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The End of Poverty

Critical Reflections on a Modern Political Vision

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Abstract

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Ending world poverty is the major goal of the international community. Various declarations of the United Nations have called for an end to poverty and prominent economists such as Jeffrey Sachs have optimistically detailed the steps necessary to eradicate poverty even as smallpox was eradicated. Such aims are nothing new, however, and the end of poverty has already been declared once. In this essay, I will historically reconstruct the emergence of the political vision of poverty eradication. It will become clear that an end to poverty only became a feasible policy option once the concept of poverty had been limited to absolute and extreme poverty only, and once it had become possible to measure this narrow idea of poverty statistically. In the process of quantification, the prior notion of poverty as a form of inequality was lost. Consequently, one could argue that the desired elimination of poverty will thus fail to be what it claims to be: a real end to poverty.

Keywords:

Poverty, End of Poverty, Poverty Line, Relative Deprivation

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1. Introduction

In 2005, the economist Jeffrey Sachs published a book entitled *The End of Poverty* (Sachs 2005), which was to become a global bestseller. At the same time, a prominent international campaign was launched with the slogan “Make Poverty History”, calling for larger aid donations to the Third World. The publications *Acting Now to End World Poverty* by Peter Singer (Singer 2009) and *Creating a World Without Poverty* by Muhammad Yunus (Yunus 2007) are only two examples of a myriad of similar monographs which came out over the last decade. As early as 1995, the final document of the World Social Summit of the United Nations in Copenhagen programmatically declared: “We commit ourselves to the goal of eradicating poverty in the world” (UN 1995). The end of poverty was no longer the dream of academics – it had in fact become the explicit goal of the international community.

In today’s development discourse there is hardly a vision that could compare to the scope and importance of the idea of ending poverty. Its claim is immense: it is not about the mere reduction of poverty, a reduction in the number of poor people in the world or the improvement of their living conditions. No, more is at stake. It is the eradication, the complete vanishing of global poverty from the face of the earth that is to be achieved, just as the scourge of smallpox was eliminated in the last century.

The powerful image of a possible end to poverty consciously plays with the historical role of poverty. The idea of the elimination of poverty de-historicizes a condition that has been part of human society for millennia, by denying it a future. The contrast between the role that poverty has played in virtually all societies at all times and the expectation of a future free of such suffering makes this bold claim particularly

compelling. In this grandiose rhetoric, poverty is not usually further defined. It is the end of “poverty” that is called for, not the end of “absolute poverty” or of “extreme poverty” (even if this is often implicitly assumed). The important point is to note that the issue at stake (and the term used) is poverty – poverty in general.

However, although the call for an end to poverty seems to be very modern, the idea of a possible and necessary eradication of poverty is not new. It has been proclaimed for the past 200 years, at least. And not only that. Half a century ago it was commonly claimed that poverty had already been ended for good.

In this essay, I will trace the emergence of the idea of an end to poverty from a historical perspective. Emphasis will be placed on the process through which poverty as the inevitable fate of humanity evolved into a parameter that could not only be deliberately controlled, but also eliminated through adequate political measures. Differing definitions of poverty as well as its statistical measurability will play an important role. The first part deals with the timeframe from the Middle Ages to Thomas Malthus. In the second part, I will show how the threat of communism seemed to help make the idea of an end to poverty a realistic option. In the third part, I will highlight the rediscovery of poverty as relative deprivation. Lastly, I will discuss why the vision of an end to poverty is still so vehemently clung to.

In light of the current claim of the necessity and feasibility of ending world poverty I will come to a paradoxical conclusion: If the programs and strategies to end world poverty are as effective as believed, there is one thing that they will not achieve – an end to poverty.

2. Perpetual Poverty: From the Middle Ages to Malthus

To believe that poverty could somehow vanish would have been deemed absurd for centuries. Poverty was part of human history. It had always existed and there was no reason to believe that this would or could change. The social hierarchy was static. The individual occupied a clearly defined position from his or her birth onwards. Improvement or upward social mobility were unusual. Rather, it was expected that one show contentment with his or her lot. The Christian religion was characterized by an “eschatological reversal”: Deprivation and poverty in this life would be rewarded with a carefree eternal life in the kingdom to come. Christianity deliberately omitted a vision of the possible and necessary improvement of living conditions in the here and now. Instead, religion helped the poor to come to grips with and to endure their fate.

