Two

POVERTY CONDITIONS AND POVERTY ROLES

Steve D’Arcy

One of the central tasks of political philosophy is to develop clear and compelling articulations of the grievances and aspirations of those who resist and challenge injustice. The distributive-justice framework, most closely associated with the egalitarian brand of liberal justice theory proposed by John Rawls offers one viable approach to pursuing the formulation and legitimation of complaints against contemporary capitalism, notably complaints raised by those Rawls describes as “the least advantaged.” But in this paper I pursue a different approach to formulating and legitimating the grievances of the poor. I propose a way of thinking about poverty as an injustice that frames the issue, not in terms of the distribution of resources, but rather in terms of the formation and contestation of social identities: an ethics of identification instead of—or in addition to—the more familiar post-Rawlsian ethics of distribution.

My strategy is as follows: first, I examine the phenomenon of paternalism in social policy, pointing out the underlying continuity between the ostensibly opposed policy orientations of the “War on Poverty” in the 1960s and the “Welfare Reform” project that dominates more recent debates; second, I analyze the way identifying “labels” are used to justify or authorize interventions and intrusions into the lives of poor people that would otherwise be deemed impermissible; third, I show that these labels operate by conferring social statuses on poor people, a fact which necessitates that we think of poverty on two levels, as both a set of factual conditions, like low income or joblessness, and also a set of normatively structured roles, like the “welfare mother” role, the “disadvantaged” role, or the “homeless” role; and finally, I draw some conclusions from this analysis, both for how we think about social justice and for how we evaluate policy proposals.

1. Paternalism, the War on Poverty and the War on the Poor

The “War on Poverty” seems like a distant memory in the age of “welfare reform” and forced labor assignments for welfare clients. One can be forgiven for looking back nostalgically at the 1960s as, in some respects, a kind of golden age of non-punitive poverty policy. A decisive shift certainly seems to have occurred since then, such that the enemy once singled out by the war on poverty—namely, poverty understood as a social-structural problem—has
been displaced by a new enemy: poor people themselves, considered as a kind of deviant social group. For this reason it has become common to hear the welfare reform project dismissed as a War on the Poor: a sort of perverse inversion of the War on Poverty.\textsuperscript{3}

But we should notice, even as we draw attention to the contrast between the War on Poverty and the War on the Poor, that there is also an underlying continuity in these two approaches, a continuity that is best brought out by changing the metaphor. If we look at poverty, not in terms of the metaphor of \textit{military mobilization}, but in terms of the metaphor of \textit{parental supervision}, we see that what both the war on the poor and the war on poverty share is a common commitment to the infantilization of the poor: in the one case, the poor are depicted as \textit{misbehaving} children, in need of punitive discipline and stern behavioral correction; in the other, they are seen as \textit{helpless} children, in need of the guidance and support of wise and benevolent overseers. This is an important distinction, of course. But we cannot fail to note that it is a distinction between two modes of paternalism: two ways of treating adults as if they were children. It is a difference, but one which implies also a point of convergence between overtly punitive (blame-the-poor) and ambiguously “helping” (blame-the-poverty) approaches to public assistance.

Interestingly, a paternalistic manner of relating to poor people is explicitly and elaborately defended by one of the most influential social policy analysts of our time, “workfare” advocate and key “welfare reform” architect, Lawrence M. Mead. It is notable that the book he edited celebrating recent trends in social policy is entitled \textit{The New Paternalism: Supervisory Approaches to Poverty}. In it, Mead offers a clear—all too clear—statement of the rationale for the blame-the-poor mode of paternalistic poverty policy. Paternalistic policies, he says,

> attempt to reduce poverty and other social problems by directive and supervisory means. Programs based on these policies help the needy but also require that they meet certain behavioral requirements, which the programs enforce through close supervision. These measures assume that the people concerned need assistance but that they also need direction if they are to live constructively.\textsuperscript{4}

