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A New Social Contract?  
Against Exclusion:  
The Poor and the Social Sciences

GIOVANNA PROCACCI

RSC No. 96/41

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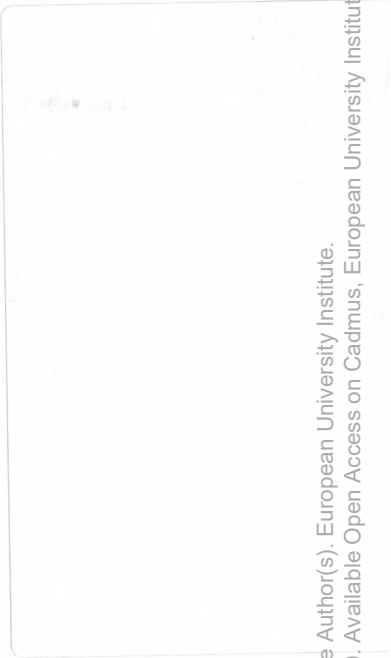
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**EUI Working Paper RSC No. 96/41**

**Procacci: *A New Social Contract?*  
*Against Exclusion:*  
*The Poor and the Social Sciences***

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**A New Social Contract?  
Against Exclusion:  
The Poor and the Social Sciences**

**GIOVANNA PROCACCI**

A Working Paper written for the Conference organised by the RSC on  
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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The issue of poverty appears to have been marginalised by the neo-conservative attempt to discredit the problems associated with inequality and by today's more general loss of consensus on welfare policies. The political debate has been reduced to discussing the financial resources compatible with other political objectives, as if poverty would disappear simply because of the amount of money society is prepared to spend on it. With rare exceptions, the scientific debate appears to be increasingly caught between neo-liberal attacks on social policies and the humanitarian aid logic that inspires religious associations and non-governmental organisations. The theme of poverty seems to have become *politically neutral*, reduced to a question of mere figures or humanitarian concerns. The real political choices seem to be only between the market and charity an alternative hardly new since the very origins of all policies directed against poverty.

Despite this theoretical lacuna, poverty continues to grow, as does the anguish of public opinion, tormented by the image of poverty portrayed dramatically by the media, so much so that we even talk of 'media star' poverty (Damon 1994). Poverty is produced, is made spectacular and even creates its *own* media (journals, reviews, foundations of all kinds). It is talked about and is omni-present. It has never been so spoken of or so visible as in this period of almost obligatory attacks on the polices directed against it. In fact, this suggests that traditional policies are not sufficient and that there is a realisation that poverty resists economic development and is a potentially explosive factor on a world scale. Furthermore, the statistical data bodes ill: poverty afflicts a quarter of the population of industrialised countries. It has become a non-cyclical constant of the economic system since the 1980s when it began to persist despite a period of strong growth. The World Summit on Development on Copenhagen promoted by the UN in March 1995 felt the need to denounce the neo-liberal hysteria that prevailed there in the light of a disquieting question: is it true that poverty is now simply a moral, humanitarian problem? Or rather has poverty become a political imperative of international security? Whether poverty is moral or political is just another dilemma after the one about market or charity that the modern analysis of poverty has always had to deal with.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Claire M. O'Neill and Martin Rhodes

On the one hand, therefore, poverty is seen no longer as a political theme but merely a moral one. On the other, it is seen as growing excessively and fear concerning its destabilising potential has correspondingly increased. Between these two views, scientific analysis suggests and promotes new concepts which seem to be a response to both to the theoretical lacuna and the media outcry. However, no analytical category is neutral, and still less so are the categories that underpin social policies. Here I wish to present a critical analysis of those concepts that largely predominate today in the debate on poverty and social policies - the concept of *underclass* in the USA and that of *social exclusion* in France and Europe. Their similarities can be demonstrated by taking firstly the element that they share: they both break all links between the question of poverty and that of citizenship.

We know that the status of 'the poor' in modern liberal societies only emerged because it posed a constant challenge to the formalisation of citizenship in a constitutional framework, and thus to a genuinely consistent view of equality for all. The development of a modern notion of law that made the poor citizens like everyone else coincided with demands for their inclusion as active participants in the economic system. But the 'normality' of the presence of the poor in the socio-economic order came up against the political difficulty of governing conflicts of inequality in a society of 'legal' equals. Hence, the juridical, liberal framework was forced to accommodate social rights which were foreign to its logic, but were a response to the need to counter the risk of a dependence in a state of poverty that could prevent the attainment of independent citizenship. They have even contributed to foster democratisation of liberal societies.

