

Rowntree and townsend's theories on poverty



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Introduction

Sociologists disagree over what poverty actually is. In this essay I aim to discuss and criticise Seebohm Rowntree's theory from 1899 -1950 then I will discuss and criticise, Peter Townsend's theory. The next section will be to discuss and criticise, Mack and Lansley's theory, and the ideas of Herbert Spencer (social Darwinism) There will then be a discussion of regressive and progressive taxation and an explanation of Marslands theory. Finally I will explain and criticise, John Wetergaard and Henrietta Resler's argument that there is a myth surrounding the welfare state. This myth is that the welfare state is progressive and redistributes from the rich to the poor.

Poverty and Seebohm Rowntree

In the time of Queen Elizabeth the first it was people's duty to help alleviate poverty. They did this by feeding the poor and visiting the sick and trying to ensure that people were not destitute. After the Reformation things changed and laws were passed to regulate the amount that was spent on the poor. In 1601 the Elizabethan Poor Law was passed and made provision for " the setting of the poor on work" ^[1] The Poor Law also said that the poor were responsible for caring for each other. Overseers were appointed in every area to decide how much poor relief would be needed. In the amended Poor Law of 1834 overseers knew the circumstances of the poor in their are and those who were considered lazy would not get much help. These amendments to the Poor Law gave those in power a greater degree of control over the lives of the poor.

In the 1860s, Joseph Rowntree, Seebohm Rowntree's father conducted two studies into poverty. ^[2] This led Seebohm Rowntree to later conduct his own study which was published in 1901. He made an early distinction between primary and secondary poverty – a distinction which sociologists still use today. Primary poverty meant that a family did not have enough money coming in to cover the basic necessities of food, shelter and clothing. Secondary poverty was where families earned enough but spent their money on things other than the basic necessities. So some spending was regarded as alright while other spending was seen as wasting money, on drink for example. He believed that wages should be increased because then people would be well fed and healthy and would be an efficient workforce. He raised the wages of workers at his own company and said that businesses who refused to do this should be closed down as they were doing the country no favours. His second study which he carried out in the 1930s was published as “Progress and Poverty in 1941.” He argued in this study that the main cause of poverty was unemployment, the conclusions of his report influenced the founding of the welfare state.

Although Seebohm Rowntree did a lot to further the cause of the poor and to point out the causes of poverty. His remarks about primary and secondary poverty, while still influential today, were typical of those in power. That is to say they carried the message that the poor were irresponsible and needed to be told how to spend the money that they had earned.

Peter Townsend – Poverty as a Social Problem

Townsend (1979) has defined poverty in the following way:

“ Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diets, participate in the activities and have the living conditions which are customary, or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies to which they belong.” Townsend(1979: 31).

Townsend's work makes it quite clear that poverty is not just a lack of money but encompasses things other than strictly material needs. Those who are poor often live in poorer areas with badly performing schools and poor housing. This often results in ill health. Townsend said that there were two types of poverty, relative poverty and absolute poverty. Research undertaken for the Rowntree Foundation (Howarth et al, 1999) found that in local authority housing more than two thirds of the heads of those households were not in paid work and since 1991 there has been an increase of 40% in the number of local authority areas with above average mortality rates. Absolute poverty is not really seen in the west.

In underdeveloped countries people are often denied thenecessities e. g. food and shelter which maintain existence. Giddens (2001: 311) argues that the idea of absolute poverty is grounded in ‘ *subsistence*’. Anyone without sufficient food, shelter and clothing could be said to be living in absolute poverty. One of the ways in which absolute poverty is measured is by the poverty line which is based on the price of goods in a given society that humans need for survival. Those who cannot afford these goods live in poverty.

Not everyone agrees with this and the idea of absolute poverty is highly contested because the use of a single criterion fails to take into account the differences between societies. Needs are not the same in all societies, or even in the same society, nutritional needs are different for people working in different jobs, a labourer for example may need more calories than a bank clerk. Drewnowski and Scott (1966) ^[3] argue that absolute poverty should also include a lack of cultural needs. This is often argued over because a fixed standard on such needs is bound to fail. These people are more interested in relative poverty.

