“POVERTY” AS A MALAISE OF DEVELOPMENT: 
A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN ITS GLOBAL CONTEXT

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In this chapter, a social constructivist approach to poverty discourses is combined with a realist approach to the causes of poverty. The constructivist element is seen in an practical analysis of texts using photos and quotations from development publications. A specific argument is set out: three main discourses in these texts, all relating to ‘poverty’, all tend to mask the real structural elements and relations that perpetuate poverty in capitalist society today. The three discourses I focus on are the charity discourse, the social-exclusion discourse, and the economic poverty discourse. I criticise discourses that have contradictory notions embedded in them. Without meaning to disparage those discourses, I argue that they need to be augmented (and hence radically changed) by the addition of a structuralist element that recognises that some oppressive class, gender and ethnic relationships need urgently to be changed. I point out one specific performative contradiction to illustrate my critique. The chapter ends by offering a better moral reasoning strategy than the simplistic poverty discourses. Thus, I argue, a weak social constructivist approach to poverty discourses can be combined with a realist approach to the causes of poor/rich relations.

As a reader, you will have to decide how to deal with the three standard discourses yourself. As a realist, I tend to take a transformative approach: one that challenges existing discourses in ways that progressively help society to move forward. This can be called transformationalism (e.g. Langley and Mellor, 2002).

Introductory Anecdote

I would like to introduce the chapter with an anecdote from my research in my own locality, Salford in Greater Manchester, where I have lived for 18 years. Salford has several electoral wards which are among the most deprived places in the whole of England and Wales, according to the Indicators of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), 2004. Salford, as a whole, is now an area selected for regeneration funds since it qualified as among the 88 most deprived and low-income areas in the country, according to the Labour Party, after it got into government in 1997. Detailed studies of local poverty were conducted, notably the IMD 2000 as well as its update in 2004. I was brought in during 2004 by members of the Salford Local Partnership. The Partnership is a mutual enterprise; it is sponsored by the regeneration funds of central government, and consists of voluntary participants and organisations from the charity, business, and local government sectors of the city. The Partnership paid for me to conduct a small local study, jointly with about a dozen local development workers. Much cooperation occurred and we shared our views about poverty as well as about research methods whilst this study got under way. In the end we studied property price movements, ward-level and small area IMD indicators, income levels by ward, documents about the management of the area, and detailed interview transcripts. These interviews, however, could not be mapped onto socio-demographic characteristics of respondents related to poverty. The local development workers insisted that any question on occupation, income or expenditure levels be removed from the interview and that no face-sheet of socio-demographic details could be used if it contained these personal, private details. Income, they repeatedly told me, was a sensitive subject.
In other words, in a study of poverty they didn’t want to make anybody reveal whether they were poor or not. It soon became evident who was, in fact, poor (in economic, social or political terms) but this initial restriction was very intriguing. It implied that the people I was working with had reservations about what they considered to be disparaging to any individual - i.e. even hinting that they were on a low income. Yet when I provided detailed ward-level income data, everyone was fascinated (one ward had an average household income of 600 pounds per week after housing costs, whilst several others were between 280 and 340 pounds per week on average). Inequality was evident between the wards. But no one wanted inequality to become explicit in a room full of physical people. Not only would it be embarrassing to oneself, I learned, but it was also considered embarrassing to embarrass anyone else in this way.

Looking back at older histories of the working class in the Northwest, I found that Robert Roberts had already described a similar approach to human dignity in his book *The Classic Slum* (1971). Roberts argued that a pretence of equal dignity for everyone was widespread. This discourse was only broken once someone was overtly a criminal or if one acted in a way that was regarded as disgusting in public. The pretence of equality, Roberts noted, was overlaid by delicate structurings of a hierarchy of social status. Status was achieved for instance by having a piano (noted also by Skeggs in her description of class/gender intersections (Skeggs, 1997). Other status markers in the 1910-1922 period included keeping the steps clean, having a polite mother at home, helping others out, being overtly religious, and so on (Roberts, 1971). Many of these forms of status were accessible even to those who are economically poor. In this way, some social status was achievable by all, and in spite of great inequality there were few rumblings of revolution in the district of Salford during the 1910-1922 period about which Roberts wrote.