Today, political reasoning has been reversed. Poverty is no longer perceived as an obstacle to citizenship. By contrast, social policies maintain the individual in a state of dependence by virtue of the very fact that they make the individual participate in a system of protection. The result of this strategic reversal is, above all, that we talk once again of 'poverty', an indistinct category that welfare policies have replaced by groups which have rights. Not only does poverty reappear, but it takes an extreme form of growing marginalisation, giving rise once again to a doubt that seemed to have been surmounted: are the poor really citizens?

This doubt in turn risks creating a gap in citizenship and thus deepening the process of 'de-citizenship' in which the crisis of work becomes a crisis of political ties and civicness. Thus a reflection on the conditions for a new social contract cannot proceed without taking an opposing view of this trend and subjecting it to critical analysis. The discovery of the political



need to *include* the poor was at the origin of modern democracy. Today the debate on social exclusion risks creating a gulf between our societies and the poverty that continues to haunt them. Excluded from the 'polis' and form 'citizenship', poverty would no longer say anything about society, and citizenship would diverge definitively from the strategies that counter poverty most effectively. Analysed as *outsiders* who are the extreme end product of a long social process which generates inequality, poverty risks becoming the target of policies that merely aim to restore the 'human' condition in specific, local instances.

## Outsiders

According to today's analysts of poverty in the United States, outside society and beyond social classes lies the *underclass*. Born as a purely economic concept, the notion of underclass has acquired currency chiefly because of its extraordinary media success. In fact, rarely have sociological categories permeated journalistic language to such a degree (Bagguley and Mann 1992).

When Gunnar Myrdal used it in *The Affluent Society* in 1962, his concern was to return to a structural analysis of poverty in opposition to the trend towards cultural interpretation. He wished to draw attention to a rarely analysed phenomenon that was rooted in the very structure of the economic modernisation processes: the existence of a poverty that had not been absorbed by growth but seemed to resist it. This persistence of poverty over time despite the economic growth of the post-war period, led to the fear that underneath the classes involved in the modernising economy there was the consolidation of a class of unemployed persons who were constantly rejected by it. It was a warning sign which shook our confidence in the attainment of full employment and made us think about necessary reforms to the economy.

By contrast, media reports from the end of the 1970s - such as the famous *Time* magazine cover story in 1977 and Ken Auletta's articles in the *New Yorker* in 1981 - classified under the category of underclass a restricted phenomenon in the heart of cities that were otherwise centres of growth. Journalistic reports described the ways of life in these miserable areas and illustrated the 'behaviour deficiencies' that characterised the city centre poor and distinguished them from the rest of the poor population. The concept of underclass gradually became remote from the problems of unemployment and instead denoted poverty in its most extreme and persistent form. The logic of the media prefers to describe phenomena

using exceptional cases rather than more ordinary cases: the underclass - as an extreme example - became superimposed on the more general notion of poverty and thereby served to obfuscate it.

Its media success in turn, created other dimensions to the concept of underclass, in relation for example, to persistent unemployment. These new dimensions quickly became dominant. Firstly, there was a *behavioural* dimension linked to modes of behaviour likely to be found in these extreme conditions of destitution. Secondly, there was a *racial* dimension and the reports often identified the underclass as composed of blacks or Hispanics. The underclass thus designated referred to groups of the population with a high risk of poverty: adolescent blacks particularly, young unmarried mothers and young unemployed men. Because of this concentration on behavioural aspects, the concept lost its essentially economic character and cultural definitions created a degree of ambiguity which the analysis of poverty in the United States has never completely transcended (Katz 1989).

During the 1980s, the social sciences resurrected the concept and once again it was in order to convey the structural dimension of poverty rather than to dwell on cultural factors. When Wilson and Glasgow used the concept of underclass in their influential works (see Wilson 1987 and Glasgow 1980), they used a structural analysis of the persistence of poverty centred on 'black male joblessness'. Nevertheless, by virtue of looking for explanations of the persistence of poverty in the ghettos of large towns, their research reinforces the association of underclass with certain parts of the poor black population. In addition to the temporal dimension of a poverty that persists and is undefeated by political action is added a *spatial* dimension that becomes a crucial element in the definition of the underclass (Lynn and McGeary 1990). The social isolation of poverty in these ghettos plays a decisive role, according to these authors, in the immobility of large-scale poverty.

