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Elite Perceptions of the Poor: Reflections for a Comparative Research Project

This article presents the theoretical foundations for an ongoing research project on elites and their perceptions of poverty and poor people within their own societies. We are addressing this topic for two reasons. First, virtually nothing is known about such perceptions in most societies, especially in less developed countries where poverty is most serious and where our work is mainly focused. Second, the way in which elites perceive and define poverty can powerfully affect social policy and the quality of life of the poor.

The Context of the Project

The very broad connotations of the concepts 'perceptions' and 'poverty' allow them to be adapted to the wide array of circumstances that prevail in the very diverse societies that are to be studied in this comparative project. For the sake of analytic coherence, a more precisely defined concept is introduced: 'social consciousness'. This term refers to a set of perceptions which de Swaan (1988), in his study of the evolution of social policy in Western Europe and the USA, found to be relevant to analyse the ways poverty affected the elites and to interpret their efforts to control it.

Members of the elites possess social consciousness to the degree that:

1. they are aware of the interdependence among social groups in society – and, most relevantly, of the external effects of poverty upon the elites, which they may perceive either as threatening or as promising opportunities;

2. they realize that as members of the elite they bear some responsibility for the condition of the poor; and
3. they believe that feasible and efficacious means of improving the lot of the poor exist or might be created.

James Manor (1994) has applied the concept of social consciousness in a study of elites and their incapacities in coping with a mass poisoning of slum dwellers by illicit liquor in India. He argued that the elites had gone some of the way towards each of the three elements in de Swaan's definition. For example, they often believed that poor people posed threats to them – by way of epidemics, crime, possible insurrection and so forth. That idea can trigger a realization that all social groups are interlinked, and the conviction that it is in the interests of elites to alleviate at least the extremes of poverty. In countries that are experiencing economic growth, the availability of surpluses and the rising morale that attends growth sometimes inspire the beginnings of a belief that both the resources and the instruments (governmental or non-governmental) to tackle poverty exist or may be created.

When, as is often the case, individual members of the elite are unable on their own to ward off the threats, or to exploit the opportunities that the presence of the poor holds for them, and since they are incapable of alleviating poverty individually, the presence of the poor in their midst confronts the elites with a problem of collective action: to coordinate their efforts, either through voluntary agreement or by seeking a compulsory arrangement, namely public action. In the history of western welfare states, elite initiatives and elite consent have been pivotal in bringing about (and equally in holding off) collective and public arrangements for remedying ignorance, disease and deprivation.

The three elements of a 'social consciousness' refer to three different types of thinking by elites. Point 1 entails a factual assessment of the condition of the society in which they live. It calls for a 'proto-sociological' insight on the part of elite members. Point 2 entails both factual assessments (the identification of a causal chain linking their (in)action to the living conditions of the poor) and moral evaluations, which researchers need to sort out. Point 3 requires them to accept the power of collective or public agency (governmental or non-governmental) to change the prevailing situation.

It ought to be said at the outset that altruistic dispositions and a general climate of social compassion greatly facilitate collective and public action to alleviate poverty (see Bendix, 1962: 286–90). But the problem of coordination, that is the distribution of burdens within the elites, must somehow be resolved if remedial arrangements are to be realized. This requires that the mutual suspicions of inaction or desertion, in short the fear of 'free riders' with its paralysing impact, are overcome. If this occurs, it is most often in the course of tentative, yet successful collective efforts that strengthen mutual

confidence. To the degree that elites possess a social consciousness, in all three respects listed above, and if that awareness resonates with personal and societal moral concerns, it should facilitate voluntary and public action to tackle poverty.

At the cognitive level, elites may not be fully aware of social interdependence. They may not regard the poor either as a threat (through contagion, crime, revolt, immigration and so forth) or as a source of opportunity (as potential consumers, recruits, menials, voters and so on). When they perceive social interdependencies, they may yet doubt or deny that feasible and efficacious means can be found to reduce or alleviate poverty. And finally, even if they recognize the external effects that poverty exerts on them and believe that effective remedies are feasible, they may still be morally indifferent to the lot of the poor, or to the efforts of their peers to alleviate it.

