

New Models of Social Advocacy

Active Agents: Participation and Self-organisation of People Experiencing Poverty

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When people experiencing poverty start to get active, this may take diverse forms. This article will discuss several of these forms. The term *participation* means that people who live in poverty start to take part in social areas from which they have formerly been excluded. *Inclusion* refers to the active integration in societal subsystems such as education and training, health care or public institutions. *Self-organisation* in turn focuses on aspects of identity that members of a group share and consequently use to lobby for their concerns, which have been marginalised by the social mainstream, and to establish a network of mutual support and assistance. People's organisations deliberately interfere in established power structures and build pressure for change at a tactical level, backing a wider range of issues.

Get Visible

‘We aren’t humble petitioners, we want respect!’ This was the message of the participants in Austria’s first nationwide meeting of people experiencing poverty, which took place in Vienna in 2006, under the slogan Get Visible. Jobless people, street paper sellers, people suffering from mental disorders and people with special needs as well as single mothers and immigrants convened for three days to reflect on joint strategies against poverty, point out their concerns and discuss approaches to solutions. ‘What will get visible is our everyday experience, our abilities and our strengths, –and what we require and demand in order to improve our situation.’ (*Die Armutskonferenz 2006–07*). If one takes a closer look at what determines the everyday life of people experiencing poverty, the shortcomings and deficits of the current system become obvious: it is a fact that the welfare assistance granted at present is too small a sum to permit recipients actually to support themselves and that both the criteria for take-up of and the benefits included in welfare assistance have to be improved throughout Austria. There is no equality in access to the health care system, and the present health insurance system is not as extensive as it should be, nor is it non-discriminatory: for instance, the thousands of people who depend on welfare assistance still do not get the health insurance e-cards that are issued to the rest of the population. There are deficits in labour market

policies, as a result of which many people are in fact ‘too healthy for retirement’ but ‘too ill for employment’. While they would actually like to take part in the labour market, according to their individual abilities, this is prevented by make-or-break policies that do not at all show the flexibility demanded elsewhere. And eventually, qualifications that immigrants acquired outside Austria are not recognised in many cases so that as a result, immigrants – provided they are not denied access to the labour market outright – often work in jobs for which they are over-qualified. There are many things that restrict the everyday lives and prospects of people living in poverty, and which the general public of the non-poor, even many decision-makers and experts, just cannot imagine nor realise in all details.

As a consequence, people in poverty from all over Austria decided to direct public attention to their situation and erected 100 Figures Against Poverty in the centre of Linz, the capital of Upper Austria, on the occasion of the second nationwide meeting of the Get Visible project, which took place in spring 2007. The cardboard figures with human shapes told histories of people’s lives and what they wished and demanded for themselves, as well as recent data on rising numbers of welfare recipients, unemployment, precarious jobs, children living in poverty and the situation of people suffering from mental disorders. It was a step out in the open. A step to break the silence, as a participant said. It was the first step, which was followed by a second one in autumn: in November 2007 an anti-poverty march was organised in the context of the third meeting of people experiencing poverty in Graz, Styria. The meetings in Linz and Graz also included direct contacts with, and enquiries to, political decision-makers from different political parties, as well as workshops and discussions on poverty-related themes, e.g., the current method of poverty measuring by EU-SILC (see *Moser/Schenk, 2010*).

The Get Visible project was initiated on the occasion of the European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty, which have been organised for several years by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) in cooperation with the respective spring Presidency of the EU Council: once a year, more than 200 people experiencing poverty meet at a conference in Brussels. The mobilisation of all stakeholders, a much-quoted catchphrase to describe the European goal of and means for combating poverty, was to be followed by actions to become a visible expression of the fact that for anti-poverty strategies to be effective, the participation of those concerned is indispensable. In addition, the political decision-makers involved at

national and European levels should become visible and take over responsibility: they should directly respond to those experiencing poverty and see what consequences their policies have. The skills and competencies of people in poverty, which have become invisible and devalued and seem to be useless, are shown to a greater public, at least in a symbolic way, if for a short time only. Furthermore, the meetings are opportunities of building links, exchanging opinions and developing strategies, and they permit the participants' mutual empowerment as political subjects, across both regional and national borders and the borders of one's own group, e.g., that of single parents.