Even though, the analysis is placed within a macro-economic framework linking poverty to the transformation of the economy in a phase of de-industrialisation and a decrease in employment, the importance attributed to social isolation links the empirical definition of underclass with behavioural analysis. The spatial concentration of the poor in the ghetto can only have a multiplier effect on their behaviour: they resemble each other in attitudes, in relation to work, marriage, school and so on. The result is that instead of measuring the misery that is created by poverty in a wealthy society, the concept of underclass measures sexuality, family



models, refusal to work, dependence on welfare and propensity to criminality and drug abuse. Moreover, the analyses it inspires focus not so much on the sources of poverty as on the causes of behaviour which hinders the social mobility of the poor. Instead of analysing the problems that produce the underclass, the underclass itself becomes the real problem.

Thus, in the analysis of the underclass, 'joblessness' is interpreted in terms of 'weak labour-force attachment' encouraged by social isolation. Wilson (1991) specifies that it is a structural concept that refers less to the individual motivation to work than to the marginal position in which certain people find themselves because of structural factors. But he rightly needs to specify this since attachment to work is only analysed insofar as it relates to family structures, marriage *etc.*

In the same way, when Ricketts and Sawhill tried to measure the underclass for the Joint Center for Political Studies in 1987, they claimed that they wanted to comprehend the convergence of a certain number of 'social ills' (Ricketts and Sawhill 1988). But they adopt a definition of the underclass as 'a subgroup of the American population that engages in behaviours at variance with those of mainstream populations' and therefore represents a high social cost. Once they establish that they are measuring the differences in behaviour in zones with a high density of deviance in relation to their 'norm', they use indicators such as 'high school dropouts, prime-age males not regularly attached to the labor force, welfare recipients and female heads'. In their opinion, these indicators allow the profile of the underclass to be sketched since only the behavioural definition can be specified in relation to poverty in general. But as Robert Aponte shows, this does not work because the 'underclass' ends up coinciding with 'poverty', instead of being distinct. Defining its norm and its behaviour is complex and, furthermore, it becomes difficult analytically to distinguish it from similar behaviour outside the ghetto (Aponte 1990).

Confusing the concept of underclass with poverty deflects attention from the global nature of the problem and centres it on the sub-groups of poor in an extreme condition of destitution. This 1 per cent of the American population (2.5 million) which, according to the estimates of Ricketts and Sawhill, belong to the underclass, ends up representing, as Aponte (1990) notes, all of the population living in conditions of poverty. The concept of underclass facilitates a simultaneously dramatic and reassuring account because it minimises the importance of poverty and reduces it to minorities

for which we can propose targeted policies. By so doing, it separates them from the rest of the poor in a stigmatising way and thus reinforces their political impotence.

As critics have begun to show, the underclass, as a sociological category, remains fairly blurred. Instead of helping explain the apparent 'paradox of poverty' (Peterson 1990) - that is to say, how the risk of poverty continued to grow, particularly among young people, during the 'war on poverty' and the expansion of welfare in the 1970s - in reality, it produced very little new information (Stafford and Ladner 1990). Conversely, it came up against empirical contradictions which is surprising, especially given its explicit empirical vocation.

Wilson makes hypotheses on the causal relations between the processes of de-industrialisation and social isolation, but he avoids any theoretical precision on the relations between socio-economic structures and poverty. This is what Hughes, quoted by Aponte (1990), called his 'ecological fallacy'. From the aggregated data of census forms, he deduces general implications in relation to the characteristics of individuals which leads him to infer that a high density of crime, unemployment, *etc.* in the environment in which they live drives the majority of people to similar behaviour. Thus, the independent and dependent variables become confused. The notion of underclass has always under-estimated decisive factors such as institutional barriers, or constant discrimination in the labour market (in relation to blacks as well as women, and even more so black women) or the weight of urban renewal policies.