With the emergence of the dogma of salvation in the early Middle Ages, the continuing existence of poverty even became something of an ethical necessity. The wealthy members of society could only guarantee their salvation if alms were given to the poor. This system actually and effectively precluded the idea of an end to poverty. Poverty alleviation was surely desired – but an end to poverty was not. This would have made charity superfluous. This was hardly in the interests of the rich: They needed the poor to help them enter heaven.

As the economy monetized in the late Middle Ages, more people worked for money and were able to accumulate it. Differences in economic wealth within societies became more pronounced and public opinion towards the poor changed. Whereas the poor had once been welcome instruments on the pathway to paradise, they were suddenly seen as annoying, dirty and threatening from the 14th century onwards. Pov-

erty and the poor were perceived as evil, like a disease against which one had to protect oneself. It was during this phase that regulations for dealing with poverty emerged across Europe (Geremek 1994; Dietz 1997; Himmelfarb 1984).

In this process, Elizabethan England played a pivotal role. The so-called Old Poor Laws, in place from around 1600 until 1834, were the first attempt by a state to regulate the provision of poor relief. Before that, social assistance had been organized by the church, but this became impossible after monasteries and other church institutions were closed during the reign of Henry VIII. Henceforth, all villages in England and Wales were to collect a special tax with which a variety of relief measures were to be financed. Begging was penalized, as was vagrancy. As Sydney and Beatrice Webb argue, the Elizabethan Poor Laws were first and foremost a system of state repression. It was not the alleviation or ending of poverty that was the goal, but rather the maintenance of public order. Nonetheless, the Elizabethan Poor Laws are seen as the forerunner of the European welfare state and proved extremely durable (Webb and Webb 1917; Marshall 1968, Slack 1995).

Yet, in the 18th century, resistance towards the Poor Laws began to grow. The poor rate or poor tax increasingly strained the wealthier villagers as the funds collected to provide poor relief continued to mount. But the number of poor did not seem to become smaller. Voices grew louder arguing that payments to the poor served only to lull them to idleness and sin, and that poverty itself was not being alleviated. They grew so loud that a powerful political movement was formed, calling for the total abolition of poor relief. For the opponents of poor relief, everyone was responsible for his or her own life and happiness.

Relief was undoubtedly necessary for those truly in need, such as widows with children or those who could not work. For others, however, relief should not take the form of money. Their alternative idea was the incarceration of the “able-bodied poor” into pauper homes that were not substantially different from prisons and in which the poor were to be forced to labor.

The opponents of the Poor Laws based their views on the then-novel ideology that state interference was always and automatically detrimental to society. For them, society functioned like a competitive market in equilibrium. *Laissez-faire* was thus not merely an economic dogma, but a principle of nature. The provision of poor relief was an unnatural meddling with the natural functioning of society. For the believers in *laissez-faire*, poverty was a feature of reality. Nature itself would see to it that the number of poor would not exceed a critical threshold (Joseph Townsend 2011 [1786]; Lepenies 2013; Polanyi 2001 [1944]).

The most prominent thinker guiding the opponents of poor relief was Thomas Malthus. Malthus developed his population principle as a direct reaction to the – in his view, completely futile – Poor Laws. The high birth rates among the poor, which Malthus blamed on the readily available relief payments under the Laws, was the main reason why, at the beginning of the 19th century, it was believed that more people lived in England than the country could manage to feed. Only the complete abolition of public relief payments could effectively assist in reducing misery (again, by keeping the number of poor low). Poverty was here to stay and would never cease. This was one of the certainties in which the theologian Malthus firmly believed (Malthus 1976 [1798]).

Malthus was not only an opponent of the Poor Laws and a radical representative of Liberalism. Interestingly, his ideas on population dynamics were a direct reaction to a thinker who had prophesized what in the eyes of Malthus and many of his contemporaries sounded like utter nonsense: an end to poverty.