The power of interpretation

Some time ago, a group of tenants of Vienna's Schöpfwerk housing estate tried to arrange a meeting with the competent City Councillor for Social Affairs. Rents had gone up steeply because unauthorised waste disposal fees had been added. Many people who live in the Schöpfwerk estate have low incomes; the neighbourhood assistance centre has repeatedly helped families who did not have enough money to buy the compasses, pens or notebooks that the children need when school begins. The Councillor did not seem to find time for the tenants. They were kept waiting for weeks. However, a group of Schöpfwerk residents, all of them without jobs, run a local radio station: Radio Schöpfwerk. As reporters, they asked the Councillor to give them an interview about rents – and an appointment was made within one week.

If you are forced to accept being seen from the perspective of others, you are the one who is 'different'. The angle of view is what matters. It defines who will remain an outsider and who has got the authority of interpretation. For instance, the media tell stories about poverty. What is seen from the camera's angle has to have a narrative form so that others may relate to it. An event as such is not newsworthy – only the story that can be told about it. Every news coverage is a mini-drama, in a certain setting, with a plot and roles. Although the actors are free to decide what to say, it is the editors who decide who will get a part, which text is finally used and in which way the text is integrated in the play. The story told reflects their views, and it is their perspective that defines the setting of the story. This setting is determined by deciding who may become a subject. Those who are granted the status of subject are allowed to speak and they have the power of interpretation. In this way, instructions for action are defined.

It is almost always people who are not directly affected by marginalisation that have the power of interpretation: journalists, scientists, social experts, officials and politicians. According to sociologist Eva Barlösius, social inequality, and thus poverty, is primarily (re)presented and interpreted to the public through charts and a certain concept of society, statistics, categories and classifications as well as public reports, such as the reports on the social situation which are published regularly (*Barlösius, 2005*). When those described in such reports, i.e., the group of unemployed people running the Schöpfwerk radio station, or the participants in the Get Visible meeting in Graz who made proposals for modifications of a survey questionnaire, speak up themselves, they start to take over essential forms of representation from which they are 'normally' excluded.

Those who rise to speak have a story to tell. We will only know who they are, and have been, if we listen to the stories in which they are the main characters. They take the floor and speak – not for others, but for themselves. If those who have been excluded make their lives visible, they find a place that is the centre of their perspective, a stage on which they may tell their own story, which they interpret themselves, to give it significance. Their life, which has seemed unspectacular, is worth telling, it is something special. Those who speak up put into words who they are, and who they could be.

In the province of Styria, 28 people experiencing poverty attended a one-week workshop with actors of the InterACT theatre initiative which took place in spring 2007, where they rehearsed a forum theatre play on poverty and overindebtedness: *Kein Kies zum Kurven kratzen* [No dough to make ends meet]. In the months to follow, a number of participants in the project performed the play in 14 towns all over Styria, which was an opportunity for more than 1 000 people to contribute to finding ways of preventing and overcoming poverty.

This is one of several ways of defining a place where those who have been marginalised may make themselves heard and start to act, in a form of collective action which is linked to a specific situation, culture and lifestyle: homeless people and their friends get together to produce a street paper; immigrant kids perform hip hop songs; immigrant adults organise training programmes for trainers of the Public Employment Service; jobless young people present themselves in a video; single mothers publish their own newspaper. This is 'stocktaking of hidden talents' in the phrase of an initiative at Vienna's Augarten park: revealing those skills and knowhow that have been economically devalued – crafts skills as well as social and cultural resources. People have occupied new places and defined them for

themselves. The public space becomes a stage for joint acting. In order to break up the monopoly on definition held by those in power, the terms they use are redefined and taken over for one's own group. In Austria, non-native musicians use the derogatory term *Tschusch* (for Slav) in the name of their band, *Tschuschenkapelle*; homeless alcoholics call their quarters drunkards' home (*Tschecherantenheim*), and a group of unemployed people decided to establish a turning-down agency (*Absageagentur*) for employers.

The difficulty of getting organised

'Poverty means losing your dignity. If you're poor, your family and society will turn away from you.' This is what participants in the 3rd European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty said in a video produced during the meeting.

What goes hand in hand with poverty is shame. Psychologically speaking, shame means that our reputation is at risk and we fear to lose our face. Already in 1776 Adam Smith, in his classic *The Wealth of Nations*, wrote that being poor is 'being unable to appear in public without shame' (Smith 2004).

Being ashamed belittles people, and their embarrassment and humiliation is seen as something for which the person themselves is to blame. This is the trick. 'My shame is an admission of guilt,' Jean Paul Sartre put it. And sociologist Sighard Neckel (2008) explains that social shame triggers its own moralising in order to find the reason for having been hurt in the first place. The act of making someone feel ashamed will only work if the person in question is made believe that they are responsible for the deficit that is the reason for their shame. The person who feels ashamed has become the object of the freedom of those on the other side, whose increase in freedom means an equal loss of freedom and autonomy of the one who is ashamed.