The theoretical weakness of the concept is not abated by recourse to the terminology of social classes. Wilson himself (1987: 7) likens underclass to the concept of *lumpenproletariat*, that Marx used to describe the life of the slums of England in the nineteenth century. However, neither Marx nor, moreover, Weber made the definition of class dependent on behaviour because behaviour is never specific enough for a distinction to be made between classes. How can the existence of the same behaviour outside of a class be explained or indeed, how can different behaviour among members of the same class be explained? No behaviour whose spatial concentration indicates the existence of an underclass is exclusive to the underclass nor even to the poor. Class determination remains ambiguous. Christopher Jencks ascribes the ambiguity of the concept to the multiplicity of criteria that can be used to classify people, according to the theory of underclass. He identifies four criteria - income level, income source, cultural capacity, moral norms - each of which leads to a different definition of underclass



and consequently to different evaluations of its numerical size (Jencks 1993: 144).

Even more serious is the fact that the concept of underclass does not refer to any theory of social division. Nor does it even try to construct one. On the contrary, it designs a class outside the social class structure which is defined by itself, not *vis-à-vis* other classes and is thus bereft of any relational dimension. The underclass does not therefore facilitate a conceptualisation of social stratification and it does not clarify causal relations that link social structures and their inequalities, primarily poverty. In order to decipher the sources of poverty, the sources of individual behaviour are examined: poverty is born in the individual and there is a class of them. They are less numerous than the poor and the danger that they represent is bigger and more urgent which makes them more interesting as objects of policy.

Although vague from a sociological point of view, the underclass has all the characteristics of a moral category. Here we come up against the weakness of all cultural analyses of poverty in the USA - falling, that is, into the trap of defining a norm according to models of middle class behaviour to analyse a society which is extraordinarily mixed. In this regard, the determining belief becomes, to use Michael Katz's expression (1993: 470), 'different is worse'. Conscious of this risk, Wilson (1987: 137-138) distances himself from analyses of 'the culture of poverty', where cultural traits assume an autonomous character. By contrast, he tends to link them to socio-institutional mechanisms. The cause of under-employment among young blacks is linked to the labour market, but nevertheless the concept of underclass conveys their aversion to work. Moreover, the very idea of denoting a class below every other class reinforces the idea of passivity and resignation that is linked to a long tradition of moral and subjective interpretations of poverty in the USA. By distinguishing between the deserving poor and those that deserve nothing, a stigmatising attitude is perpetuated. Thus the underclass can be defined as 'the most modern euphemism for the undeserving poor' (Katz 1989: 196). Herbert Gans is still more explicit: 'while (the concept of underclass) seems inoffensively technical on the surface, it hides within it all the moral opprobrium Americans have long felt toward those poor people who have been judged to be undeserving' (Gans 1990: 273). He sets out, or as he puts it, deconstructs the dangers of the concept which are all due to its euphemistic, flexible and synthetic character: it ends up assimilating all the poor to one condition which reifies a social division rooted in racial antagonism.

These dangers make the underclass a pseudo-scientific concept that conveys fragments with a common - and therefore persuasive - meaning. However, it does not have any analytical advantage. Due to the absence of any theory of social divisions, its theoretical inconsistencies produce an ambivalence due to its dual - structural and behavioural - nature. Moreover, it has quite diverse and even politically incompatible proponents - conservatives stress the behavioural dimension, while liberals stress its structural logic. But the concept remains caught by such a twofold dimension. Greenstone (1991) demonstrates that the cultural and structural approaches share identical problems. In both cases, culture and rationality are treated separately, which obscures the fact that the behaviour attributed to the underclass is, in fact, shared by other social groups.

The underclass represents a reassuring discovery. Since poverty becomes a minority's problem, the analysis can forget more difficult questions, such as the increasing inequality of income among the poor that work, and substitutes research on the causes of behaviour for research on the causes of poverty. As with all analyses that employ a class categorisation, the underclass analysis can only lead to strategies of rehabilitation instead of a structural reform of the market or of redistribution. As Laurence Mead asserts, poverty is no longer a question of inequalities among classes, because 'a politics of conduct is today more salient than a politics of class' (Mead 1991:4). The underclass is a scientific myth that transforms a number of partial truths into a collection of middle class ideological beliefs. Its result is to renew the conviction that was always at the very heart of the notion of the undeserving poor: goods must be earned through work and/or good behaviour.

Finally, the notion of underclass does not offer real alternatives to the neo-conservative interpretation of policies for the poor. On the contrary, as with 'the culture of poverty', it goes against the intentions of its liberal promoters by reinforcing the moral and subjective structure of the interpretation of poverty which is always subjugated to the middle class hold over models of behaviour. The reasons for its success have to do with the implications of the financing of political institutions, foundations, research institutes, as well as the support given to it by the media. The advantage of an analysis that avoids the issue of institutional barriers is doubtless an important reason for its success.