In other words, it is possible that we shall encounter among the elites three basic attitudes to poverty and poor people. First, they may be wholly indifferent to the problems of the poor. Second, they may be concerned with the problems of the poor because they perceive that these pose threats to their own well-being, and because they believe that the poor might provide them with opportunities, individually and collectively. Yet, they may still remain inactive and resign themselves to the existing state of affairs, because they believe that no effective remedies are available. And, third, their concern and confidence in the efficacy of their actions may impel them to undertake remedial, collective action.

Of course, elites are not monolithic, and will tend to be divided in their perceptions of the poor in all relevant aspects. In the course of time, the nature of the debate and thus of perceptions may change: for instance, the idea that the poor are responsible for their fate was off the agenda in Europe for a long period, but was brought firmly on to it in the 1980s. Since then, a paradigmatic split in European elite perceptions has occurred, and similar divisions may be found in our studies of other societies.

At this stage the research project includes field studies in Brazil, Mozambique, South Africa, Bangladesh, the Philippines and two regions of India. The choice of research areas was, as usual, limited by the availability of funds, but within these constraints countries were selected that differ in the degree of poverty and the degree of inequality that prevails there: extreme inequality and considerable poverty (South Africa, Brazil); considerable inequality and extreme poverty (Bangladesh, the two regions in India); considerable inequality and considerable poverty (Philippines). We expect that both the sheer size of the 'social question' (the degree of poverty) and the 'social distance' between the elites and the poor (the degree of inequality) will turn out to be major factors in shaping elite perceptions.

We make extensive use in this article of three terms: 'elites', 'the poor' and the 'non-poor'. We offer brief explanations of these (admittedly somewhat

imprecise) terms presently, and we elaborate on them throughout this article. But it is worth stressing here that we use them because they are sufficiently flexible to analyse the diverse societies and the wide array of institutional arrangements that we are studying. The terms are, moreover, compatible with various approaches to analysis in terms of 'class'. In some societies, class relations have developed greater coherence and salience than in others. The power resources, the material wealth and cultural capital of the elites on the one hand and of the poor on the other hand vary considerably from one country to another and so do the functional interdependencies between elites and the poor strata. Perceptions of inequality and of the necessity to alleviate poverty also loom larger in the popular awareness and public discourse of some countries than of others.

Let us now look briefly at these three terms. 'Elites', by definition, control a much larger share of material, symbolic and political resources than the other strata of society. They occupy the highest ranks in a hierarchy of status and authority, be it achieved or ascribed. Yet, the nation's elites do not constitute a homogeneous group. They should be seen as an interlinking set of groups with differing but often overlapping spheres of influence. The sphere of influence reflects the immediate interests of a particular elite. But its capacity to exercise power in other spheres is often substantial, and some elites are able to exercise power in all spheres.

There is no clear dividing line that demarcates elites from the rest of society, although in some societies they are more sharply separated from other citizens than elsewhere. The elites are made up of those persons who occupy the strongest power positions, control the most property and hold the highest prestige. As a rule of thumb, individuals (and people closely related to them) who belong to the uppermost one-tenth of 1 percent on at least two out of these three dimensions constitute the elites.

The 'poor', on the other hand, possess very few material, political or symbolic resources; they rank at the bottom of the status or authority hierarchy. Their material deprivation is reinforced by their low status and by their exclusion from cultural and political resources, and vice versa. They lack the skills, capital and connections which the elites possess in relative abundance. If they resort to the limited means for violent coercion at their disposal, they are denied social legitimation as 'criminals' and 'rebels', whereas violence against them is often justified as 'legitimate self-defence' and the 'restoration of law and order'.