Malthus conceptualized his *Essay on The Principle of Population* from 1798 as a direct challenge to the writings of the French philosopher, the Marquis de Condorcet. With his *Sketch of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* from 1793, (*Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, Condorcet 1988 [1793]) Condorcet had positioned himself as the discoverer of the modern idea of progress. He believed that humanity would always “progress” further over time. With this “progression” he basically meant that the use of reason would become ever more pronounced. But the most important of his ideas was that he believed that humanity was travelling on a linear pathway of progress, at the end of which a clear goal was waiting. This final stage of human progression was the end of inequalities within and among the peoples of the Earth – nothing less than an end to world poverty as all differences on the globe ultimately levelled out. The use of reason would induce people to have less and less children so that the specter of the critical overpopulation of the world would never become reality. In France, according to Condorcet, the eradication of poverty was a question of political will and institution-building. Condorcet conceived of practical proposals for the design of social security systems that were to combat poverty permanently. According to Gareth Stedman Jones (2004), Condorcet was the first thinker to come up with the idea that poverty could be “ended”. And this end had an all-encompassing, global dimension.

3. How the Fear of Communism Resulted in an End to Poverty

The year 1834 saw the reform of the Poor Laws in England. A complete abolition of relief measures was politically infeasible. But the number of eligible poor was dramatically reduced. Through this process, the idea of who was poor was lastingly altered and narrowed. Traditionally, the poor comprised the large majority of a country's population. In the English language, the terms "laborer" and "poor" were traditionally used as synonyms. Whoever had to work to make a living was poor. Such was the bitter reality for generations. The *Poor Commissioner's Report* from 1834, which was instrumental in forging the critical political mass for the reform of poor relief, made the distinction between "poverty" – the condition in which the individual was forced to secure his livelihood by work, and "indigence" that resulted from the fact that one was usually unable to work. Relief was to be concentrated on the latter, not the former (Himmelfarb 1984; Polanyi 2001 [1944]).

However, the situation of the poor became even harsher after the reforms of 1834. The main reason for this was the massive impoverishment resulting from industrialization. As industrialization completely uprooted a society traditionally based on craftsmen and peasants, it became ever more apparent in the middle of the 19th century that the idea of a static societal structure was untenable. No one could predict, however, how the societal dynamics would evolve.

Marxism provided a possible answer. For Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, mass poverty was a logical consequence of capitalist accumulation. In Chapter 23 of the first volume of *Das Kapital*, the inevitability of this development was elaborated in minute detail (Marx 1977 [1867]). Capitalism and impoverishment went hand in hand. The one determined the other. For communists, poverty was even a necessary evil. Only the inevitable and irreversible impoverishment

of the masses would bring about the revolution of the proletariat. A few years before the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1989 [1844]) Engels had already sketched this inevitable historical trajectory in his *The Conditions of the English Working Class* from 1844 (Engels 1957 [1844]).

An important detail of the Marxian vision was that the final stage of communism would also entail an end to poverty. The idea of a linear pathway to happiness was taken up by communism and concretized. The linear pathway was not one of an ever more pronounced usage of reason, but one of class struggle. Communists had an interest in overcoming the capitalist stage of human development as soon as possible. For them, the goal was not to combat poverty, but instead to completely abolish the existing social and economic order. An improvement in the lives of the poor during the stage of capitalism would only jeopardize the coming of the desired revolution. Communists exchanged the religious appeasement of the eschatological reversal with a vision that proclaimed an end to poverty in the existing world – if and only if existing property relations were collectively abolished. The vision of a possible better life in a not-so-distant future which was certain to arrive, according to Marxist theory, gave the poor something to believe in and to hope for, and the wealthy something to fear. This fear became so great that the wealthy had to devise a strategy in response to these promises of a poverty-free future.

In order to stave off the threat of communism, the last quarter of the 19th century saw the appearance of a number of initiatives financed by private businessmen to help the state in alleviating poverty and in lastingly improving the lives of the poor. In contrast to the opinions aired at the beginning of the century, these entrepreneurs were convinced that govern-

ment could actively and effectively do something for the poor and indeed had the obligation to do so. The idea was that an improvement in the lives of the poor was a necessary precondition to preventing any socialist or communist uprising or other threat to the status quo. What surprised these men, however, was that there existed no credible data on the amount and degree of poverty, no credible poverty statistics. In a nutshell, there was no empirical basis for government action, no data similar to the financial facts and numbers they used to inform their business decisions. If data on poverty was not yet available, the businessmen believed, then somehow it must be produced. And if no methodology for counting the poor existed, then one had to be invented. In the course of their endeavors the classical toolkit of empirical social research, still in use today, was invented from scratch. The approach was typically British: empirical and pragmatic. The issue was not to end poverty or inequality or to produce some anti-Marxist ideology that could make a similar claim, but rather to enable sound incremental government policies based on empirical data that could protect the status quo by improving the lot of the poor in such a way as to render Marxism unattractive.