Mead adds that the success, as he sees it, of paternalistic poverty policies derives from the fact that “misbehavior is not just punished; it is pre-empted by the oversight of authority figures, much as parents supervise their families.”\textsuperscript{5}

But paternalistic thinking—albeit responding to the supposedly helpless rather than the supposedly misbehaving poor person—is no less manifest in
the sort of social policy Mead rejects, typified by the Great Society programs of the Johnson Administration. In the words of one prominent official intimately involved in implementing Johnson’s War on Poverty, the project as a whole was based “on an assumption that...the poor, in many cases seen as immigrants, essentially were to be helped up and into a stable position in society by the down-reaching hands of the well-to-do and the intellectuals.” The infantilization of the poor seems to serve here as an underlying commonality and shared premise which frames the issue and sets the terms of the debate between the ostensibly antagonistic positions taken by the two sides in the main debates about North American poverty policy for the past several decades.

Paternalism (of both sorts) toward the poor is rightly described as “dehumanizing.” But this obviously cannot be because children are less human than adults. Rather, paternalism is dehumanizing because treating an adult like a child denies the full and unambiguous personhood of that adult. Notice that it is equally true that failing or refusing to treat a child like a child (hence as a person needing special forms of care and protection) can be a way of dehumanizing the child. In either case, one is engaged in a kind of rejection, a symbolic expulsion of a person from the human community. One is refusing to acknowledge fully the other’s standing as a person with the rights and duties associated with human childhood or adulthood, as the case may be.

Obviously paternalism, so described, demands a special justification, or at least a rationalization or pretext. Without some kind of special authorization, how could key institutions in a modern society—the welfare system, for example—successfully claim the authority to treat some members of the community as though they were less than fully human? Clearly one cannot simply declare poor people to be non-adults without further ado. Dehumanization is the sort of thing one achieves indirectly, by securing acceptance of some rationale for differential treatment of a group singled out as somehow problematic. In the case of the poor, as in many other cases, the standard method is to propose a label for the poor, one which implies that their full humanity is somehow attenuated or uncertain, and to hope that the dehumanizing label “sticks.” And few populations have been so relentlessly subjected to the imposition of infantilizing labels as have the poor.

2. Labels

Many of the labels associated with poverty are familiar to us, but we need to suspend any inclination to adopt their use uncritically. Paying even passing attention to the historical variability of perceptions of the poor should encourage us to be more than a little skeptical of such standard characterizations of various “kinds” of poor people as “welfare mothers,” “the
unemployed,” “the homeless,” or “the underclass.” I don’t mean simply that the poor might consist of, say, fewer “welfare mothers” or “homeless” persons than many people think. Rather, I am suggesting that the very identification of some people as “welfare mothers” or as “homeless” may be less a matter of assigning names to self-standing phenomena than a precondition for the emergence of effectively instituted social positions: “constructed” identities, so to speak. We need to gain a critical distance from the naive assumption that the categories in terms of which we classify poor people are simply descriptive names for pre-existing kinds of people.

True, all members of the class of poor people do share at least one trait that objectively grounds their differentiation from the wider community: they lack adequate resources. This may be referred to as the “condition” of poverty, and it is the sort of thing supposedly measured by “poverty lines.” But what is the relationship between (1) the condition of satisfying the abstract definition of poverty (and hence lacking adequate resources) and (2) belonging to such “groups” as the underclass or the unemployed or the population of welfare mothers? Clearly there is a substantial gap between being poor and being counted as a member of a labeled poverty-“group.” The author of a recent book that purports to analyze the “underclass” begins his discussion on “Defining the Underclass” with the telling remark that “all commentators agree that if there is any one trait that seems to characterize the underclass it is their willingness to flout the traditional norms of what society generally considers acceptable behavior.” Clearly this has nothing to do with the condition of lacking adequate resources. It would seem that the term ‘underclass’ is not simply a descriptive term, but has some normative import. Moreover, the same could be said of other key terms in poverty discourse, terms like ‘culture of poverty,’ ‘the disadvantaged,’ ‘the undeserving poor,’ ‘welfare mother,’ etc. Each of these expressions goes beyond informing us about a de facto condition, and implies something about how it is appropriate to act toward members of the group associated with the condition, and how it is appropriate to act as a member of the group. Such labels are essentially action-guiding identifications.