Gans suggests that the real danger in the notion of underclass is that it legitimises a society that is preparing itself for a future in which a certain number of people will be more or less permanently without work (Gans 1990: 276). In this sense, the insistence on the notion of an underclass seems to him to be a sign that a sort of *overclass* is in the making that would dominate this society of classes. Bagguley and Mann (1992) see a similar danger, and read the concept as a collection of ideological beliefs that belong to certain groups of the dominant classes. Although it contains some partial truths, these do not conceal its chaotic nature or the processes that produce the correlations that it takes as given. This is why the concept of underclass ends up producing fairly poor social science as well as inadequate social policies.

The underclass can therefore be seen as one of the ideological effects of the dominant classes. After all, it is not unusual to suggest that the dominant classes have an ideology of social inequality. But the concept of underclass goes further: it creates an entity 'outside' society. It isolates the poor, confines them to their ghettos and thus renders unrecognisable the deep ties between their degradation and the processes that are transforming society as a whole. Once all the problems are reduced to one extreme form of poverty, the poor find themselves outside the structure of social classes, separated not only from the other poor, but from society as such. They are therefore also 'outside' citizenship.

Barbara Schmitter-Heisler (1991) analyses the concept of underclass *vis-à-vis* the problem of citizenship and asserts that the extremely limited character of the institutions of social citizenship in the USA played a decisive role in the development of the phenomena called 'underclass'. There seems to be a link between a very partial welfare state such as that of the USA and the aggravation of poverty conditions at the lower end of the social ladder. It is this which distinguishes American society from the European countries. Because of the lack of support institutions, the extension of the legal equality of citizenship to minorities, both ethnic and non-ethnic thanks to the civil rights movements of the 1960s, could not produce an equivalent extension of social rights. By contrast, these social rights were at the origin of the development in Europe of different models of welfare that attained what T.H. Marshall referred to as 'social citizenship'. For this reason it is especially surprising to find that in Europe the debate on poverty has followed quite uncritically the lines of American research, including the concept of underclass .

## The Excluded

Despite appearances, there are similarities between the concept of underclass and that of *social exclusion* which recently has come to dominate research on poverty and social policies in France and the rest of Europe, as well as European Community action. Herpin (1993) actually deals with the two concepts as if they were synonymous. In effect, for both of them, the analysis of poverty imperceptibly tends to identify all the problems of poverty that afflict our societies with *extreme* poverty.

But they also have different histories and, accordingly, quite different characteristics. When René Lenoir published *Les exclus* in 1974, documenting a huge variety of handicaps, nobody doubted that the notion of exclusion would one day re-emerge from a social sciences' hat that was bereft of ideas. It seemed to contain an application of the theory of global social action, mixing together an assortment of sectoral specific interventions (Chevalier, 1993). It revives an old indistinct image of poverty that haunted conservative thought and seemed to have been taken over by the system of social protection that turned it into a series of identified social risks and targeted policies. Since the climate has changed in the meantime, the concepts cannot but do likewise. But what has produced the current craze for the notion of social exclusion? What drove 'the excluded' onto the media stage?

The success of the concept of exclusion has occurred since it was adopted from the exclusively conservative views that had previously limited its potential. Moreover, the reasons for denouncing such exclusion are certainly not lacking since the effects of the economic crisis were there for everyone to see, as was the increasing gap that it was producing between the rich and the poor. Above all, this increase in inequality increasingly takes the form of social polarisation which reinforces the distance of the poor from participation in social life and creates a fear of an ungovernable rupture. The end of the class struggle paradigm and the retreat of Marxist categories that provided both an analysis of social conflict and a vision of a social order without classes, leaves us without the theoretical means to analyse the phenomena that survived the death of the paradigm. Evidence at the end of the 1980s that the employment crisis was not a passing one and that the aim of full employment could no longer be realised, led to 'exclusion from work' being considered an archetype of the relationship between society and the poor today (Messu 1994).



Unlike underclass, social exclusion does not dwell on the characteristics of class and poverty. It is true that the excluded are a group apart, marginal and separated from the rest of society. But the very nature of the concept makes it a purely negative notion. The excluded do not have any positivity, they are simply outsiders and only signify a disruption. They do not have common interests, they are not the new proletariat, they are even a 'non-class' (Rosanvallon 1995: 203). From this point of view, individual trajectories rather than collective identities have to be analysed.