Shame prevents solidarity and divides those who feel ashamed. The fight against poverty is turned into a fight against those experiencing poverty. It is an obstacle to an effective joining of forces and a cunning form of keeping poor people defenceless while denying them their rights. Shame is a social weapon. Making people ashamed is the most subtle form of getting power over them because the criteria that define one's own self-respect have been set by others (Neckel 2008).

This makes it hard for people in poverty to assert themselves. Facing a disproportionate share of loneliness, helplessness and shame will make anyone weak.

In addition, the proven means of identity politics that have effectively been used by groups experiencing discrimination are not open in the same way to people living in poverty. If they take action, this is not only to regain and positively transform an identity that has been devalued, but it is always combined with the goal to overcome the very state that has been the reason for being identified in a certain way. Therefore it is difficult to make one's identity visible and tangible, as it does not actually make sense or is hard to imagine that people experiencing poverty take to the street with banners saying 'proud to be poor' (*Lister 2004*, 152). In the long run, nobody wants to identify as poor or as a loser.

According to Lister, poverty is not an identifying term but rather a concept that describes the relationship between the poor and the non-poor (*Lister 2004*, 100). Thus people in poverty are regarded as 'the others' by those who do not live in poverty. Lister uses the term 'othering' for the process which refuses or denies people in poverty the right of definition (*Lister 2004*, 101).

Another reason why it is difficult to get organised is that the group covered by the term poverty is not at all homogeneous: it includes retired people, single mothers, immigrants, people without jobs and people suffering from mental disorders. What they have in common is that, according to statistics, they have little money, but their everyday routines, their environments and their everyday cultures are highly diverse. They are termed poor for statistical reasons, and this is regarded as a commonality more important than class or a feeling of solidarity caused by living under similar socioeconomic conditions.

When people in poverty do organise, it shows that it is very difficult for such groups to keep up their activities. They face massive fluctuation, for instance, because people in the unemployed initiative have found jobs again or because members become 'bosses' who are not accepted by the others, or because members no longer identify with the group's understanding of themselves, or simply because they do not have enough time for active involvement, in addition to the stress of coping with precarious everyday routines: caring for children, paying rent, stumping up money and running the household.

Klaus Bremen thus concludes that the idea of a rebellion of the poor is but a myth. Self-organisation will not lead to political action; it is a joining of forces of people in poverty for the purpose of mutual support and encouragement. He maintains that a more practical approach would be to form networks of mutual support and assistance (*Bremen 1995*, 235) in

order to counteract tendencies to see poverty as a private problem and a reason for feeling ashamed.

Recognition, redistribution, representation

An effective approach to combating poverty, which also means encouraging the participation and self-organisation of those experiencing poverty, requires a triple strategy of redistribution, recognition and representation (*Fraser / Naples, 2004*).

Poverty experts and NGO workers, i.e., people not personally experiencing poverty, often underline or demand that those living in poverty should be mobilised to a greater extent. One must not forget, however, that this is only possible if they have social, economic and cultural capital (*Bourdieu 1995*): in addition, adequate forms of representation have to be established in which the relevant stakeholders are integrated. Consequently, it becomes obvious that power of definition and power of representation are further resources of inequality (*Barlösius 2005, 182*) which have to be named and redistributed.

This will have effects, not least on social experts and activists not directly affected by poverty, and their resources. They are called upon to give up part of their infrastructure, means, and status, and to critically reflect on, and if necessary modify, their own actions and their active contribution to processes of stigmatisation.

Furthermore, one has to challenge the existing categories that describe who actually is a stakeholder, i.e., experiencing poverty: who is talking about whom? Who uses which criteria to define whether a person is a stakeholder or not, or when is the actual number of participants experiencing poverty defined as surprisingly great, or too small, as someone notes with (dis)satisfaction in the context of a project? Who thinks they are in a position to know, and able to count, those experiencing poverty – and based on which power of interpretation? What does it mean that there are so many interrelated issues and so many different ways of experiencing poverty? Suffering from conditions of poverty and inequality and thus feeling affected by poverty – this may also apply to an NGO worker or an employee at the Public Employment Service, who, against their better judgement, and in spite of good intentions on their part, eventually have to fulfil certain quota and who, while opposed to this system, still work in it and thus contribute to its functioning. There are university students whose financial situation may at times be more precarious than that of permanently unemployed people. They

may have better opportunities of expression and better education, which means greater social and symbolic capital – but does this disqualify them from being stakeholders?