In moral theory, apparently descriptive words or phrases which carry such prescriptive significance are known as “thick” descriptions. Examples are ‘courageous’ or ‘selfish.’ These are distinguished from “thin” moral terms, such as ‘good’ or ‘ought,’ which are overtly prescriptive and which are uniquely detachable from specific descriptive truth conditions. It may be that terms like ‘underclass’ and ‘disadvantaged’ function in essentially the same way as thick moral terms, so a detour into the theoretical debates surrounding these expressions may help to clarify the covert prescriptivity of ostensibly
The work of moral theorist R.M. Hare relies extensively on a distinction designed to help elucidate the special manner in which thick terms function. Hare’s larger (meta-ethical) concern is to specify the meaning and logic of moral statements, such as ‘murder is wrong’ or ‘one ought always to pay one’s debts.’ He wants to reject all “descriptivist” (including intuitionist and naturalist) accounts of the meaning of moral terms and statements, according to which the meaning of such statements is given by the facts which constitute their truth conditions. For example, he rejects the naturalist view that the sentence ‘Murder is wrong’ just means that murder fails to promote social stability or that murder fails to maximize human welfare, or something like that. And he rejects also the intuitionist view that the claim, ‘One ought always to pay one’s debts’ means that, in the utterer’s moral community, there is a shared conviction that debts must always be paid. Descriptivism holds that the meaning of moral judgments is exhausted by their descriptive content, i.e., their truth conditions, the features of the world that make the moral concepts (e.g., ‘right,’ ‘obligation,’ etc.) applicable in a given case.

As a self-styled non-descriptivist, Hare holds that there is an element of the meaning of the standard sorts of moral judgment that extends beyond their descriptive meaning. He accepts G.E. Moore’s famous “open question argument,” according to which, for every description of an action, such as that it maximizes human welfare, or encourages the survival of the human species, or preserves social stability, it always remains an open question whether or not one ought to perform that action. In other words, logical considerations do not render the question redundant, even if our intuitions (basic moral convictions) do. As Hare understands it, this line of thinking implies that no strictly “world-guided” or descriptive judgment ever entails any “action-guiding” or prescriptive judgment. One should note, here, that although Hare is often characterized by others as a “non-cognitivist,” along with emotivists like Stevenson and Ayer, he denies that the term applies to his theory, since such an application would wrongly imply that he, as a prescriptivist, denies that moral judgments have truth values. It is, he says, quite compatible with his view to say that, within a certain linguistic community or sub-community, the conditions for the proper application of a moral judgement—its truth or assertability conditions—may be stable enough to determine its truth value, albeit in a manner that is only fixed relative to that community. Hare draws the conclusion that we need to distinguish between the “descriptive meaning” and the “prescriptive meaning” of evaluative terms or statements. Thus, ‘good’ is an evaluative term, which in a given context will have characteristic truth conditions (under which the term will be deemed applicable by members of some cultural or sub-cultural community). In that sense, the application of the
word ‘good’ is world-guided, i.e., it is applicable or not depending on facts about whatever it is used to characterize. (Phrased more technically, moral properties like goodness or rightness are said by Hare to supervene on non-moral properties of whatever is called ‘good’ or ‘right,’ such as the fact that a certain action maximizes human welfare or that it manifests an attitude of respect for all affected persons). If John is ‘a good person,’ then that must be because there is something about John—some facts about him—that make the word ‘good’ applicable as a description of him. But the open question argument implies, in Hare’s view, that the word ‘good’—and other thin ethical concepts, such as ‘ought’ or ‘wrong’—could not function as they do, logically, were there not an additional element of meaning which went beyond description, an action-guiding element.