Classification loses its importance and the statistical approach becomes increasingly inadequate for comprehending the world of the excluded. Because of this bias, as Rosanvallon himself stresses, the debate on exclusion takes the same individualistic direction as the analysis of the underclass in the US since it focuses on behaviour, individual life courses and on personalised treatment as opposed to impersonal, general measures (Affichard 1992: 17)

However, the notion of exclusion is as significant from a sociological point of view. It does not represent so much an aggregation or a class, but rather the result of a social decomposition, the indicator of a low degree of integration and the rupture of social ties. 'Exclusion' reflects a holistic conception of society, in which social cohesion is undermined by the polarisation of inequalities. Thus, the means of integrating the individual on a professional, family or community basis (Messu 1994) have to be strengthened. An equally individual trajectory of integration has to correspond to the individual path of marginalisation.

The difficulty comes from the transforming effect that the notion of exclusion has *vis-à-vis* the phenomena it analyses. It transforms a process into a condition - the condition of an excluded person - and it is more disposed towards quantifying that condition than understanding it. In fact, exclusion refers to a state of deprivation: it derives from a holistic logic of social cohesion but it none the less describes a dual society - one in which those who are within are divided from those outside. In describing the conditions of life on the margins of society, in following the channels of exclusion, it only confirms the existence of rupture, as if there was a possible place 'outside' society, where the suffering of the excluded can be analysed. But as Robert Castel (1995) points out, observing the existence of wants neither allows an understanding of the processes that generate these conditions and nor do brings out their specific nature. This is so especially if they are analysed as being on the margins of society, since the processes at work in a 'normally' integrated society are not referred to. However, the collection of phenomena that Castel describes as the

'destabilisation of the stable' - the precarious nature of work, isolation, the reduction of resources, the weakening of social protection - are not just the conditions prevailing on the margins of society but the processes that are *polarising* society. The excluded are thus separated not only from society but also from the processes which are responsible for their exclusion.

Many factors have played a role in the success of this notion, which go well beyond the framework of administrative categorisation from which it came. Firstly, there was the development of a humanitarian strategy in reaction to an economic analysis of poverty which reduces all differentials to monetary ones (Messu 1994). With this reaction, the struggle against 'mass poverty' became hugely popular and was promoted by religiously inspired organisations that saw this as a means of reviving private or charitable social assistance. Secondly, the trend of social policies was to equate social with the urban, adopting a neat characterisation of the urban structure that replaced 'inequality' with 'segregation' (Touraine 1992). More generally, the reasons for the success of the notion of social exclusion have to do with its capacity for replacing that of inequality, thereby reducing the threat of ungovernability suggested by the latter.

For while exclusion places the problem 'outside society', inequality inevitably raises the problematic issue of the attainment of equality. Etienne Balibar (1992) points to the link between the rise of the concept of exclusion and the disappearance of that of class struggle; exclusion focuses on the identification of typologies at the expense of the dynamic described by the class struggle. This dynamic is essential in social analysis as it shows that inequalities are accentuated, not outside social space, but within it, by its institutions. This is precisely what the notion of exclusion masks. Balibar fears that this will to disregard the phenomena of inequality is only a sign that, fundamentally, we dread less the exclusion of more and more groups of the population than their desire for inclusion and their corresponding claim to change political relationships.

The personalised trajectories of integration that are proposed to the excluded aim to replacing the demand for participation with a strategy of involvement. This is because participation reflects a power problematic and this 'question of power, in a certain sense, was a screen for action' (Donzelot, 1993:34). By contrast, 'involving' the excluded and calling on all to collaborate produces a collectivity bound to the realisation of each individual's potential, instead of linking them to aims that go *beyond* the individual. This approach also avoids a conflict that questions the distribution of power in society.



Thus the *exclusion-involvement-action* equation is opposed to an *inequality-participation-power* equation. The first expresses a technocratic rationality that does not accommodate conflicts very well, and does not like putting power at stake. The second constitutes a reading of society that made equality the principle as well as the objective of an emancipatory project. The first claims to have integrated the social and the economic by means of an entrepreneurial logic of individual performances, beginning with a local involvement which does not lead to any consideration of central political issues. Meanwhile, the second has been essentially translated into an economic analysis that describes poverty in quantitative terms based on income thresholds.