How can one become better aware of the more or less subtle distinctions (*Bourdieu*), and thus take seriously the resulting actual experience of poverty, without reverting to essentialism and reducing oneself or others to their experience of poverty? What has to be done to overcome such categories and the stigmatisation and division this brings about, without ignoring the existing balance of power? Because there is in fact a difference regarding experience of poverty between those in a position to grant social benefits (or advocate eligibility although the applicant has additional means of income) and those who are denied benefits temporarily or permanently.

If poverty is not understood as an identifying term but, as Ruth Lister suggests, rather a concept that expresses the structural relationships between those who have larger or smaller amounts of material, social and symbolic resources, then poverty can only be overcome if these very relationships undergo a fundamental change.

It is especially important for participation and self-organisation projects which specifically focus on these processes of change to question the categories and terminology they use and the allocation of space and resources they deem adequate, as well as their own role in the reproduction of the very ‘othering’ they criticise in others – and to understand critical self-reflection as an ongoing challenge they have to meet.

The strong points of the weak

Originally, solidarity was perceived as a direct alternative to charity and practiced among the weak against the strong. Solidarity always includes distrust of charity coming from above and from outside. The weak broke free of their situation of dependence and refused the benevolent recognition of the strong. However, if solidarity remains restricted to moralising appeals in a vale of tears, the weak will continue to be weak and forced to accept being compared to the winners.

In spite of the difficulties outlined, people experiencing poverty all over the world have always taken over proven practices of resistance, developed a discourse of dissatisfaction and built their own, independent social networks – which may be unconventional and informal, and sometimes illicit according to the traditional understanding of lawfulness, as they range

from non-compliance with agreements and slowing down work processes to producing goods of inferior quality, and even acts of sabotage, slander and theft (*Bauer 1998, Scott 1990*).

It is difficult for marginalised groups to practice solidarity. But it has been possible, again and again. In the late 1990s unemployed people in France and Germany joined forces, planned public actions and, for instance, presented themselves as happily unemployed, thus turning upside down the conventional approaches to discourse on unemployment. In France, interestingly, socially marginalised ‘native’ citizens on the one hand and immigrants without papers on the other closed ranks, which Bourdieu regarded as a sociological miracle. Back in 1830, it had been unemployed people in Paris, most of whom had lost their jobs in print shops of liberal newspapers, who started a protest movement. The June Days Uprising, in fact, was a rebellion of the unemployed.

The 20th century also saw ‘poor movements’, e.g., the self-help cooperatives in the U.S. during the Great Depression. In Chicago, people’s organisations formed. According to Saul Alinsky (1989, 132), ‘a people’s organization is a conflict group’, different to philanthropy on the one hand and social services on the other. As he sees it, the conventional community council cannot grasp the whole picture of social difficulties, and interrelated issues tend to be wrapped in individual cellophane packages (*Alinsky 1989, 59*). Youth problems, delinquency, housing and disease cannot be viewed as isolated phenomena. Instead of jobs, higher wages and non-discrimination, people are offered ‘supervised recreation, handicraft classes and character building’ (*Alinsky 1984, 57 f*). People from the community council ‘come to the people of the slums under the aegis of benevolence and goodness, not to organize the people, not to help them rebel and fight their way out of the muck – NO! They come to get these people “adjusted”; adjusted so they will live in hell and like it too.’ (*Alinsky 1989, 59*). Building a people’s organisation ‘becomes an intrusion and a threat to the existing power arrangements’ (*Alinsky 1989, 132*). The tactics and strategies that Alinsky developed, from the shit-in to boycott actions, turned out to be very effective. They were limited in time and had a defined aim, they were mobilising, they were fun for the activist and upsetting for the enemy. ‘Tactics means doing what you can with what you have.’ ‘Power has always derived from two main sources, money and people. Lacking money, the Have-Nots must build power from their own flesh and blood.’ ‘Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.’ ‘Wherever possible go outside of the experience of the enemy.’ ‘Never go outside the

experience of your people.’ ‘A good tactic is one that your people enjoy.’ (*Alinsky* 1989, 126 ff)

The civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King drew on this experience as well as on the actions by Mahatma Gandhi in India. They refused to follow the laws of the white winners and staged this as an act of resistance. In this way the powerless may adopt a position of power, albeit only a symbolic one in many cases. The movement succeeded in winning large parts of the white middle classes of the north as supporters of their cause to abolish discriminating laws.