The label 'non-poor' is applied here to all groups other than the poor, including elites. But in most societies, the vast majority of the 'non-poor' stand outside the elites. They possess some of the resources, status and authority which elites enjoy – but in most cases, only limited amounts of these.

Relations between the Poor and the Elites

Researchers have studied the poor as individuals, as families and households, as members of poor communities, neighbourhoods and regions, as products of larger poverty-creating structures. They have been analysed as victims and perpetrators of crime, as members of minority cultures, as passive consumers of mass culture and active producers of a 'counterculture', as participants in the informal economy, as inventors of survival strategies, as an economic burden and as a reserve army of labour – to mention just some of the preoccupations of poverty research (see Øyen et al., 1996).

However, in some of the literature, the poor and poverty are treated as phenomena which can be understood in isolation from the rest of society. The poor are sometimes treated as a group living, be it uncomfortably, at one remove from society at large. We intend to study poverty as a phenomenon intimately bound up with the elites who tend to dominate the wider society. Elite perceptions of poverty and poor people have received grossly inadequate attention. A comprehensive review of the literature on poverty in less developed countries by two leading authorities yielded nothing on this topic (Lipton and Ravallion, 1995), consultation of several colleagues, knowledgeable in different relevant fields confirmed the existence of this hiatus that the present research project should be able to remedy at least in part.

The elites, who occupy the small upper stratum within the category of the non-poor, and their functions in the emergence and reproduction of poverty are as interesting and important an object for poverty research as are the poor themselves. The elites have images of the poor and of poverty which shape their decisions and actions. So far, little is known about those images, except as they are sketchily portrayed in popular stereotypes. The elites may well ignore or deny the external effects of their own actions (and omissions) upon the living conditions of the poor. Many social scientists may take a very different view. As poverty emerged and was reproduced, legal frameworks were created to contain the problems it caused with profound, and largely unknown, consequences for the poor themselves. In general, political, educational and social institutions tend to ignore or even damage the interests of the poor. In constructing a physical infrastructure for transport, industry, trade and tourism, the settlements of the poor are often the first to be razed or to be left standing and exposed to pollution, noise and crowding.

Although elites (and most of the other non-poor with them) may perceive the poor as a burden on society, poverty researchers have pointed out that a certain degree of poverty helps to smooth labour relations, by securing a labour reserve, keeping a downward pressure on wages and disciplining those who hold jobs (e.g. Piven and Cloward, 1972).

Herbert Gans (1973, 1995) has demonstrated how functional the negative

identification of the poor may be for the wider society. Most important are the economic functions of poverty, as for lack of other options the poor are forced to perform activities considered degrading or unclean, and thus allowing the non-poor to shun them. The poor are more likely to buy second-hand goods and leftover foodstuffs, thus prolonging their economic utility. They are prone to use the services of low-quality doctors, teachers and lawyers whom the non-poor shy away from, thereby enhancing their professional opportunities. Poverty and the poor serve an important symbolic function, in reminding citizens of the lot that may befall those who do not heed the values of thrift, diligence and cleanliness, and of the constant threat that the rough, the immoral and the violent represent for the rest of society.

Physically, the poor and the non-poor are often kept apart, through differential land use and ghettoization. Socially, they are separated through differential participation in the labour market, the consumption economy, and in political, social and cultural institutions. Conceptually, they are divided through stereotyping and media clichés. This separation is even more pronounced between the elites and the poor.

The views of Gans and others from a long tradition of poverty research serve as a 'sensitizing background' for the evaluation of the perceptions that elite respondents report: when the contrast with the perceptions of the interviewees becomes especially stark, or when we find the respondents to be remarkably reticent or denying, further responses may be elicited by cautiously introducing these notions from social science.