The pioneers of these initiatives were the ship-owner Charles Booth (Webb 1971 [1926]; Lindner 2004) with his famous decade-long research into poverty in London, and above all Seebohm Rowntree, a descendant of the North-English chocolate dynasty.

Rowntree wanted to improve the life of the poor in his hometown of York. But he found that he was unable to quantify who was poor and how large a share of the population was living in poverty – this information simply did not exist. In his attempt to find an answer, he invented the measurement-tool of the “poverty line” and presented his methodology and results in his 1901 book *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (Rowntree 1901). The idea of devising a cut-off point for poverty with the help of a poverty line was not in itself new. But it was Rowntree who popularized the measure and who came up with the most useful definition and application of it. Rowntree established that the line was to represent the amount of income necessary to allow the “maintenance of physical efficiency” of the members of a household. Departing from the then-novel ideas of nutrition science, he based his

calculation on the daily recommended calorie-intake and then constructed a basket of simple food items that would allow this requirement to be met (allowing for differences of age and gender). The market price of these goods was then calculated in order for a poverty line to be calibrated that was expressed in monetary units but based on calories. Rudimentary expenditure for clothing and housing was also included. With the help of questionnaires and other revolutionary survey techniques, Rowntree was able to calculate the number and percentage of poor. Roughly 30% of the population of York were poor according to his data – far more than conservatives had expected.

The important feature of Rowntree’s poverty line was that it was a measure of absolute poverty. The line was not defined in relation to the living standard of the society in question, but merely based on what was deemed necessary for physical survival – it measured what today is usually called “extreme poverty”. Yet, his line allowed for the first time the determination of a transparently calculated income below which a household could be deemed poor. In this way, poverty was reduced to the income dimension and became a feature that could be expressed in monetary terms. In other words, the social phenomenon of poverty was quantified and turned into a number. Moreover, the poverty line not only allowed researchers to identify the poor within a specific area, but it also allowed them to document what happened to the poor over time – something that had not been possible before.

In Rowntree’s first study, there was no talk of an “end to poverty”. Several decades after his initial investigation, he analyzed the situation of the poor in York again. In his book *Progress and Poverty* (Rowntree 1942), published in the early forties, he discovered that poverty had been reduced by 50%. Roughly ten years later he was able to state in *Poverty and the Welfare State* (Rowntree und Lavers 1951) that the British welfare state had not only reduced poverty, but had actually produced a complete disappearance of the poor. According to his calculations, poverty in York was at a negligible 1.5% of the population. There was no longer any poverty.

Ironically, it was Rowntree, whose primary object had been merely to learn more about the state of poverty by producing and using statistical data and

who was dedicated to the credibility of his sober methodology and his empirical data without any ideological narrative, who discovered with the help of his numbers (which were quickly taken to be valid not only for York but for the country as a whole) an empirical proof dear to the political philosophers and ideologues whose theories men such as Rowntree so mistrusted: the “conquest of poverty” within English society, a lasting end to poverty.

Yet these data concerned only “absolute” or extreme poverty. This end of poverty had little to do with the end of poverty as envisaged by Condorcet. For Rowntree, poverty as measured by his line was not inequality but only the struggle for survival. Needless to say, Rowntree was conscious of other forms and dimensions of poverty, but as these could not be measured, they did not form part of his poverty statistics.

Rowntree’s methodology took the world by storm. It was quickly adapted in most industrialized countries. And this widespread use had very important consequences: within a very short time, extreme poverty had become a synonym for poverty in general. This

was also a direct result of the term “poverty line” itself, which seemed to imply, at least in terms of language, that what it measured was “poverty” in general. With the political focus on the poverty line, other dimensions of poverty were soon forgotten.

Rowntree’s claim that poverty had been conquered achieved even greater credibility through its supposedly ideology-free measurement and quantification. Whereas Condorcet and Marx depended on ideological and theoretical deliberations to derive their notion of an end to poverty as the final stage in the social evolution of mankind, Rowntree discovered poverty’s end without having looked for it. This coincidental discovery of a statistically proven end to poverty was interpreted as a proof of the effectiveness of the post-war welfare state not only in Britain, but all over Europe and the West as well.