Hare finds this action-guiding element in the prescriptive meaning of terms like ‘good’ or ‘ought,’ which is constant (and can, at least in the most basic cases, be formulated in terms of deontic-logical modalities, such as permission, obligation, etc.), notwithstanding changes or differences in the descriptive meanings of these terms, that is, facts which groups of speakers deem to warrant the terms’ application. As a moral theorist, Hare’s primary interest is in the meaning of these thin moral concepts. He refers to them as “primarily evaluative” terms, since their descriptive meaning is “less firmly attached to them” than their prescriptive meaning. That is, across cultures, or across conflicting moral world-views, a debate about the claim that ‘X is wrong’ can proceed without interruption, even if it forever goes unresolved, because the parties to the dispute agree about the prescriptive significance of wrongness (namely, its “must-not,” prohibitive action-implications), in spite of their disagreement about its descriptive significance (the cases to which the term is applicable). Thus, there is no doubt what a person means by ‘wrong’ who utters the sentence, ‘Slavery is not wrong,’ and were we to find this remark in the private letters of an eighteenth century slave owner, we would understand quite well what he meant by ‘not wrong.’ This, on Hare’s view, is just because thin ethical terms can retain the primary (but not exclusive) determinant of their meaning, namely their prescriptive significance, even where their descriptive meanings (truth conditions) vary widely. It is in this sense that, although all “evaluative” terms or statements have (by Hare’s stipulation of how to use that word) both descriptive and prescriptive meaning, specifically thin moral concepts like ‘ought’ and ‘wrong’ are referred to by Hare as “primarily evaluative.”

But Hare formulates this notion of primarily evaluative terms in part by contrast with “secondarily evaluative” terms, such as ‘blasphemous,’ ‘industrious,’ or ‘courageous.’ And it is this idea that sheds light on the sort of thick poverty discourse that I am trying to clarify.
Thick ethical terms, such as ‘courageous,’ are described as secondarily evaluative by Hare because, unlike thin terms, they have their descriptive meaning “more firmly attached” to them than their prescriptive meaning. If I change my estimation of those behaviors now counted as indications of courage (i.e., satisfying the truth conditions of the term ‘courage’), and begin to regard them as contemptible, I would cease to refer to them as courageous, as long as the prevailing view was that courageous conduct is commendable. We cannot just call a different set of actions (like fleeing at the first sign of danger) “courageous,” in the way that we can call this different set of actions “good” if we come to admire it. We are, in a sense, stuck with the entrenched descriptive meanings of thick terms, which may change, but not at the whim of particular speakers. Secondarily evaluative terms tend to fall out of our vocabulary if we accept their standard descriptive meanings, but reject the standard prescriptions associated with them (cf. ‘chaste,’ ‘pious’).

Hare’s analysis takes us several steps toward a clarification of terms like ‘courageous,’ and thereby toward a clarification also of expressions like ‘welfare mother’ and ‘disadvantaged,’ that is, expressions that seem on the grammatical surface to describe a kind of person, but also evidently (albeit not explicitly) prescribe a manner of relating to such a person, and typically also a way for the described individual to relate to herself.

But there may be a serious problem with applying Hare’s account of thick evaluative speech to poverty-labels like ‘underclass’ and ‘disadvantaged.’ Hare’s notion of prescriptivity is evidently far too narrow to accommodate the sort of normative content implied by a term like disadvantaged. The meaning of ‘courageous’ is given by its descriptive meaning (truth conditions) plus the prescriptive significance of a commendation (in effect, a generic “pro-attitude” or endorsement). As Hare puts it, “the [normative] properties ascribed to moral words by my theory are purely formal, [deontic-]logical properties.” The meaning of ‘disadvantaged’ by contrast is given by its descriptive meaning plus the implicit assignment of a set of appropriate-conduct norms to those so described and correlatively to their typical interaction partners. This kind of social interaction-regulating prescriptivity is a far cry from mere commendation, or from the application of deontic-logical modalities (e.g., obligation or permission).