From Roberts’ and Skeggs’ book, and the other northern England classics by Friedrich Engels (1892) and by George Orwell (1989), we learn that economic poverty does not necessarily imply social stigma or political exclusion. However, social stigma and political exclusion are likely to follow from the degradation that is often (but not always) associated with economic poverty. Ironic, isn’t it then, that economic poverty continues to be very difficult to ask about in interviews in 2004?

Part of the explanation is that economically poor people are usually construed as the other. In English phrasings, statements about ‘the poor’ typically imply that the speaker is automatically designated as non-poor. It is rare indeed for ‘poor’ people to talk about other poor people as such. Indeed one could argue that many people do not want to have a debate about either the poor or poverty. For instance, the UK government under ‘new Labour’ did not want to have a discussion about poverty as such, but rather about wealth creation. Another buzz phrase in use is ‘social protection’. ‘Indices of multiple deprivation’ were constructed. Deprivation would be construed as a failure to properly target and protect these areas. Social protection policies would include benefits and social support as well as pensions. In other words, by framing the scene a certain way, a positive light can be cast upon it, and especially upon the speaker or author. In this way, poverty disappears and something more pleasant – such as meaningfully targeted action - miraculously appears. Iyengar (1990) explains that the framing of poverty affects the politics of poverty. Yapa (1996) presents issues of subjectivity and reality with regard to poverty, helping to clarify how poverty discourses work. The ‘subjective’ realm is the one mainly set up using mental and linguistic constructs.
The way poverty is construed is itself a process of social construction. Poor people are construed (often air-brushed) out of existence. Yet poor people do exist, and many of us have personally experienced poverty at given points in life and understand something of what such a life is like. Poverty is a reality for poor people. Many poor people live in Salford. But it's possible for them and others to collude in hiding the realities of their lives. Not only is the label hidden, but also the real day-to-day difficulties, the hard choices and suffering. In our study, we heard about the use of food stamps, of taking up free school meals, of ostracism and racism during our interviews. Yet always the stories were about 'other' people, 'those' people. Not us.

The social construction of poverty was described by Maia Green as having a long history (2006). Green traces the historical predominance and usage of 'poverty' through a variety of schools of thought. These include anthropology in its early decades, the big international institutions as they construe poverty, and more recent normative statements from 1990 onward by global actors. For example, in the context of a debate over supply-side economics and structural adjustment, the 'poor' are those whose talents are wasted through bad government. To better use these talents, market forces need to be liberalised, some say, and government corruption and waste would need to be reduced (e.g. Berg Report, 1981). This came to be known as the Washington Consensus on market-oriented development. This Consensus underpinned the Structural Adjustment programmes aimed at restructuring the economies of less-developed, poorer, countries and setting them on the path of market-led growth. Now we have the post-Washington Consensus; this new 'consensus' is a widely-held view that government itself is sometimes not the most efficient way to deliver services, but that the government can help where the services are in any case not delivered by markets. The post-Washington Consensus idea that you intervene “where there is market failure”, also has radical critics (Fine, 2001). This new consensus again has its own particular way of slotting 'poverty' and the 'poor' into the discourse. Fine explains that to say that the poor lack social capital is to avoid discussing deeper structural class problems. Green argues that there is nothing essential to be seeking, in poverty, but only these twists and turns of social construction of poverty (Green, 2006. As an anthropologist, her view is that poverty is simply socially constructed; my view is that poverty is partly socially constructed but also partly real. Elsewhere, Green offers important advice to those who run governments, or international institutions.(Green, 2002). Her advice is to focus on real social differentiation and to avoid glib overview statements when framing policy. This is good advice but does not do justice to the need for a radical overhaul of dominant conceptions of poverty. In fact it seems rather mildly reformist.

Discourse Analysis

I will describe three discourses in some detail in this chapter. First it is important to set out what a discourse is. Discourses are combinations of communicative acts that fit together. In society, generally, we have neoliberal discourse, marxist discourse, radical feminist discourse and so on. Focusing concretely on poverty-talk, there are some images to take into account, apart from texts and documents (see Table 1). A detailed breakdown of the components of three discourses is hinted at in Table 2. I will define discourse and then explain (and critique) each of the three. This is great fun but it is best to conclude by constructing an alternative. I can only sketch out that alternative here – which I call a transformationalist analysis of development – but there are plenty of
authors working in this area. These authors are generally known as the post-development school. The title refers mainly to being post-neoliberal, post-economism, and post-capitalist in what the authors seek. (You can think these aspects over while) Initially, I will run through the existing, much more reformist, discourses.