The young people’s uprising in the suburbs of Paris in 2006 was not a protest inspired by a civil rights movement, however. It was characterised by acts of violence, typically setting fire to or destroying cars, phone booths, shops and schools. What this uprising, and similar destructive rebellions, have in common is that their main activists are young people between 12 and 16, almost children in fact. Another commonality is that the violence is aimed at public institutions and visible expressions of consumerism and everyday culture. Wherever such youth riots break out, it is in groups that have not had any chances of social advancement for generations. They live in certain segregated quarters, and a divide between suburbs and city centres shows. They look back on a collective experience of discrimination, insult to self-esteem and chronic frustration. It is obvious that entire social groups are not adequately represented in the public, political and media elites. Their concepts of honour are predominated by male or macho principles. Another common aspect is that parents have failed as role models because they ‘have not made it either’.

The youth rebellions of Paris are not based on religious motives, rather, it is a no-future rebellion of young outlaws with nothing left to lose: violence as a combination of macho honour principles and misery. Islam is used as a mask for their identity: according to a recent survey in the poor banlieues, 90 percent of the young people do not pray at the mosque or practice their religion in everyday life.

These young people are children of unskilled workers, unemployed people or servants. Their foreseeable future is one as unskilled workers, unemployed people or servants. The majority of parents come from the former French colonies in northern Africa. They are children of immigrants who have had no chance of social advancement and face considerable hostility by both old-established residents and the elites. Their secret motto is: we have nothing to lose.

Obviously, their self-assurance is at stake. The superfluous say, we exist. We are here. The young people in the streets of the banlieues use the term *sga*, an Arabic word meaning outcry. Still, the rebellion will turn against the young people themselves as long as their ‘burning’ problems are not addressed by civil society. Without a civil movement that issues demands and expresses them in public, there will not be any further pressure to improve the situation. The young rebels will be seen as young people by some, and as rebels by others. Under the rule of law, the courts will pass judgement on those arrested, while the elites get back to business as usual.

We are here: this is the message, if by different means, also of the *sans papiers* in France, the Assembly of the Poor in Thailand, the numerous settlement groups in Nairobi and other cities in Africa, as well as European Romani organisations. People experiencing poverty and marginalisation, such as Madjiguène Cissé living in France without papers, assert that ‘we are here, we do not hide, we’re human beings, that’s all’ (*Notes from Nowhere* 2007, 40). ‘We may be poor, but we are not stupid.’ This is how an Austrian participant put it in a letter to Austria’s Minister for Social Affairs at the 2007 European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty.

The degree of freedom

Following Leiprecht (1997), the fight against poverty should focus on a structural political level, amendments to existing laws and structural equality; it is about creating counter public spheres, the fight for definitions, public criticism and political action. It is about participating in the very spheres where definitions are made: science and the media. It is about helping to a position of strength those groups that are experiencing marginalisation and poverty, and intervening in everyday situations whenever people are marginalised, insulted and discriminated against. Notably, it is about continual self-reflection, to ensure that one’s commitment does not turn into a new type of paternalism. Last but not least, it is about subject-centred work with individuals and groups in the fields of education and further training, and supporting the self-organisation of the disadvantaged.

Ironically, those who are excluded to the greatest extent are extremely confined at the same time. They have been left behind but not set free. They are not allowed in – but are not free to go either. ‘Social exclusion, rather than exclusion from society, should be understood as exclusion within society. Only in this way can those who are excluded be perceived in the

context of the conditions that trigger their exclusion, and to which they are responding. Those at the margin are part of society even though they do not take part in what it has to offer.’ (Kronauer 2006, 44)

One cannot take it for granted that inclusion is good and exclusion is bad: the contrast between inclusion in the labour market v. take-up of welfare assistance, or gainful employment v. the status of hard to employ, illustrates that the issue of assistance by the state which includes compulsory measures is a very sensitive one. It may in fact have positive aspects to be excluded – from compliance with patterns of behaviour demanded by authorities, and certain forms of inclusion may be refused because they massively restrict individual freedom. In order to understand the dynamics of the processes of inclusion and exclusion, one has to focus on the potentials that the stakeholders themselves have. ‘They may activate these potentials in order to take part in those processes of inclusion and exclusion that they deem good while they resist those processes of exclusion and inclusion that they deem bad.’ (Vobruba 2000, 117)

In other words: any measures to combat poverty and social exclusion require social policies that do not patronise stakeholders but increase the degree of their freedom. The way in which a society responds to its marginalised groups, i.e., to ‘the others’ (the poor or long-term unemployed or immigrants) is a precise indicator of the situation within this society, not least of its authoritarian tendencies and scapegoat policies. Therefore, combating poverty is not just a question of improving a social balance: it always involves the degree of freedom within a country as well.

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