The Role of Elites

It is possible to identify macro-economic and macro-social processes which create, sustain or, on the contrary, alleviate poverty. Elites do much to shape such developments, sometimes in a planned and coordinated way. But members of the elites also act on their own, deliberately or spontaneously. How committed are individual members of the elites in influencing the living conditions of the poor? How do they operate? When and to what degree do they rely on individual, voluntary interventions, and in which cases will they resort to collective action? In the latter case, how do they evaluate the chances that other elite members will support the undertaking, or rather profit from it without contributing? Under which conditions will they accept external compulsion to coordinate their actions? What is the role they assign to state intervention in controlling the poor and managing the external effects of poverty? What are the mechanisms by which elites actually impinge on the world of the poor? The answers to these questions are bound to vary in different societies.

There is a substantial literature on elite views of many subjects in the

industrialized countries. There are works on the evolution of elite attitudes towards the welfare state in the West (Gouda, 1995; Hagenaars, 1986; Verba and Orren, 1985), on the tendency of western elites to misunderstand mass preferences (Chowdry and Newcomb, 1965; Erikson and Luttbeg, 1973; Miller, 1970; Putnam, 1976), and on the ways in which mass opinion in the USA is influenced by elite views (Bottomore, 1993; Putnam et al., 1993; Shapiro, 1992; Wittkopf, 1990; Zaller, 1987, 1992). There is a particularly impressive study by Verba and Kellman (1987) of elites and the idea of inequality in Sweden, Japan and the USA.

The general impression to emerge from these sources is that national elites have played a decisive role in the development of the Western European welfare states. Activist political regimes, supported by civil servants, and either by progressive entrepreneurs or moderate trade union leaders, or by both, have succeeded in enacting major social legislation, much aided by the support of religious elites, whenever it was forthcoming. Aristocratic elites and small entrepreneurs or peasants on the whole have tended to oppose state social insurance and prefer private savings (de Swaan, 1988).

The elites in many contemporary industrializing countries appear to perceive the poor differently than did most of the Western European countries around the turn of the last century, when they defined and debated 'the social question' (see Reis, 1998; Reis and Cheibub, 1995). This difference in perceptions may be a crucial factor in determining the course of social policy-making in these countries.

The near-total lack of evidence on elite perceptions of poverty in less developed countries is a matter of serious concern, since elites there tend to dominate the institutions that might tackle poverty. Little is also known about the composition of those elites, the conditions in which they live, especially their contacts and relationships with poorer groups. We propose to examine these topics.

Poverty reduction measures can only be implemented if they are based on a certain legitimacy. We therefore also examine the role of elites in setting standards, providing ideological arguments and proposing solutions.

Although elites in a particular society have much in common, they have different bases for their power and different sets of interests. Their economic bases – the control of land, industry, financial institutions and so forth – vary. So do the political resources that they command – as leaders of parties, movements, bureaucratic agencies, armies, unions and so on. So do their symbolic resources – as traditional leaders, religious leaders, intellectuals or controllers of media. So does their influence over the means of violence and coercion – resources which are available to politicians, the police and the armed forces, but not to other elite groups. The nature and potential impact of the networks of connections which different elite groups maintain also vary in their character and importance.

On the one hand, they share certain common interests and habits of mind. They interact, they have certain common norms, they consume along the same patterns, they claim attention and respect because they belong to higher social classes, and they behave in certain ways because they are in positions of power. On the other hand, they also oversee and possess divergent interests, and in certain areas they are also competitors. Actual contact with the world of poor people is another variable that needs to be explored. Various elites will differ in their familiarity with the everyday existence of poor people, military and religious leaders may be better acquainted with the poor than bankers. These different elite positions may affect their ways of perceiving the poor, and they must shape their ideas about which kinds of action are desirable in controlling the external effects of poverty. This leads us to focus on the degree or intensity of contact which elites have or have not had with poor people and poverty.

Other social divisions separate elites and the poor and may influence perceptions. Various ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural or regional differences may be salient at any moment, and some are partly the result of elite manipulation.