Table 1
Typical Images of Poverty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Photo Images</th>
<th>Charity Discourse</th>
<th>Social Inclusion Discourse</th>
<th>Economics of Poverty Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orphan, hungry child, wrinkled older person</td>
<td>A form to fill in for donating money</td>
<td>Pie chart of voting percentages (voting being a liberal notion of inclusion)</td>
<td>Summary bullet points of achievements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A discourse is a context-specific local set of rules or norms that kick in when people are interacting or communicating (Fairclough, 2001). The local rules need not always be followed. But discourses do shape how we communicate about poverty. Thus we might label the poor; target the poor; help the poor; eradicate poverty (or try to); or complain about the creation of poverty. According to the discourse being used, you might be able to combine 2-3 of these activities. But you can't both 'target' the poor and 'be' poor at the same time! The targeter is implicitly separate from an isolable group called the poor. It is, at this deeper level of semantics, language in use, or ontology, that we say that the discourse is a set of rules. Poor people don't talk about poverty, as they are (by definition, within poverty discourse) too busy scratching out a living somewhere. The speaker about poverty is constructed as a heroic, non-poor, figure, who is doing something about a problem.

In discourse analysis, there is an awareness that text, talk and images all combine to give impressions which are recognised, by their usual audiences, as giving or affirming typical messages. In this chapter I will illustrate this using images of anti-poverty charity groups, for example. Some images are visual or graphic images, while others are words that act as metaphors. Fairclough wrote a useful review of how to conduct discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 1995). Another volume by Chouliaraki and Fairclough puts this into the context of theories of late modernity (1999), a useful addition. But in poverty studies we don't want to just look at late modern Europe – we want a global analysis of discourse. Therefore we may need to revise our conception of discourse analysis.

Whatever the place of language, pictures are always an important part of discourses. Fairclough includes many pictures from advertising and newspapers, as well as brochures and other genres, in his books. Table 1 summarises the types of photo images we expect to find in each of the three main poverty discourses.

Table 2
### Discourse Components for Three Typical Poverty Discourses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charities</th>
<th>Social Inclusion</th>
<th>Economics of Poverty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-governmental organisations</td>
<td>State and civil society</td>
<td>Economists, entrepreneurs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agents of Technologisation</th>
<th>Charity Discourse</th>
<th>Social Inclusion Discourse</th>
<th>Economics of Poverty Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-governmental organisations</td>
<td>State and civil society</td>
<td>Economists, entrepreneurs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agents -types –labels</th>
<th>Charity Discourse</th>
<th>Social Inclusion Discourse</th>
<th>Economics of Poverty Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Givers, needy people, donors, orphans, refugees (the more oppressed the better)</td>
<td>Voters, citizens</td>
<td>Firms, Workers, Entrepreneurs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumptions about structure</th>
<th>Charity Discourse</th>
<th>Social Inclusion Discourse</th>
<th>Economics of Poverty Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor/rich relationship is one which creates a demand that rich donate to poor</td>
<td>Strong class awareness; strong awareness of ethnic, gender and other divisions</td>
<td>Nil, because atomistic. Each class role is one into which people can choose to join if they wish (e.g. Via Dragon’s Den)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumptions about human actualisation</th>
<th>Charity Discourse</th>
<th>Social Inclusion Discourse</th>
<th>Economics of Poverty Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restricted for poor; enhanced by kind and altruistic giving of money, for non-poor</td>
<td>Stunting and deprivation are measurable effects of social exclusion</td>
<td>Money is a means to human happiness. Important to measure money earnings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of states</th>
<th>Charity Discourse</th>
<th>Social Inclusion Discourse</th>
<th>Economics of Poverty Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State is not sufficient</td>
<td>State is an important actor</td>
<td>State role varies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of the UN</th>
<th>Charity Discourse</th>
<th>Social Inclusion Discourse</th>
<th>Economics of Poverty Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assumes that UN fails</td>
<td>UN and EU may be important in setting up agreed frameworks of individual rights</td>
<td>UN role varies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myths</th>
<th>Charity Discourse</th>
<th>Social Inclusion Discourse</th>
<th>Economics of Poverty Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Giving Helps&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Human Development” matters</td>
<td>“The Invisible Hand” of the market</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tropes</th>
<th>Charity Discourse</th>
<th>Social Inclusion Discourse</th>
<th>Economics of Poverty Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Every little bit helps</td>
<td>Low level of development; ‘backward’</td>
<td>Invest in human capital</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbols</th>
<th>Charity Discourse</th>
<th>Social Inclusion Discourse</th>
<th>Economics of Poverty Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Café Direct logo</td>
<td>Country flags</td>
<td>Money logos on bills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Verbs</th>
<th>Charity Discourse</th>
<th>Social Inclusion Discourse</th>
<th>Economics of Poverty Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contribute</td>
<td>Participate,</td>
<td>Earn, create</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Charity Discourse of Poverty