4. The Rediscovery of Poverty as Relative Deprivation

In the 1960s, poverty seemed have been relegated to history, at least in the industrialized countries and according to the available statistical data that was based on the Rowntree methodology. Precisely as the end of poverty had become a reality, however, mounting criticism began to question the claim of a poverty-free society. The most prominent critical voice was that of yet another Englishman: Peter Townsend. In his famous article “The Meaning of Poverty” from 1962 he made clear just how all-encompassing the belief in the end of poverty had become (Townsend 1962):

“The belief that poverty has been eliminated in Britain is commonly held. It has been reiterated in parliament and the press and has gained authority from a stream of books and papers.” (Townsend 1962: 220)

According to Townsend, the discovery of the end of poverty had led to a condition “of dazed euphoria” (Townsend 1962: 220) that obscured the necessary clear-eyed focus on social reality.

Townsend found fault with the fact that poverty was seen merely as extreme or subsistence poverty. Instead, Townsend called for a relative definition of poverty. He wrote:

“My main thesis is that both ‘poverty’ and ‘subsistence’ are relative concepts and that they can only be defined in relation to the material and emotional resources available at a particular time to the members either of a particular society or different societies.” (Townsend 1962: 210-211)

For Townsend, even the fixation on an absolute minimum income was arbitrary. Which goods were included in the basket and how many calories were deemed sufficient for survival was not the result of objective investigations. The chosen data were based on decisions that would be different in different geographical and cultural contexts and thus rendered poverty statistics uncomparable.

“One mistake has been to narrow attention largely to the preservation of physical efficiency, whatever that may mean, and by implication to assume that the physical efficiency of individuals can be divorced from their psychological well-being and the organization and structure of society. Another has been to draw up a list of basic necessities, translate them into a certain income, and call this ‘subsistence’. All students of poverty ... have tended to write as if their subsistence standards consisted of a list of absolute necessities which could be applied irrespective of time and place, rather as if a fixed yardstick could be devised and measured against a given population, whether in 1900, 1930 or 1950, and whether in York, London, Sicily or Calcutta.” (Townsend 1962: 218–219)

For Townsend, poverty was a dynamic, not a static, concept. But above all, poverty was not the impossibility of achieving some minimum of existence defined in absolute terms. Poverty, instead, was “relative deprivation” – i.e. deprivation in relation to the average livelihood of the society. A society could become wealthier over time, but there would always exist those whose standard of living was way below what most people enjoyed – even if their physical existence and survival was not threatened. Those people, too, were poor. And poverty, in this understanding, was inequality.

The notion of relative poverty itself was not new. But in the shadow of the success of Rowntree’s methodology, it was simply forgotten. In his “Wealth of Nations”, Adam Smith had claimed in 1776 that the goods that a person necessarily required were not merely those that allowed physical survival, but those that allowed for life in dignity according to the customs and rules of society. Thus he famously stated: “The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them [i.e. these goods]” (Smith 1999 [1776]: 465). And of course, Condorcet’s ideal of a world without inequality, formulated twenty years earlier, was based on the notion of relative deprivation as well.

Townsend’s impulse resulted in a theoretical differentiation of what was to be understood by poverty. This process continues to the present day and concerns mostly the idea of relative deprivation. Amongst these modern concepts are the idea of poverty as entitlement failure. Even the definition of the European Union of citizens at risk of falling into poverty – those whose net equivalent income falls below 60% of the national mean – is based on the notion of relative poverty.

Probably the most encompassing modern concept of poverty as relative deprivation is the capability approach that was developed in the 1980s by the Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen and which has been expanded and specified ever since. Sen formulated that an individual can be considered poor if his or her possibilities of living the life one has the right to desire are somehow obstructed (or in Sen’s words, if an individual experiences some form of capability deprivation that prevents him or her from living life according to his or her aspirations and possibilities). This deprivation can be social, cultural, economic or political. An individual is poor if he or she cannot participate (in the widest sense) in the life of a given community (Sen 1987; Sen 1997; Sen 1999).