What seems to be involved here is something clearly akin to thick (secondarily evaluative) moral speech as Hare understands it, but with a significantly different way of embedding normativity in apparently descriptive language. What is needed is a more plausible elucidation of the prescriptivity of poverty-related thick descriptions. I propose to develop such an elucidation by turning away from the semantics of moral speech and toward a very different intellectual enterprise: the sociology of social roles.
3. Poverty Roles

My strategy will be to try to illuminate the normativity of poverty labels by looking at Talcott Parsons’ influential distinction between the “condition” and the “role” of the sick individual.

Parsons that “the role of the sick person is a socially structured and in a sense institutionalized role,” so that “illness is not merely a ‘condition’ but also a social role. The essential criteria of a social role concern the attitudes both of the incumbent and of others with whom he interacts, in relation to a set of social norms defining expectations of appropriate or proper behavior for persons in that role.” Parsons lists four “main features” of the sick role, which here means four major norms of appropriate conduct on the part of and in relation to those socially identified as sick. First, the sick person is exempted from a wide range of normally applicable social obligations. In particular, children identified as sick are not expected to attend school as usual, and adults deemed sick are not expected to show up for work. This in turn gives rise to the possibility of “abusing the privileges” of the sick role, since those exempted in this way are always in principle subject to suspicion of possible malingering or hypochondria. Second, the sick person is not held accountable for her own state or condition. Even illness brought on by reckless behavior is not held to be the responsibility of the sick person, in the sense that she is not expected to “pull herself together” and stop being sick, or to cure herself. Third, and related to these exemptions, is the obligation on the part of the sick person to make every effort to get better, in the sense that sickness is “socially defined as undesirable, to be gotten out of as expeditiously as possible,” so that “no one is given the privileges of being sick any longer than necessary but only so long as he ‘can’t help it’.” Fourth, “being sick is also defined, except for the mildest cases, as being ‘in need of help’, which generates an obligation to co-operate with physicians in the process of recovery. “This obviously constitutes an affirmation of the admission of being sick, and therefore in an undesirable state, and also exposes the individual to specific reintegrative influences.” These four propriety-norms for being or dealing with a sick person constitute a normative role which is irreducible, even if it is conceptually related (via causal theories about how sick people get well), to the bare physiological condition of somatic illness as such. But how relevant is all this to poverty-labeling?

In 1987, William Julius Wilson published his influential book, The Truly Disadvantaged. At the time, he felt comfortable speaking of the subject matter of that book as either “the disadvantaged” or “the underclass.” Three years later, he dropped, and urged others to drop, the term ‘underclass.’ The reason for this decision was that others in his field had come to use ‘underclass’ in a
very different way. Wilson wanted to talk about the disadvantaged, and thought that the term ‘underclass’ could be used to name them. Meanwhile, however, everyone else had come to use that same word to talk about “behaviorally pathological” poor people who “flout traditional norms.”

But who did Wilson have in mind when he spoke of “the disadvantaged”? I suggest that this term does not name any poverty condition, and hence it does not name the same condition others called “the underclass.” Instead, both ‘underclass’ and ‘disadvantaged’ are labels that serve as the vehicles through which poverty roles are ascribed to one or more poor persons, and not as names for pre-classificatory or extra-normative conditions of any kind. Let me illustrate the point with a specific example. I suggest that—uniquely to this particular poverty role-ascription—the term ‘disadvantaged’ ascribes to the poor people to whom it is applied a social role strikingly parallel (point for point) to the sick role described above. Accordingly, one can discern four basic conduct norms constitutive of the disadvantaged role: (1) The disadvantaged are not expected to secure means of subsistence by their own efforts, i.e., they are exempted from the default norm of self-reliance of adults (traditionally, men and single women) in the wider society. (2) The disadvantaged are not faulted for their condition or expected single-handedly to remove themselves from it. (3) The disadvantaged are exempted from the norm of self-reliance only so long as they “can’t help it.” (4) They are socially defined as being “in need of help,” and so incur an obligation to co-operate with “helping professionals,” such as welfare (or other “social”) workers.