In looking at Table 1, we notice that images in the charity discourse are especially photographical, and in Figure 1 I provide samples of these types of images. They are easily recognizable – in association with their text – as charity donation request images. Of course the discourse of charity is very complex and has sub-divisions. My first picture illustrates a common strand from earlier decades, in which a picture of a struggling or hungry child easily attracts our attention. In the 1990s there was concern that these images caused emotional burnout and a gradual desensitization of western readers to the suffering of hungry people (Kinnick, Krugman, and Cameron, 1996). Today readers also find the images somewhat degrading for the poor person who is objectified in the picture (Wright, 2004) so in order to avoid this insult, we get something more like the second (middle) picture. Wark says ‘the most innocent-looking media images are sometimes the most sinister’ (1995: 36). Here, the orphans look normal but are possibly African and not exactly cheerful. The associated text explains their problem – they are evidently children of people who have died of AIDS virus related diseases. This photo is less denigrating for the subject. Still it is noticeable that they don’t get a caption, nor do the subjects in the photo get names attributed to them. The person is objectified. Some people say that the charity discourse tends to commodify the people on whose behalf the organisations work (Wright, 2004). Wright’s closely argued paper on Café Direct advertisements, for example, reminds us that the people in advertisement cannot speak to/about us, nor can they see us; whereas we can see and talk about them. They remain anonymous. This is known as objectifying the person. Wright argues that it actually fetishises them, following up on Marx’s critique of capitalism. Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism refers to the perception of goods in terms of our relation with the goods or their prices, rather than our relation with the producers of the goods. Human relations (which are class relations), he says, are reduced to the relations between the consumer and the thing [the product]. – When Marx wrote, in the period 1860 to 1880, this was a vastly innovative thing to say. Even today, it appears in sociology texts but is not widely recognised in popular society. The ‘glamour’ and fashion industries rest firmly upon a denial of the fetishisation of the person. Perhaps you can see how, in charity discourse, even if the images show a happy healthy child, the poor person is still objectified and depersonalised. They are also not the agent of action! In charity discourse, the important agents are the donors and the intermediaries. A third agent is the media person or advertising expert. But all the agency aspects are subdued, and the moral aspect is primary. One is supposed to feel obligated to donate to mitigate the harm seen in the photos.

The third image in Figure 1 illustrates how Oxfam sometimes avoids having person-pictures. Instead we see a gift-wrap image. This is a massively consumerist image. Gift-wrapping is wasteful and luxurious. It involves producing a gift, which has symbolic meaning, by clothing it in layers of mystery and secrecy. The giving of the gift has further layers of symbolic meaning. Now we are seeing that a donation to charity can be perceived as a gift, to be given to a third party. The third party is going to get the message that waste is not approved of, but that spending has been done on their behalf. The third party is not going to receive a consumer good, but they will receive a message that the money has been spent on useful goods. The specific sentence used here to describe the gift reads as follows:

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‘you can do your Christmas shopping and help Oxfam to overcome poverty and suffering’

When I read this I felt like laughing and crying at the same time. On the one hand, it’s a bright and cheerful way to re-capture the importance of donating to charity. On the other hand, it is still encouraging the western consumer to enjoy wasteful consumption. It simply wraps up gift-giving to the poor as part of gift-giving in general. The irony here is that gift-giving is well known (in anthropology) to reflect social differentials and quite often to be a way of showing either patronage or submissiveness. The patron gives gifts to those they wish to patronise; the submissive ‘low’ ranking person gives gifts to show respect to those above her/him. This well-known pattern is found in many diverse societies. In Japan, the giving of gifts has out-lasting the growth of commercialisation. It is very popular and occurs around marriage times, on meeting visitors, within the family, at work, and at some ceremonial events. Oxfam, by using a discourse of gift-giving for requesting charity donations, is clearly suggesting that readers will feel that they are successful patrons if they simply allocate some money to the cause. There is no need for them to pursue issues of administrative efficiency, targeted aid vs. unconditional aid, or how the chosen recipients were chosen. To me the essence of the charity donation discourse is that there is no democratic or public realm where the targets of charity can communicate with the givers of charity. The givers are essentially protected from the realities of struggle over resources. They are beyond criticism.