Relative poverty looks at peoples incomes and compares them to a national average. Relative poverty means that people are living in poverty when their life is compared to those of the average family this is because lack of income also means poorer housing. People who live in relative poverty usually live in deprived areas also. Since 1979 increased unemployment and a rise in benefit payments and earnings that are index linked to prices rather than wages, has resulted in a huge rise in the number of people living in relative poverty. ^[4] In a report in The British Medical Journal (2000) the writer looked at absolute and relative child poverty in developed countries where some peoples incomes were more than fifty percent lower than the average. It also said that in the league table of relative child poverty one of the four bottom places was held by the UK.

An article in the Daily Telegraph (27/08/02) says that the idea of relative poverty is a problem. The article suggests that instead of using household income as the regulator it might be better if statisticians calculated the

prices of basic goods and services. Under the present system the rich were becoming richer and the poor were paying for it in increased taxes and a lack of services. Another approach to measuring relative poverty is through people's perceptions of the necessities of life which is what Mack and Lansley did.

Mack and Lansley

The work of Mack and Lansley (1985, 1992) listed those things that were considered to be necessary to modern day life if a person was not living in poverty. They did two studies on relative poverty in the UK. Mack and Lansley carried out an opinion poll to find out what people thought were the necessities of modern day life. There were twenty six things that most people considered important these things included new clothes, heating, a bath and indoor toilet. Relative poverty was thus measured by the presence or absence of the things that had been listed. Mack and Lansley's research found that the number of people living in poverty in the 1980s went up quite a bit, this poverty was defined by the lack of three or more of the basic necessities mentioned earlier. Between 1983 and 1990 when the two studies were undertaken the number of people who were living in poverty went up from 7.5 million to 11 million and the number of those living in severe poverty or who were lacking more than 7 of the items that were considered essential, went up from 2.6 to 3.5 million (Mack and Lansley, 1992). Poverty is also defined by how far people can afford to participate in social activities such as school trips. In recent years this has been called social exclusion. Social exclusion does not look at poverty just in terms of a lack of material

things. It looks at the wider picture and this includes whether people are able to participate in society.

There are no clear ways of measuring poverty. Absolute and relative poverty are both complex and ways of measuring what it is to be poor, and not everyone agrees on them. Policy makers say what poverty is and then make laws for it but few of them experience what it is to be poor. A report published by the Rowntree foundation says that what the poor have to say needs to be taken into consideration in research on poverty. Taking into account the opinions of those who actually lived in poverty would provide useful information for existing organisations that might help shape policy making in the long term. ^[5] In all this there is a feeling that the poor are somehow to blame for the circumstances in which they find themselves. A point which Herbert Spencer writing in the nineteenth century would have agreed with.

As far as Spencer was concerned people lived in poverty as a result of dissolute living. He had no sympathy at all for the poor and regarded many of them as criminals and drunks. He believed it was unnatural to help people who lived in poverty as a result of their own behaviour and irresponsibility. If people were too lazy to work then they should not be allowed to eat. He believed that the cause of poverty could be found by an examination of the moral character of an individual. The Poor Laws were wrong because they encouraged the poor to be lazy and to rely on somebody else's hard work to provide them with the necessities of life. This allowed moral decline to spread through the population. The result would be that both society and the economy would suffer. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century thought

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was heavily influence by Darwins work “ The Origins of the Species” and Spencer was no exception. He believed in Darwin’s idea of the survival of the fittest. Society could only evolve properly and morally if the honest and hard working members of society were allowed to keep the fruits of their labour. The week and lazy members of society should be condemned to live in poverty because that was what they deserved. Falling into poverty was a necessary evil in society because without poverty work would not exist.

Although this may seem repugnant to a lot of people Spencer’s ideas are still rife in modern society. Peter Golding (1978) has said that media reporting of poverty in the nineteen seventies portrayed the poor as welfare scroungers living off the backs of others. The press portrayed people as having a comfortable existence living off social security at the expense of tax payers.