This poverty role, the role of the disadvantaged, is to be distinguished from other, distinct poverty roles, each implying its own set of behavioral norms: the roles of the homeless, the unemployed, the welfare mother, the poor child, along with more or less obsolete or antiquated poverty roles, such as that of the monastic poor, the pauper, the tramp, and so on. The primary function of all of these identifications is not to announce a difference in the conditions occupied by the diverse populations labeled by the corresponding terms; it is to specify the normative “authorizations” or permissions that are deemed applicable to those populations. It is not different conditions but different roles that are implied by the various poverty-related forms of identification (labels). The label of ‘the disadvantaged’ in particular seems to authorize that mode of intervention known as social work, with its familiar combination of condescending intrusiveness and high-minded paternalism. I do not propose now to inquire into the moral legitimacy of this mode of intervention, but we must remain alert to the fact that there is a moral question here to be addressed, namely, the question posed so insistently by Mill in *On Liberty*: what considerations, if any, can rightly “authorize the subjection of individual spontaneity to external control”27? And the intrinsic difficulty of this question is only obscured by the pervasive acceptance of a false realism (as opposed to
nominalism) about poverty role-ascriptive labels. It is all too easy to suppose, without sufficient warrant, that poor people already are what—once successfully labeled as “disadvantaged”—they are bound (by virtue of the shared understanding of the disadvantaged role) to be treated as being: semi- or non-responsible, for example, or in need of assistance from “helping professionals.”

One problem with the analysis presented so far in this paper is the potential ambiguity of the concept of “poverty condition.” I suggested that this is what is “ostensibly measured by poverty lines,” and that what constituted one as poor was, precisely, a lack of adequate resources. But consider some of my “poverty role” examples: the homeless, the unemployed, welfare mothers, the underclass. My manner of discussing “the” poverty condition has so far suggested that these various roles were all ways of labeling, and of normatively regulating, people whose condition was simply a lack of adequate resources. The specifics of each condition would seem on such an analysis mere pretexts for assignment to a role. What substantially distinguishes the unemployed and welfare mothers from one another would then be just their social role, not their unfortunate conditions. On examination, however, this does not hold up. No doubt, a high-level corporate executive between jobs is never really unemployed, but at most “jobless.” And this is because terms like ‘unemployed’ are role-ascriptive expressions, and one does not occupy a role (such as “father”) just by being in an ostensibly role-correlated condition (such as being a male “biological” parent). Nevertheless, although the condition (in Parsons’ sense) of being jobless is not a sufficient condition (in the logical sense) of being “unemployed,” it does seem to be a necessary condition. This point is even more obvious in the case of welfare mothers. There are no welfare mothers who are not mothers, or who are not on welfare, even if there are single mothers receiving welfare who are not identified as welfare mothers (for example, because they are seen as somehow out of place in that set of circumstances, perhaps because their predicament is viewed as manifestly conjunctural and temporary rather than chronic). But even in the case of the underclass, which is often said to include single mothers, violent criminals and the long-term unemployed—which is what Michel Foucault would call a “heterogeneous ensemble” (i.e., a “group” for which we can only adopt a nominalist ontology)—it is evident that the “condition” here is not simply what is measured by poverty lines. Rather, the condition is that of being in one of a number of situations that neo-conservatives perceive as threatening to what they deem to be the pillars of social order (the nuclear family, law and order, and the labor market). So, it seems that there is not one poverty condition, to be contrasted with several poverty roles, but rather several such conditions, which specify necessary but not sufficient characteristics that
qualify persons as possible targets of particular role ascriptions. At the same time, it remains important to emphasize that there is a fundamental gap in each case between the condition and the role, such that the former does not “objectively” license the normative structure of the latter. That is, there is nothing about the condition of being a female single parent in receipt of public assistance that might serve as an indication, outside of a historically and politically contingent normative context, that one is to regard oneself or be regarded by others as a “welfare mother.”