Figure 1
Typical Images from Contemporary Donor Appeals in Charity Discourse

The Social Exclusion/Inclusion Discourse

Look now at column two of Tables 1 and 2. Here the social inclusion discourse is described. In wider contexts, such as social and economic policy in Europe, social inclusion is the flip side of what has been called the social exclusion approach to poverty. A bit of history is useful here. Social exclusion is considered normatively wrong because the belonging of citizens is considered sacrosanct across European democracies. Indeed, in some parts of Europe, this ‘belonging’ is not just a link between the individual and the state, which confers some legal rights to citizens (Byrne, 1999). It is also a sense of shared social solidarity. Thus instead of social inclusion being an act of charity, for many French, or Germans, it is a deeper sense of shared history and values, a sense of solidarity and togetherness. Habermas (1986) describes this as distinct from individualistic concepts of democratic rights. However in Britain (where I live) the social
exclusion discourse was taken up as a central plank in Labour’s policies before and after their 1997 election victory. For ‘New’ Labour, social exclusion was a way to describe the ravages of poverty, and social inclusion was a set of policies which not only ‘gave to’ the poor their rights, but also required from the policy targets a set of behaviours, which Blair and other politicians, called ‘their responsibilities’ (Fairclough, 2000). Poor people have been redesignated as policy targets. Blair’s discourse was studied carefully by Fairclough, and the policies have been studied by many experts (notably Smith and Morton (2006), in relation to employment.

The social inclusion discourse (as found in Britain, both in domestic policy and in international development policy) argues that the poor people have responsibility to act in proper ways, to work hard and train themselves, and that in exchange for these decent behaviours, compliant citizens can participate fully in society. An underlying argument is that no matter how low your income, e.g. the minimum wage, you are still an accepted member of society. The ‘society’ here is the nation-state. Government is an important actor in this discourse. In the EU, this discourse is linked up with the assertion of basic human rights (Milcher and Ivanov, 2008). Ironically, it has been turned into quite an individualistic type of discourse in recent years. The worker’s supply of labour is seen as crucial; they must not be lazy or they will become excluded. The latest phrase in the social inclusion discourse is employability. The worker must make themselves highly employable, in which case a labour market will successfully integrate them. All else will follow – decent housing, medical care and pension – if only workers will earn enough money for themselves. This has moved a long way from the original sense of social solidarity that is found in core states of Europe. In this sense the UK, New Labour discourse has become somewhat neoliberal (individualistic and commercially minded) while other Europeans still hold out for some fundamental unconditional rights and do not blame workers for their own unemployment. In New Labour’s social inclusion discourse, the poor are partly to blame for their own poverty, and are agents of their own empowerment. If they persist in being lazy, e.g. In ‘the workless household’ where both parents get unemployment benefits, then they are beyond help.

This arrangement of powers and capabilities has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand it enables individuals and families to consider themselves in charge of their destiny. The UK government has encouraged self-employment among women, for example. Many women have become registered as self-employed childminders, facilitating their own sense of autonomy in work, whilst also supporting the paid work of other mothers who can trust the registered childminder – and must pay them – to mind the kids. Another example of self-autonomy in this discourse is that the government encourages people to take out private health insurance and a private pension to supplement the inadequate state provision. The obvious disadvantage of this system of ‘justice’ is that it does not promote social equality. Instead, it continuously promotes a growth of inequality in which state provision is for the poor and private provision is for the well-off. Basic reasons for poverty, such as having a poor education or lacking experience of employment, are not dealt with. Indeed, the government has no industrial strategy and does not intervene when companies sell out to Indian or other international buyers. Jobs are being moved to other countries, and the state waits for workers to get themselves re-employed. Thus, social inclusion is a theme in politics, but it does not underpin many constructive policies to include people.