The return to a localised treatment of problems which is evident in the current forms of social administration is a way of trying to reconstruct social exchange on an increasingly individualistic basis (Castel 1992: 470), implementing a contractual reciprocity on a territorial level, and leaving aside universal rights. However, at work in this localism there is, as Marcel Gauchet (1991: 179) points out, the illusion of decentralisation as a palliative which is good for everyone. The individual contract put in place by the RMI (Minimum Insertion Income) makes an appeal to individual capacities for insertion as educational outcomes of social integration. By contrast, it does not modify the structural conditions which militate against them, nor does it diminish the RMI claimants' distress at being socially non-existent. Returning to a local level means refusing to recognise the collective nature of the problems that affect the poor, with all what follows from this in terms of valorisation.

Finally, the notion of social exclusion risks renewing the old vice of liberalism in relation to poverty which was to make poverty visible without promising any subjective rights for the poor. This vice already produced the *impasse* against which the social policies founded on social rights were formulated. The attack on social rights today is justified by their indiscriminate nature - the legacy of a society that 'mistakenly' aspired to equality. In their place, social exclusion presents a very limited target for egalitarian policies, suggesting that, except in extreme cases, inequality is no longer a problem.

Exclusion has the advantage of combining this need for a theory that avoids a consideration of inequality and the humanitarian concern that is increasingly invoked as a way of understanding conflicts. A technocratic concept that has become the password for all financing of research on

'poverty', it allows us to take into account the unjust destiny that we reserve for the poor, excluded from the post-industrial banquet, without questioning the nature of this society or the deep crisis that afflicts it. The success of the notion of exclusion is due precisely to its social neutrality and pseudo-scientific garb.

## Conclusion

The underclass refers to a group of the population, identified by a spatial proximity which provides its common characteristics, and places individual behaviour at the centre of analysis. Whereas social exclusion fragments poverty, breaking it down into individual trajectories of rehabilitation, but nevertheless emphasizes the importance of a localized intervention over the space where these individuals live together. Besides, the two concepts differ due to the very different contexts from which they have emerged. The strategy of combating exclusion in France today attacks policies that aimed to equalize conditions. By contrast, the concept of the underclass comes into play within social policies which have been dominated by the "work-ethic", and remains obsessed with putting the members of this underclass back to work.

However, despite their differences, the two concepts have convergent effects. Not only because they both move the emphasis from the social to the urban, and therefore the policies they inspire are targeted more at the space where poverty is reproduced than at its causes. More importantly, they pursue a similar strategy for shifting the issue of the poor to the margins, which entails making "extreme poverty" the object of analysis. In both cases, a dual society is described, and poverty is reduced to the condition of marginal minorities. If exclusion destroys 'the honour of the citizen' (Balibar 1992), the notion of the underclass reinforces the barriers that separate the poor ghettos from others in towns. The two concepts thus bi-polarise the poor population: those who are deserving and those who do not deserve to exit from their poverty, the good and the bad poor who have long fought over favours from liberals.

Unquestionably, there is a crisis of social regulation that, as Marcel Gauchet (1993) indicates, now affects all institutional forms of participation. The 'collective actor' is itself in crisis, under the influence of what he calls 'mass individualism'. It is inevitable that this presents a challenge to social cohesion, creating a sort of anomic condition. And even if this 'de-structuring' of society and social protection is part of valid

reassessment of the needs of the individual against the hegemony of the State over civil society, it nevertheless produces, as Robert Castel (1992) asserts, a dangerous gap between those who can derive independence from individualism and those for whom individuality is a burden and the absence of protection the root of insecurity.

Adopting concepts such as underclass and social exclusion which marginalise the poor, runs the risk of merely endorsing the isolation in which they are condemned to live. Only re-establishing the necessary link between poverty and citizenship issues can offer a theoretical means for breaking this isolation and reversing the exclusion-insertion cycle, eventually tackling the dual risk of the growth of an abandoned population or the perpetuation of its dangerous dependence. If a new social contract is to be considered, it cannot take the form of a pure and simple return to the market, excluding those who do not succeed while simply compensating them for their exclusion. Instead, the rules of collective action will have to be reformulated for a highly individualised society. As sociology has been teaching us, this will require stretching the boundaries of individualism.



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