4. Poverty as Injustice

This clarification concerning the condition/role distinction brings me to my final point. I believe that there is reason to think that the imposition of labels on poor people raises important moral questions that cannot be properly formulated by the standard philosophical approach to inquiring into the (in)justice of poverty: the philosophy of distributive justice, understood as the theory of the fair allocation of the benefits and burdens of social co-operation. The problem is that distributive justice theory enables us to identify and criticize poverty conditions (such as joblessness or low income), but lacks the conceptual tools for formulating concerns about the political morality of poverty roles. Although I cannot here elaborate this claim in great detail, I will assert that the moral philosophy of (mis)recognition (from Hegel to contemporary critical theory) offers a promising alternative in this regard. The gap to which I have drawn attention—between the factual circumstances of the poor and the conduct norms deemed applicable to them—generates the possibility that poor people’s movements will take the form, at least in part, of what have come to be known as struggles for recognition, a concept introduced by Hegel and elaborated in the work of Frantz Fanon, Charles Taylor, Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth, Jürgen Habermas, and others.

Obviously one can be a violent criminal, or a single mother, or long-term unemployed, without being a member of the underclass. This must be so, since one seldom (if ever) hears talk of an underclass existing prior to the 1960s, even though each of these “conditions” has evidently existed for centuries. In any case, it can make all the difference to a group of people whether or not they are identified as members of the underclass. This is because that identification generates normative reactions from others: persons so identified are destined to be treated differently by legislators, social workers, police, the courts, and so on. No one would propose legislation with the intention of expanding the entitlements of the underclass. That would be symptomatic (now that the term’s meaning and normative import has become stabilized) of a failure to understand what the underclass role is. Instead, one would propose legislation to give “opportunities” to “the disadvantaged.”
This, of course, provides an incentive for poor people to identify themselves as “disadvantaged” rather than members of an “underclass.” So, one form of “struggle for recognition” is the struggle to be recognized as (for example) disadvantaged, or as a member of the “working poor,” and not the “welfare poor,” and so on. Child advocates as well as anti-poverty activists will emphasize the evils of “child poverty” because this role is defined in part by a norm of non-responsibility for one’s condition, and so the punitive responses often thought to be appropriate in dealing with the underclass are deemed inapplicable to poor children (however contradictory it is, in policy terms, to attempt simultaneously to punish welfare mothers and assist their children).

Arguably, the welfare rights movement in the U.S.A. in the 1960’s was a struggle for this sort of recognition: what was sought, to some extent, was recognition as an entitlement claimant—and thus as a right-bearing citizen—rather than as a parasite or an object of public charity. Thus, a book written by self-identifying “welfare mother” role-incumbents in 1972 argued that practically all Americans were on welfare, since this just means claiming an entitlement to government benefits. This is, I tend to think, a struggle for recognition as an occupant of one poverty role (entitlement claimant), as against another (welfare mother).

A second type of struggle for recognition, also made possible by the perceivable, if not always perceived, gap between poverty conditions and poverty roles, is the struggle to be recognized as a person whose poverty condition implies occupancy of no poverty role at all. Here one thinks of Foucault’s remark that “maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are.” He says of “subjection”—by which he means roughly the use of power to impose a role and a correlated self-image on individuals—that “this form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects.” From this point of view, some poor people’s movements seem at least in part to be struggles against poverty roles as such, e.g., against the “stigmatization” or the “criminalization” or the “humiliation” of the poor—the practice of treating poor people differently, and typically worse than others just because they are poor. In a word, these are struggles against dehumanization. In this sort of struggle, what is asserted is not that the poor are singled out incorrectly, but that it is incorrect to single them out at all. In this manner, the poor can struggle for recognition as people who lack money or perhaps homes or jobs, but as nothing more than that, e.g.,
Poverty Conditions and Poverty Roles

not “dependent,” “dangerous” or “pathological.” Poverty, from the point of view of these struggles, is all condition(s) and no role(s).37