*The Economic Discourse of Poverty*
The third poverty discourse is the one economists often use. The economics of poverty are seen as lying in causal explanations of why people and households are poor, and what it is about the non-poor that makes them different. Numerous famous economists can be cited – Dollar (2001), Dollar and Kraay (2001), Dollar and Gatti (1999), Rama (2003), Ravallion (1996), Ravallion and Datt (1996), for example. These economists hold certain types of theory dear. Firstly, there is the theory that people maximise their utility and try to better themselves, whilst also trading off paid work against more desirable leisure activities. Secondly, we have the theory of human capital. In this theory people’s earnings reflect their education and acquired skills. Investment in education is seen as rational individual choice, and if wages are low for a group (e.g. for women) then they may not invest in schooling because it won’t repay the investment. The higher-response group, e.g. men, may get more investment because it is rational to prefer to invest where returns are higher rather than where returns are stagnant. Thus a mental model of a capital market is used to envision how decisions are made in the schooling market and labour market. Thirdly, the economists usually focus on firms as an important locus of decisionmaking. Firms pay wages, and the tradeoff here is that if they hire more people on lower wages, then poverty may go down, compared with hiring just a few people, in more capital-intensive work, on higher wages. Some economists advocate labour-intensive growth as a way to alleviate poverty. This approach accepts that low-wage work will predominate for the poor. It accepts high levels of economic inequality, while acknowledging that those who lack any paid work at all will suffer from poverty in modern industrialised societies.

All the discourses share a sense that people will be better off if they can be enabled to earn a living and to make themselves better off. Thus at some anodyne level these discourses of poverty converge.

It would be dangerous to attribute too much explanatory power to discourses. Green’s paper, which I cited at the start, seems to suggest that discourses create poverty. Does she mean that discourses of poverty create poverty where before there was none? Her view is probably that the history of poverty is, in part, the history of poverty discourses. But my question about causality may seem a bit confused. There is an underlying philosophical question – does poverty exist prior to its description, when it is encapsulated into a narrative within a discourse? If we answer yes, we presume too much. (This begs the question and essentialises poverty.) If we answer no, then we will inevitably have trouble studying the causes of poverty, because by taking an anti-essentialist position (which feminists call anti-foundationalist) we are making it impossible to study the thing that people are trying to describe.

Through long years of field visits in both UK and India, and close study of texts from anthropology and economics as well as sociology, I have concluded that suffering exists, and that this statement is a better starting point than ‘poverty exists’ (Amato, 2001). However we can use words about ‘poverty’ to describe the sources of suffering, since poverty – by its nature, or by what we mean to pin down when we say ‘poverty’ – implies some suffering. I take a realist view of poverty (Olsen, 2007). That makes me think that discourses of poverty nobly try to get at the problem, and sometimes fail, yet in the meantime are interesting in themselves.

There are many other discourses of poverty – one might for example mention the participation discourse, in which participation in development is thought to potentially reduce poverty; the human needs discourse, which in the 1970s had been called Basic...
Needs, and so on. I have just described three because I thought that the reader could relate more easily to these.

The next section will discuss two problems that arise in relation to the three poverty discourses—the contradictions they imply for the user of the discourse; and their explanatory weaknesses.

**Dealing with False Discourses**

In treating the discourses as if they could be ‘false’ I am referring to separate work on causality that argues that truth is contested and that knowledge is generally fallible (Olsen and Morgan, 2005; Morgan and Olsen, 2007 and 2008). I feel bound to point out two glaring problems with the discourses listed above. This does not mean they are wholly untrue. Indeed truth and falsehood probably have a large overlap area in social science. But these problems are serious.

i) **performative contradictions of the poverty discourses**

Firstly, the speaker who uses the social exclusion/inclusion discourse engages in a contradictory moment, called a ‘performative contradiction’, by excluding the poor from autonomous action. Just by labelling them poor and making ‘them’ a them, and ‘us’ (the experts or the government) an us, the speaker creates a social division that tends to be patronising and disempowering for really poor people. Having a performative contradiction makes it impossible for policies drawn up under this discourse to attack the nerve centres of poverty creation. Instead, the policies are mainly ameliorative. I would go further and argue that ameliorative reforms in capitalism actually help to reproduce poverty and elitism. But this comes from my own position (see conclusion of paper) – instead let’s look more closely at an example to illustrate the performative contradiction.