The capability approach has been highly influential. German social policy, for instance, is explicitly grounded in it. In the Report on *Poverty and Wealth* of the Federal Government of 2008 (the Armuts- und Reichtumsbericht der Bundesregierung) it is stated that:

“The essence of a just politics is to provide opportunities for economic and social participation and fulfillment for all members of society. Politics that wishes to contribute to preventing poverty and social exclusion cannot limit itself to securing material basic needs. [...] Everyone must have the chance to make the best out of his or her individual potential.” (Bundestag 2008: 12, my translation)¹

In this sense, poverty is not only a lack of basic necessities. It is, above all the inability to participate. In contrast to the narrow understanding of poverty as fixed by Rowntree’s poverty line, this understanding of poverty is fairly broad. In fact, it is compatible with many elementary human rights and is based on the ideal of equity. Based on such a holistic understanding, poverty alleviation is a permanent feature of politics – and poverty is not something that can be realistically “ended”.

5. Conclusion:

Why Again an End to Poverty?

So how can it be that the idea of an end to poverty has resurfaced so prominently in recent years on the international level – despite the fact that modern poverty theory holds that a true end to poverty is not even believed to be feasible in highly developed countries?

Part of the answer can be found in a single succinct sentence from a publication by the German federal agency for political education² on the subject of poverty. It reads: “Nowadays, poverty is usually associated with the conditions of developing countries” (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung 2009: 3, my translation). Townsend and Sen might have expanded our theoretical understanding of what poverty is, and politicians might pay lip-service to their ideas as seen in the German report quoted above, but the traditional notion that poverty is first and foremost physical survival is still prevalent. This is one of the

lasting results of the success of Rowntree’s methodology. No other notion of poverty has been so readily translated into statistics, no other notion has entered politics, the media, and the perception of the general public in likewise fashion – let alone under the name of “poverty”. It is telling that the adjective “extreme” is often omitted when speaking of poverty or the end of poverty. It seems so obvious that poverty is the same thing as subsistence or extreme poverty that the word poverty needs no further specification. And since extreme poverty is indeed less prevalent in the Global North (and believed to have ended some time ago), the problem of poverty is automatically projected onto the Global South.

But the main reason for the belief in a possible end to poverty has to do with measurement. Interestingly, the Poverty and Wealth report of the federal govern-

¹“Kern sozial gerechter Politik ist es, ökonomische und soziale Teilhabe- und Verwirklichungschancen für alle Mitglieder der Gesellschaft zu ermöglichen. Politik, die dazu beitragen will, Armut und soziale Ausgrenzung zu verhindern, kann sich daher nicht in der Sicherung materieller Grundbedürfnisse erschöpfen. [...] Alle müssen die Chance erhalten, ihre individuellen Möglichkeiten auszuschöpfen.”

²Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung; a public body responsible for disseminating scientifically based information on topics of historical, social, economic, cultural and political interest to the wider German public.

ment of Germany states that poverty “is a multi-faceted social phenomenon. It defies exact measurement” (Bundestag 2008: 12). But as history has shown, it was Rowntree’s attempt at exact measurement that led to the discovery of the feasibility of an “end to poverty” and to a narrowing of the definition of poverty in the first place. And perhaps, from the point of view of politics, an understandable need is felt to measure things, as precisely as possible.

In the 1990s, international development found itself in its biggest crisis of legitimacy. Declining aid payments by donor governments accompanied a general doubt as to the effectiveness of aid. This forced development institutions to reinvent themselves. And they did so by placing poverty alleviation into the focus of attention. In previous years – characterized by structural adjustment, the liberalization of markets and the search for solutions to the problems of debt and inflation – poverty was believed to diminish in trickle-down fashion once other policy priorities (such as market liberalization or growth) were met. With specific attention to poverty and to the poor, the aid industry wanted to reinvent its image as an emphatic advocate of the neediest – combatting the erstwhile impression that economic growth and markets were all they cared about, rather than people.

Yet, to show that this new prioritization of poverty was serious and would genuinely change the focus and emphasis of the donor countries and institutions, the commitment had to be stronger than before. This was done by boldly claiming that the goal was an *eradication of poverty*, an end to poverty altogether.

Development policy, since its inception, was based on the idea of overcoming differences through convergence. Developing countries lacked what the developed world already had, and adequate policies should help to “close gaps” or to “catch up”, as the usual development rhetoric held. In a nutshell, the developing world should become like the developed. The end of poverty thus made a conscious allusion to the “fact” that poverty had already been eliminated in the industrialized world. What had been achieved in the latter could – through adequate policy measures of development – become possible in the former as well (Hulme und Fukuda-Parr 2009).