An important implication of this analysis is that, whatever the merits of marking the distinction between “struggles over resources” and “struggles for recognition,” we should strive to remain alert to the danger that some people will find irresistible the impulse to assimilate poor people's (“anti-poverty”) movements to the former type of struggle. Some commentators, in and out of the academy, are apparently tempted to associate the grievances of poor people exclusively with the philosophy of distributive justice. This perspective would have us analyze those grievance in terms of, for instance, on the one hand, Marxist critiques of exploitation like those of Holmstrom,38 and Reiman,39 and on the other, egalitarian theories of resource-allocation like those of Rawls40 and Dworkin.41 Distributive justice theory, however, is not really designed to account for why some people would, for example, refrain from accepting public assistance to avoid the inevitable imposition of humiliating correlated roles. Yet that sort of phenomenon is actually a typical instance of the sort of moral problem to which poor people, and their movements, have always had to respond. Attempts to insist on an understanding of distributive justice sufficiently broad to incorporate the value of access to symbolic goods, like Rawls’ “social bases of self-respect,” are a step in the right direction, but they remain underdeveloped and feeble conceptual tools compared to the sophisticated analyses and theoretical frameworks developed by theorists looking beyond the “distributive paradigm.”42

5. Conclusion

I want to conclude by sketching, briefly and in very broad strokes, the “policy” perspective that I take to be implied by the critical analysis of poverty roles developed above. At first sight, there may seem to be a dilemma here, because it may not be clear how one can remedy the basic distributive grievance of the poor —the unjust denial to them of adequate resources— without exacerbating their basic “recognitional” grievance—the imposition of labels which ascribe to them incumbency in poverty roles that effectively authorize dehumanizing paternalism toward them. Certainly neither the “War on Poverty” nor the “War on the Poor” took any steps toward avoiding this trap. And yet, the solution is not all that elusive conceptually, however staunch the resistance to it might be politically. A genuine anti-poverty policy, as opposed to a policy focused on regulating the poor, would have to adopt universalism as its basic principle. That is to say, it would have to take the form of benefits that are conferred equally on all members of the community, regardless of their income level, and indeed regardless of anything other than their bare membership (residence) in the community. Such an approach could
take many forms, but the simplest would be to establish an income-floor, and to pay a corresponding amount, in cash, to all citizens without exception, paying for this in the familiar way, namely, through a system of progressive taxation. Obviously, as a tax-supported policy initiative, any such universalist approach would disproportionately benefit low income people (most of whom would pay little or no taxes to support the policy) and raise the tax burden of the wealthiest citizens. This is a commendable feature of the approach, on distributive-justice grounds. But notice that the poor would in no way be singled out, either as a specific target of communal benevolence and “helping” (paternalism of the war-on-poverty type) or as an identifiable threat to public order and prosperity (paternalism of the war-on-the-poor type). The uncoupling of redistribution from pernicious identification would have been fully secured.

The general idea is not new. Notable advocates of such an approach include Milton Friedman, who proposed a negative income tax policy, without success, to the Nixon Administration; William Julius Wilson, who proposed universalist policies, also without success, to the Clinton Administration; and—in a more radical and bold form—Philippe Van Parijs, whose proposal for a Universal Basic Income has been met with considerable enthusiasm in some academic circles, and by a predictably icy silence in the corridors of power.

The idea looks like a clear non-starter. But this is because of what would be lost by the implementation of a universalist income policy: it would mean the end of the standing authorization for paternalistic regulation of the lives of poor people by the state. In today’s world, that is a price the powerful remain unwilling to pay.

Notes


Poverty Conditions and Poverty Roles

5. Ibid., p. 5.
6. Katz, The Underserving Poor, p. 82.
9. See Gans, The War Against the Poor.
17. Hare, ibid., pp. 136-37).
20. Hare, Freedom and Reason, pp. 24-25 and pp. 189-90; and Hare, Sorting Out Ethics, pp. 60-61.
23. Ibid., p. 149.
24. Ibid., p. 150.
25. Ibid., p. 150.
36. Ibid., p. 212.