Milcher and Ivanov, 2008, define and discuss social inclusion as follows:

Social inclusion is a relatively new concept promoted especially by the European Union (EU). The EU defines social inclusion as “a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live”. Thus, social inclusion is understood as both a relative concept where exclusion can only be judged by comparing the circumstances of some individuals (or groups or communities) relative to others . . . and as a normative concept which places emphasis on the individual’s right of “having a life associated with being a member of a community”. In order to achieve these rights, inclusion policies have to address institutional inefficiencies, which derive from exclusionary acts by agents based on power and social attitudes and result in multiple disadvantages based on gender, age, ethnicity, location, economic, education, health status or disability, etc.” (page 1; Milcher and Ivanov did not cite any reference for their quoted phrases)
A stronger and more concerted rejection of structuralism in favour of individualistic reductionism is hard to imagine. Yet the rejection is subtly framed, taking the form of a positive statement in favour of human rights and against inefficiency. Who could disagree? The net result is that the discourse tends to leave poor people to blame for their position, and responsible for their own rescue. After all, it is they, not the state that create the inefficiency. They are not in the state that is so inefficient. The essence of the argument is that they are outside of the state.

The tone of such writings is patronising and state-ist yet, ironically, (and confusingly) at the same time, liberal in the soft, ‘small,’ sense of being socially progressive. Whilst progressive, such liberal views do not enable the “poor” to get into policy processes. Instead, they patronise poor people and keeps them separate from the well-educated, technocratic classes. (In Salford, where I am politically and socially active, we see this in everyday life.) Social inclusion is wishful thinking for those on the top of a heap of inequality.

The Milcher and Ivanov example also shows some other weaknesses that all three poverty discourses have in common. These weaknesses are ontological, i.e. at the level of deep assumptions about what the world is like. First the authors in all 3 discourses assume that markets are a necessary part of the solution to problems. Second the analyses are all rather individualistic. They do not allow for social solidarity or any profound grounding ethics, except rational choice. Thirdly patronage is seen to be good, in that it is independent of any analysis of the ethics of inequality. Patronage is missing only from the ‘economic discourse of poverty’ where it would be considered irrational. This is an important exception and one worth thinking about. The role of patronage and charity, in an anti-poverty ethics, is the subject of interesting current research (Sayer, 2005). In general, serious ethical analysis does not use simplistic discourses like the charity or the social inclusion discourse. See Alkire and Black (1997), Clark (2002), or Habermas (1998) for examples of serious ethical analysis in the context of poverty.

So far, I have suggested that a performative contradiction in the social exclusion discourse makes it seem confused. Other authors have suggested that we need to see poverty more relationally, rather than seeing the poor as a separate group (Green and Hulme, 2005). And one argument is that poverty planning is a political negotiation which should be democratic – a discussion among equals – not a technical or bureaucratic targeting exercise (Hickey and Bracking, 2005). The more conspiracy-theory oriented authors even see social inclusion and other false discourses as a distinctive, deliberate, carefully planned exercise that distracts them while pauperization goes on and on (Harriss-White, 2006). I suggest that when we do study the real causes of suffering through poverty, we must carefully avoid these performative contradictions. Starting from first principles, we construct a realist approach to poverty which accepts the strengths and limitations of each aspect of the complex social world (Martins, 2007). Realists usually tend to think mostly of the aim of human flourishing and then focus on the real structural causes of human poverty/suffering. I am going to turn to this area now, where the other poverty discourses are so weak.

ii) the falsehood of masking the real causal role of social class relations.

Structures of social class are changing all the time. By definition a structure is a set of social locations and the relationships between people in these metaphorical "locations", e.g. worker, elite, business person. Structuralists argue that structures are more than
metaphors because they have real effects of two kinds: one, their effect upon the elements in the structures, e.g. being a worker in a job affects the worker. Two, their emergent properties go beyond the nature of the different parts of the structure. For example, class relations evolve as people migrate from villages to cities, but the nature of class relations is not simply the sum of the proportions of people in different types of job, in each place. It also involves larger properties of the whole society, such as inequality and hence the emergence of real poverty. Thus structures have real effects. Structures are also durable. Their enduring – but not permanent – nature makes us tend to call them ‘structures’ rather than simply norms or institutions. Authors who have set out this ontology include Gimenez (1999), Sayer (2005), and Elder-Vass (2007).