Overcoming poverty had of course, always been the main justification for development assistance. But the donor institutions had never been so bold as to claim that poverty was to be completely eradicated. For this claim to be credible and to show that poverty alleviation was not a side-effect of other development measures, the success in poverty alleviation, as well as the state of poverty in the world, had to be documented by data. And this data had to be highly visible and comprehensible.

In 1990, partly as a reaction to the methodologically diverse methods of calculating the number of the poor in the world, which had resulted in contradicting poverty statistics in the past, the World Bank introduced a universal poverty line. According to that measure, a person was poor if he or she had an income of less than a dollar a day. This global measure of extreme poverty quickly became the standard statistic used for poverty analysis – in development policy, in academia and in the wider media. In its conceptualization and methodology, this poverty line is identical with Rowntree’s approach. Its calibration is based on the idea that it represents the cost of purchasing a bundle of goods that allows the maintenance of physical efficiency in a given national context (see Lepenies 2010).

The World Bank’s efforts were also very similar to Rowntree’s. As with Rowntree, the Bank’s motivation was to improve an understanding of poverty by making it measurable, and to inform politics accordingly. What began as a mere exercise in statistics was quickly taken as the fundamental numerical and ideological basis of the program for ending world poverty. Basically all initiatives that call for an “end of poverty” are based on the one-dollar-a-day figure. Without this measure, the “end of poverty” would have remained mere rhetoric. The availability of this statistic (and its wide acceptance by authorities such as the World Bank and UN institutions) lends credibility and authority to the claim to end poverty.

Generally, translating a social phenomenon into a particular statistic is a “technology of government” as Nicolas Rose and Peter Miller have called it in their approach to Foucault’s notion of *gouvernementalité* (Rose und Miller 1992). A “technology of government” empowers the state to define a specific social

phenomenon by fixing an official way of estimating and documenting it (such as the official poverty figures). The statistic documents a “problem” that governments have to solve. If the international community is understood in its widest sense as some form of global government whose goal is to improve the living conditions of all people, especially in the developing countries, it is understandable that a specification of poverty along the lines of Rowntree’s methodology and definition most easily allows the effectiveness of government activities to be documented. And it also explains why wider conceptions of poverty such as inequality are excluded: They run the risk of engendering lengthy if not endless discussions as to what aspects of inequality should or should not be included.

However, history shows how the narrow statistical measurement of poverty and the apparent statistically documented disappearance of poverty over time led to the erroneous belief that poverty had indeed been eradicated. It reveals, as well, how the idea of an end to poverty was so euphorically embraced that the real, and necessarily broader, notion of what poverty really is, was forgotten.

If the plight of millions of destitute persons is improved through more focused aid in the coming years, this is of course a cause for celebration. But it should not be forgotten that the fight against poverty entails more than securing survival. The rhetoric of an “end of poverty” is thus not genuinely helpful – unless, of course, one considers the aid institutions seeking a justification for their work. It is this hidden agenda behind the vociferous call for an “end of poverty” that has to be kept in mind.

In reviewing the history of this field, it should be noted that limiting the focus to poverty as physical efficiency is a mistake that has been made in the past that should not necessarily be made again.

The narrow idea of poverty overlooks the fact that the lack of human dignity caused by relative deprivation is at the core of what poverty means. Such a condition might defy statistical measurement and render anti-poverty measures something of a perpetual government exercise. But this is exactly what Condorcet had in mind when he spoke of an end to poverty. Al-

though Condorcet had a clear vision of humanity’s future, he was realistic enough to know that this vision could only be approximated – never truly achieved. Thus, the end of poverty as an end of all inequality is a normative ideal and rightly so. Governments should strive to approach this ideal incrementally and continuously. But no one should claim that within a given time frame and based on statistics, poverty will ultimately end, or be statistically shown to have ended.

This might be highly unattractive from the point of view of governments or aid agencies, but acknowledgement of this fact might prevent the frustration that will invariably arise once one finds that although poverty has supposedly ended, in fact, it has not. This is a lesson of history that should not repeat itself. Instead, it might be worthwhile to tone down the grand rhetoric of an end of poverty, and to concentrate instead on what measures other than survival enhancement might be necessary to alleviate poverty. Poverty in its true sense, that is. ■

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