The rural-urban divide is another variable to be taken into consideration. Eugen Weber (1976: 6-12) writes that in 19th-century France, there were 'two distinct races, city dwellers and countryfolk, living in mutual ignorance, and in two distinct Frances, different and hostile, that of the country and that of the town', and 'what has sometimes been taken as evidence of class war in the countryside was often the extension of an understandable feud between country and town'. In Disraeli's Britain, by contrast, the rich-poor divide predominated over regional differences. This reminds us that perceptions can be linked to and compounded by severe regional disparities which may distract elites from the rich-poor divide.

Like all other groups, elites have their own internal hierarchical structures. How does that affect their perceptions? Can we expect different images in the upper reaches of an elite, as compared to the second or third layer within it? This is quite possible, since upward mobility appears to be attended by a change in values and social networks, and the adoption of the values which prevail in the social category which a person is aiming at.

The Problem of Elite Action (or Inaction) against Poverty

We need to consider the degree and character of interdependence between the poor and the less impoverished strata of society. Poverty affects privileged groups directly and indirectly, thereby shaping their perceptions and attempts at poverty alleviation. Throughout modern history, this has occurred in many ways, through contagion, rebellion, crime or migration.

Elites may attempt to alleviate poverty in order to benefit themselves – so as to improve the quality of the labour force and the morale of the fighting forces, by cultivating the loyalty of poor voters, or by increasing aggregate consumer demand. Other members of elites may act for more altruistic reasons.

But whatever their motives, since poverty reduction requires collective action, efforts to tackle poverty by some members of elites may benefit those among their peers who do not share their perceptions and who thus do not cooperate. Theories of collective action suggest that the suspicion that others will not cooperate may be enough to discourage efforts to combat poverty. On the other hand, collective action may be triggered by outside initiative, or through illusions and false expectations. Once collective action gets under way, a sense of collectivity may arise in the very course of collective action, as participants begin to assess the contributions of each other, apply shared norms to one another, apply informal social sanctions to laggards and defectors, and equally praise and reward the most dedicated.

In the West, anti-poverty policies increased over time in scope, covering ever more adversities and deficiencies – they often had their origins at the dawn of modernity in charitable relief on the local level and in the modern era acquired a regional range as large cities founded poor houses for the entire area. Late in the 19th century the first social laws were enacted for the entire nation and in the 20th century the state instituted an extending array of compulsory arrangements of national scope that should remedy the effects of poverty.

This pattern may not repeat itself in countries which have not yet developed industrially, or which are still developing complex industrial economies at a later stage – in the face of intense competition from advanced western and emerging or already advanced Asian economies. But even under conditions of strong international competition, elites must find ways to control the unwelcome effects of poverty which damage their interests. The relative weakening of the nation-state vis-a-vis transnational corporations and international financial agencies may further complicate the attempt to mobilize the state apparatus in the efforts to manage the consequences of poverty.

Assessing Elite Perceptions of the Poor

One underlying assumption in this project is that the perceptions which people form of other persons will affect their behaviour towards them. These perceptions may appear morally inadequate, logically inconsistent or factually unrealistic to the outside observer, and in this case especially to specialists in poverty research. Thus, images of the poor are often stereotyped or even ritualized (as in some religions where poverty may be seen as a punishment or

as a path to a better life after death). However, they are still very well amenable to scientific analysis and may serve to explain the behaviour of the people who hold these perceptions and act upon them.

We need not assume that elite perceptions of the poor form a consistent whole, they may very well reveal internal contradictions which in turn may point to particularly contested areas in the perceived relation between the elites and the poor, for instance that poor people are especially incompetent *and* that the poor bear the moral responsibility for their own condition. We have, however, assumed that elite perceptions will reveal a more or less stable pattern over time and form a coherent (if not always consistent) whole. Where such perceptions turn out to be very fragmented and volatile, this finding would require specific explanation. We do not approach elite perceptions with a blank mind, but use generally accepted social science ideas on poverty (as they apply to developing societies) to alert the interviewer to particular discrepancies that might merit further exploration. For example, if statistics point to widespread deprivation and respondents deny the existence of poverty in their society, this would not be accepted at face value but would prompt cautious further questioning so as to differentiate ignorance of the facts from their denial to a strange interviewer, or from their internal denial or repression.

On the emotional side, how do members of the elites react when confronted with the often appalling conditions of life which the poor have to endure? How do they legitimate their own lives of affluence? How do they react to religious commands (if any) to empathize with or become like the poor? How do those members of the elites who express extremely negative attitudes towards the poor live with this antagonism of theirs, and how do they legitimize it to themselves? Or has this become a non-issue – and if so, do they not know about it, have they allowed themselves to forget; are they actively warding off unpleasant facts? Does an emphasis on individual failures as causes of poverty function to free elites from a sense of responsibility and guilt? How effective are such ‘defence mechanisms’ in maintaining cognitive, emotional and moral distance from the surrounding realities of poverty (Jacoby, 1975)?

In the last analysis, we assess the degree to which elite perceptions of the poor constitute some form of ‘social consciousness’. We are well aware that again factual assessments, moral evaluations and considerations of individual and group interests are inseparably blended in this concept. This certainly reflects real life, but at the same time the different aspects need to be analysed in their own terms and in the way they tend to reinforce or contradict one another. Thus, some moral arguments or factual assumptions may well be ‘self-serving’ and protect the interests of the beholder, other notions may create considerable conflict, such as the idea that the problem of poverty is wholly irresolvable or that the rich have a moral obligation to improve the lot of the poor.

Finally, we wish to assess whether members of the elite are willing to engage in action and what options they see. How do they regard measures against poverty in relation to their own interests? How do they place poverty in the broader context of social development, including the functioning of democracy (which in many countries in fact excludes the poor) and how do they see the future of their own community if the poor continue to be excluded?

To sum up, the basic working hypotheses are:

- *Loss avoidance*: the more acutely the elites perceive the poor as a threat, the more ready they will be to consider an improvement of the life conditions of the poor.
- *Gain seeking*: the more opportunities the elites perceive in the presence of the poor, the more ready the elites will be to consider an improvement in the life conditions of the poor.
- *Inaction*: the fewer consequences the presence of the poor are perceived to have for the elites and their station in life, the less the elites will be ready to consider an improvement of the life conditions of the poor.
- *Efficacy*: the more feasible the elites consider an improvement of the life conditions of the poor, the more willing the elites will be to consider reform measures towards that end.
- *Collective action*: the more the elites perceive that a fair distribution of burdens will be realized, the more they will be willing to consider reform measures.
- *Decisive action*: the more the elites are willing to consider improvement in the life conditions of the poor, the more likely it is that actual reforms will be implemented.

The concept of social consciousness is operationalized through the following set of questions:

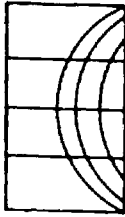
- *Identification*: how different from themselves do the elites consider the poor to be, and in which areas, if any, do the elites identify with the poor?
- *Interdependence*: how threatening (or how promising) with respect to their own position do the elites consider the poor to be?
- *Generalized responsibility*: do the elites believe that something ought to be done to improve the position of the poor?
- *Feasibility*: how far do the elites consider that the conditions of the poor can be improved?
- *Policy action*: if the elites believe the conditions of the poor can be improved, in what ways do they believe it can be done?
- *Collective action*: how do the elites see effective coordination with their peers can be ensured, or how do they see that non-collaboration by some of their peers can be prevented?

The methods used in the project are comparative, historical and sociological. Three forms of data collection are employed. The first set of data emerges from an analysis of the debate on poverty, as portrayed in two or more major national newspapers during the period 1945–96. An inventory and content analysis will be made of editorials and articles pertaining to the excluded, the indigenous poor and poor people in other countries, drawn from a random sample of articles. These newspapers should be widely read in elite circles. Such an analysis is an instrument for reconstructing the public discourse on poverty diachronically, and for making comparisons across national boundaries in the countries being studied.

The second and most crucial set of data is drawn from open-ended interviews structured around predetermined topics with five to ten persons in each of 11 elite groups in every country under study. The interviews have the character of conversations, and should allow the reconstruction of some of the perceptions and personal motivations behind the positions displayed in public. It is well known that it is difficult to gain access to and to conduct candid interviews with elite representatives. However, this task is facilitated by the 'interactive interviewing technique' which was applied successfully by one of the authors in the study of the Australian elite (Øyen, 1994). This approach solicited genuine answers on sensitive issues and generated a wealth of information.

A third set of data is drawn from observations of interaction and non-interaction between poor people and non-poor people, especially members of the elites, in business districts, shopping areas and thoroughfares. Such data yield an overall impression of the diverse ways in which visible poverty is dealt with. Where there is little contact between the poor and the non-poor, the poor only become visible to the elites in restricted settings and in limited ways; it is upon those that we focus our observations.

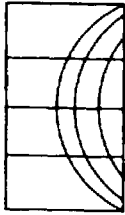
We believe that this research can fill a serious and heretofore unnoticed gap in the literature on poverty, especially in less developed countries. The study of elite perceptions of the poor will enrich our understanding of the social construction and reproduction of poverty and may facilitate the development of more effective efforts to tackle it.



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Abstract/Résumé/Resumen

Elite Perceptions of the Poor: Reflections for a Comparative Research Project

Little is known about the ways in which the elites perceive the poor, especially in those societies where poverty is most prevalent. The poor are dependent on the elites, but the elites are also affected by the poor: their presence creates negative external effects in the lives of the elites (threats such as crime, contagion, pollution, vagrancy and rebellion) but they also represent opportunities for the established strata (as potential workers, soldiers and, more recently, as consumers and voters). Members of the elites cannot ward off these threats, or realize the opportunities on their own: that requires collective action on their part. Thus, an awareness of these interdependencies and a sense of responsibility among the elites, a 'social consciousness', may well be a necessary condition for intervention to reduce poverty. This article presents the theoretical and methodological reflections underlying a comparative research project into elite perceptions of poverty.

Perception des pauvres dans l'élite: réflexions pour un projet d'étude comparative

Il existe peu d'informations sur les façons dont les élites perçoivent les pauvres, notamment dans les sociétés où la pauvreté est particulièrement répandue. Les pauvres dépendent des élites, mais les affectent en retour. Car les pauvres ont, de par leur existence, des répercussions externes négatives sur la vie des élites (menaces, comme le crime, la contagion, la pollution, les sans-abri et la révolte); cependant, ils constituent aussi un réservoir d'opportunités pour la couche sociale établie (par leur potentiel comme travailleurs, soldats et, plus récemment, comme consommateurs et électeurs). Les membres des élites ne peuvent repousser les menaces ni tirer parti des opportunités tous

seuls; il faut de leur part une action collective. Pour une intervention en vue de réduire la pauvreté, il est donc fort possible qu'il faille d'abord une conscience des interdépendances signalées plus haut, ainsi qu'un sens de la responsabilité au sein des élites: une conscience sociale. Le présent article soumet les réflexions théoriques et méthodologiques qui sous-tendent un projet de recherche comparative sur la perception qu'ont les élites de la pauvreté.

Percepciones de las elites sobre la pobreza

El artículo presenta el marco teórico de un proyecto de investigación comparativa que se lleva a cabo en distintos países acerca de las visiones que las elites nacionales tienen de la pobreza y la desigualdad en sus respectivas sociedades. Si es verdad que las visiones de los mismos pobres han merecido la atención de los investigadores sociales, lo mismo no se puede decir acerca de como los no-pobres en general y las elites en particular perciben la cuestión de la pobreza. Según los autores, esta es una cuestión crucial ya que las percepciones cognitivas y normativas de las elites nacionales tienen un fuerte impacto en la formulación e implementación de las políticas sociales y, por lo tanto, en las condiciones de vida de los pobres.

Information for Contributors

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