The main structures in capitalist societies in the 20th and 21st centuries include ethnic groups, social classes and gender relations. These structures themselves have causal powers so there are powerful mechanisms operating upon both rich and poor people ‘from outside themselves’. These causes are not determining, though; there are also some countervailing causes. One’s tendency to stay uneducated can be fought by borrowing money to pay for an education. But then one must pay interest on the loan and perhaps do bonded labour to repay it. One may have to drop out of education to repay the loan. So the worker returns to the state of low formal education, even though they have learned some interesting lessons. The worker’s agency is exercised to try to fight toward a different position in the class society. Agency is not always successful. Even when it succeeds, it may only move the worker around but not change the class structure itself (Sayer, 1992, chapters 1-3).

My argument, that the three discourses are false, rests upon the premise that each one hides class relations and the class basis of social action. Other arguments could also be adduced—perhaps about gender and ethnicity, or mothering and other topics— but this one is sufficient for me to have grave concerns about the three discourses.

In brief:

The charity discourse portrays us – the well-off – as able to ameliorate some poverty without intervening in any fundamental way to change the structure of social relations between poor and non-poor people.

The social exclusion discourse portrays us – the well-intentioned government agencies – as able to target the poor for inclusion, without allowing people to engage freely in the discussion about how society should change. (Defining ‘freely’ in this claim is contestable; see Habermas for the argument that an immigrant or ‘outsider’ is not free to engage in the debate because the debate automatically excludes them; Habermas, 1998). Example of authors who challenge capitalism on grounds that it makes workers unfree to discuss poverty alleviation include Harriss-White (2006), and Fine (2001). Fine is particularly condemning of the social inclusion discourse.

Finally, turning to the economists’ orthodox discourse, it portrays workers as choosing their own level of poverty. For this discourse everything is ‘chosen’. Agency is all. There is no role for structure. In recent years newspapers and governments have begun encouraging workers to make themselves more ‘employable’. This goes beyond formal education, as in the human capital model (which was hopeless enough for the poor). Now we have to make our c.v. lengthy, acquire office skills such as discipline and time-keeping, and document our new skills in ways recognized by employers, such as getting
National Vocational Qualifications no matter how tedious it is to produce the various portfolios and to welcome the inspectors. Inspectors and portfolios, as well as the audit culture of visiting to check files and poke noses, are now commonly found among self-employed, child care experts and health & safety, accreditation workers. All this arises from, and is consistent with, the employability theme in neoliberal thinking. Make yourself worthy of a job!

Some underlying western ontological assumptions help to bolster the three false discourses. These discourses bely the possibility of real positive change. The assumptions include individualistic reductionism, oversimplification of the role of government, and nationalistic policy making. These ontological assumptions – when re-worked – offer areas for a complete overhaul of both social theory and development theory. That is the current project for experts. Meanwhile social forums and development dialogues continue.

The Transformationalist Strategy

As researchers, we have to navigate between discourses, and we are changed (when growing in our understanding) by doing so. For me, this is part of transformationalism. A transformationalist does not just favour change: they foment it. They do not just criticise power; they transform it through practice. They do not just reject a false discourse, they propose alternatives. In Marx and Lenin’s work, transformationalism took the form of praxis. It also means being able to make reference to events more accurately in a fundamental way than some false discursive orientation. Transformationalism has been described by authors like Mies (1998) or De Angelis (2007) as people struggling within an unequal society to both change that society, and to change the way society is perceived. Foucault and Gordon (1980) are typical. They aim to make it impossible for the society to go on, with the forms of social relation in which poverty has been produced. Here the transformationalists will appear similar to Green (2006) and Hickey and Bracking (2005) - three post-structuralists who are lightly post-development in their orientation. For an explicit treatment of transformation in development see Brohman (Popular Development, 1996), and for a theorisation of it see Bhaskar (1986, 1998) or Latouche (1993).

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter I described three common ways of talking about poverty. The three I chose are prevalent in the United Kingdom today. I was quite critical of them because, although they try to direct our attention to alleviating suffering, they also mask the effects of basic structures like social class. Those who affiliate to these three discourses – the charity discourse, the social inclusion discourse, and an economic discourse – also engage in a performative contradiction, by inhibiting the transformative potential of ‘talk’ or analysis. In short, these discourses bear falsehoods and play a masking role in society. The alternative is to study causality through history and to work to re-present our analyses in ways that offer real equality (now) in the world polity and thus help all to move from where we are to somewhere that has more flourishing and less suffering. Our destination is likely to be a less capitalist, less class-ridden place so we need theories that focus on class and capital in a transformative way.

References


