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JOHN VEIT-WILSON'S NOTES
ON CONCEPTS, DEFINITIONS AND MEASURES OF POVERTY,
ON INCOME ADEQUACY AND ON MINIMUM INCOME STANDARDS.

John Veit-Wilson asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

THE LEGALISTIC DISCOURSE OF POVERTY: AN EARLY EXAMPLE.

Who is poor?

In the legalistic discourse of poverty, whether or not people are seen as poor is determined by their legal status as recipients of income from public sources intended for those who are poor: charity, welfare benefits or social assistance. The definition is tautologous: 'the poor are those who receive benefits intended for the poor', and receipt is the criterion of being poor. They are paupers, a distinct legal status (see T H Marshall [1965], "The Right to Welfare", *Sociological Review*, 13/3, 261-272).

What is poverty?

In this discourse, poverty is pauperism, public dependency, and can be described as the sum of the characteristics of paupers, labelled as poor, whatever those characteristics are. Similar objective characteristics (lack of resources; deprivations) possessed by those not labelled as poor do not define poverty in the problematic sense of this legalistic discourse, unpleasant though they may be.

An early example of this distinction can be found in the work of the German sociologist Georg Simmel, often hailed as among the 'founding fathers' of sociology. It reflects a deep-seated taken-for-granted approach which seems to persist in some poverty discourse in Germany –

Das ist das furchtbare an dieser Armut im Unterschied gegen das bloße Armsein, das jeder mit sich selbst abzumachen hat und das nur eine Färbung seiner sonstigen, individuell qualifizierten Lage ist, daß es Menschen gibt, die ihrer sozialen Stellung nach nur arm sind und weiter nichts.

[Translation by JVW – The dreadful thing about this poverty, as opposed to merely being poor (something which everyone has to cope with and which only colours one's personal situation in other respects), is that it creates people whose *entire social position is defined by their poverty* and nothing else.]

Source: G. Simmel [1908], *Soziologie*, (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot; 5th edn 1968) p 373 ff, quoted by S. Leibfried, L. Leisering et al. *Zeit der Armut*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1995) p 107. Emphasis added by JVW.

The italicised words suggest Simmel's view of Armut (poverty) as the social condition of pauperism. The inherent and unquestioned stratification of this view is shown by the assumption that the people affected are defined wholly by their status – defined by others elsewhere in society, perhaps, but what are they to themselves and their kin and associates? Simmel recognised other kinds of *bloße Armsein* (merely being poor), but apparently did not see these as problematic in the same sense as 'poverty'.

The legalistic discourse is in this sense similar to that of Euro-social exclusion (of labelled social groups) focusing on the excluded and disregarding the stratified excluders (though paupers did have a place in traditional society). Other discourses, such as the scientific or statistical, are diametrically opposed in that they focus on the problematic of what 'being poor' may be, irrespective of the social stratification or legal status of those so affected.

(Note by John Veit Wilson, May 1996; revised 2008.)