The New Right

The Conservative Government headed by Margaret Thatcher were voted into power in 1979. Political debates of the time were concerned with a free market economy versus the welfare state. The tory government brought in measures to roll back the welfare state and control spending. This was done through the introduction of marketing and business strategies into policy making. At the same time there was an intense process of privatization because it was thought that public ownership of companies, and the public sector worked against market forces. Introducing marketing principles into social care allowed the Governments to in theory improve services. It also enabled them to retain a greater degree of control. Giddens (2001) says that:

...the momentum of Thatcherism in economic matters was maintained by the privatising of public companies.....(this).. is held to reintroduce healthy economic competition in place of unwieldy and ineffective public bureaucracies, reduce public expenditure and end political interference in managerial decisions (Giddens, 2001: 434).

The introduction of market forces into social care was considered the best method of Government spending because free markets were considered to be self organising (Olssen 2000). They thought this would increase productivity and improve care and be cost efficient. Government discourses, both Conservative and New Labour have revolved around the notion that the introduction of market mechanisms would result in a more equitable system benefiting all. However, Alcock (1994) says that the Conservative policies resulted in greater unemployment, a rise in the number of homeless people, and a general growth in social inequality. Marsland (1996) disagrees and says that in Britain poverty has been exaggerated.

David Marsland

Marsland says that the Rowntree foundation deliberately confuse poverty with inequality and that they exaggerate the amount of poverty in Britain. He says that who say poverty is increasing act out of their own self interest because the evidence is not examined impartially. He does not believe in relative poverty but says that in order to truly be poverty it has to be absolute and this is disappearing from Britain because of the increase in living standards that has come about through capitalism. He is also critical of universal welfare provision i. e. those benefits such as education which are available to everyone regardless of their income as he believes they create a

dependency culture. Marsland (1989) believes that relying on the government to take care of the people results in an abdication of personal responsibility and welfare hand outs are just another reason for remaining unemployed.

Jordan (1989) says that Marsland is wrong in what he says about universal welfare provision creating a dependency culture and that if such a culture exists it is targeted with means tested benefits that only the very poor get. Rather than poverty being the result of an over generous welfare system, Jordan says that it comes from one that is too mean.

Westergaard and Resler (1976) argue that the welfare state does not make the distribution of wealth more equal. Poverty is not being eradicated. Any money or benefits that the working class receive will eventually be paid back in tax by themselves. They believe that the welfare state is simply another tool of capitalism and poverty exists because of that system which prevents poor people from obtaining the resources to stop being poor. In Westergaard's view the policies of the eighties and nineties and the hold that market forces had over Britain meant that even the aim of redistributing wealth through the welfare state had been abandoned. Kincaid says that it is not just a matter of rich and poor it is the fact that some people are very rich while some are very poor. Poverty therefore is a result of the capitalist system. However, such theories do not really explain why some people become poor nor do they differentiate between poor working class and other members of that class. So we have plenty of theories but no real solutions.

Conclusion

This essay has looked at different theories of poverty. Seebohm Rowntree in the nineteenth century who wanted to improve the lives of the poor and believed that increased wages would change things. Herbert Spencer on the other hand believed the opposite. He thought it was wrong to help the poor and believed that if people were hard working and honest then they should keep all of the money they had earned. Some people were born to be richer than others, it was the survival of the fittest. Peter Townsend distinguished between absolute and relative poverty but relative poverty is not easy to define and is still being contested. Even Macky and Llansley's work on relative poverty does not solve the problem.

New Right approaches have contributed to the problems of poverty but Marxist criticisms do not provide answers as to who the poor really are or how they became that way. Clearly this is not an easy question. However, if we look back at the definitions of absolute poverty then we can say that this type of poverty does not really exist in Britain today.

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[1] <http://www.victorianweb.org/history/poorlaw/elizpl.html>

[2] <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RErowntreeS.htm>

[3] Cited in Holborn and Langley 2002

[4] <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp0579.pdf> Nickell, S. RES conference paper April 2003

[5] From input to influence: Participatory approaches to research and inquiry into poverty by Fran Bennett with Moraene Roberts, published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation