Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna
Archivio istituzionale della ricerca

Poverty, the battle against stigmatization and the role of the public sociology

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1. *Introduction*

The last fifty years or so have witnessed an unprecedented boom in studies of poverty throughout the social sciences. A blossoming of concepts, methods of measurement and field studies has been characterised by a fruitful exchange of ideas and opinions between sociologists, economic analysts and statisticians concerned with measuring the phenomenon of poverty, together with a number of psychological and anthropological analysts. Sociology has nevertheless made efforts to pursue its own lines of enquiry as well, and the present chapter aims to contribute in some way towards such efforts by adopting the viewpoint of public sociology.

If we go back to the early 17th-century Elizabethan poor law, we can see that measures were already in place at that time to govern and regulate the poor. Apart from vagabonds, fortune tellers and brigands, who were the targets of severe repression, the help offered to the poor in Elizabethan times consisted in the provision of indoor relief to unfortunates "deserving poor" such as orphans, foundlings, invalids and widows, together with forms of vocational training and assistance designed to get those capable of working, and willing to do so, into work (in other words, those who would now be considered "unemployed"). Such individuals subsequently became "undeserving" when the emergence of the capitalist labour market meant that those at the margins were forced to accept any type of work and wage. The living conditions in the workhouses offering refuge to the able-bodied poor, were thus rendered harsher and stigmatising, and measures were introduced to implement the principle of *less eligibility*, whereby any kind of work should be preferable to public assistance. In England, soon after the Poor Reform Act implemented in 1834, there was still no distinction made between the terms "poor" and "idle". The latter term covered both conditions: that is, a form of behaviour and way of being (idleness), and a labour market condition (not in work, and therefore unemployed). Since then a number of things have changed for the better, of course: "Much of the massive suffering…is already behind us" (Polanyi 1944, p. 258). Or rather, it was. In fact, many things once again appear to very similar to what went before, as forms of worker pauperisation emerge and the distinction between workers and the poor is once again increasingly vague.

Nowadays, there are at least two dynamics underlying the representation of poor people in the political sphere and in the social services: one of a macro nature, linked to socio-economic changes and to a better understanding of the processes of impoverishment; and the other of a micro nature, relating to direct interaction with the poor who are the beneficiaries of the measures adopted. Both dimensions contribute towards the emergence of often stereotyped ideas of what causes poverty and of the way the poor behave (Cozzarelli *et al.* 2001), with their personal traits often cited (laziness, immorality, a lack of motivation), together with social dynamics (prejudice, discrimination, a lack of contacts and resources) or cultural circumstances (attending poor schools, the breakup of the family, being born in a poor environment, doing bad jobs, and/or a low IQ).

This essay aims to reconstruct some of the most common views held of the poor and of poverty, and to explore the link between such categories and the directions taken by the corresponding policy. More specifically, we are going to try and show that within the context of the constant ambivalence between combatting poverty on the one hand and "regulating the poor" on the other (Cloward and Piven 1971), new forms of blame and moral condemnation of the poor have emerged, together with public rhetoric based on the social representation of the poor as unable to provide for themselves and to self-organize in need of "good" advice, or idle people requiring explicit and implicit forms of *workfare*. Our focus on these themes aims to shine some light on one aspect of poverty that is less commonly investigated (even by sociologists), but which is of great importance for public sociology,

namely the lack of recognition, or the misrecognition of the poor; however, we do not intend to underestimate the broad question of economic inequality, given that in order for poor people to overcome the stigma of poverty and to recover their capacity to act and to make decisions, there has to be a greater, more equitable distribution of resources.

2. *Stereotypes, typologies and policies orientations*

Scholars are in broad agreement regarding the multidimensional character of poverty, and the underlying processes which render it, at one and the same time, both reversible and recurrent. It is a phenomenon capable of effecting large swathes of the population for varying periods (Castel 1995; 1996; Paugam 1991; 2005), and this inevitably impacts the type of institutional measures that can be adopted to curb poverty, and the specific aims of such measures.

Simplifying things somewhat, those policies aimed specifically at the poor may be said to have one of five aims. The first such aim is that of *prevention*, both in the economic sense and in terms of social inclusion, through educational policies, policies aimed at bolstering employment, especially among women, and policies designed to establish minimum wage levels. These policies are thus of the kind adopted *ex ante*, that is, before the conditions of poverty arise or before the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and poverty can be established (because people not only become poor, but are often born poor).

The second aim is that of *promoting individuals' capacities*, of bolstering human capital and employability, thereby rendering poor people themselves capable of overcoming their condition of need by increasing both their skills and their motivation. This approach differs from the preceding one insofar as it foresees personalised forms of self-betterment governed by «contracts» or «agreements» between the entity providing the assistance and the beneficiary (Borghi 2005).

A third aim is that of *remedying the losses suffered*, through the adoption of consumption support policies in the form of monetary transfers, the provision of food, and even more essential services such as the provision of blankets and hot drinks to the homeless. In this case, the consequent measures operate when a situation of poverty has already emerged.

A fourth objective is that of *compassionate assistance*, and the policies adopted with this objective in mind tend to be somewhat sporadic, and are not designed to prevent or remedy poverty, but target passive individuals in the main.

Finally, the fifth aim is that of *social regulation and control*. In this case, measures aimed at those who are already poor are combined with actions designed to prevent organised social conflict, and to establish the subjection of individuals through rituals like long wait in line asking for information or filling out a module or other blame the victim procedures (Auyero 2012; Dubois 1999).

This typology of the approaches adopted to the poor through implementation of given social policies, is not organised in any historical order, nor is it designed to suggest any scale of desirability, although the first types are undoubtedly closer to the principles of social justice than the latter types are. On the contrary, it is designed to show the complexity of those factors involved in establishing measures for the poor, and the «long waves» of those actions taken (Paci 1982), characterised by periods in which the specific objectives and arrangements put in place declined, and other periods in which they re-emerged.

The link between the characteristics of policies and their underlying direction is based on a deeper dimension rooted in the social representation of the poor, and in the latent or openly expressed stereotypes cited in support of certain public decisions. The literature in this field frames matters in various different ways, starting from the recurring themes operating as genuine labels expressing the fundamental traits of poverty, the differences that exist within this phenomenon and in the public's image of such, and also the permeable borders between one category and another. Table 1 shows three different representations of the poor (the "good", the "bad" and the "ugly"), and associates each

category with a specific type of policy and underlying orientation. In doing so, it aims to show how each type of policy substantially affects public action, and vice-versa [1].

Table 1: Representations of poor people, type of policy and the underlying orientation

Representation	Policy	Orientation
The good	Charitable neo-paternalism	Pedagogical Compassionate
The bad	Zero tolerance Criminal populism Workfare	Repressive Punitive Disciplinary
The ugly	A wall-building policy "City cleanliness" "Hostile architecture"	Immunisation Displacement Reification

2.1 *The "good"*

The representation of the poor as "good" is based on expectations of their virtuous behaviour. The poor must not be a nuisance, and they must stay where they belong, in their humble dwellings or in those places specifically designed for them: soup kitchens, shelters for the homeless, social services waiting rooms. In exceptional circumstances they have to act heroically, risking their lives to thwart robberies or to save children in danger, for which they are deemed deserving of public praise or, if they are illegal immigrants, of a residence permit. Good poor people are also those who cooperate with social services, who send their children to school, even if this does not protect them from such phenomenon as "lunch shaming", that is, the exclusion or segregation of those children whose parents cannot afford to pay for their children's school lunches[2].

The category of the good poor (the "deserving poor") who do not constitute a threat to the social order, or who are not required to work as they are not "able-bodied", is often pitied as mentioned before, and this pity is embodied by neo-philanthropic and neo-paternalistic approaches such as the "gift economy", which lead to a kind of infantilisation of the poor who are seen as fragile individuals in need of protection, completely devoid of all personal resources, and incapable of collective action. Such approaches are characterised by three aspects in general: a) the choices of justice are warranted using the language of charity rather than that of social justice; b) relations are perceived as relations among people which hide power inequalities; c) the services rendered are seen as gifts and not rights (de Leonardis and Bifulco 2005, p. 209).

A paternalistic relationship is based on the assumption that one of the two parties lacks the capacity to know what is best for him/herself, and the self-discipline required to act in accordance with such principles. Hence the "stronger party" in the relationship is authorised to shape the other's behaviour in order to avoid negative consequences for the person incapable of knowing what is good for him/herself (Mead 1997).

A further example of the paternalistic approach is that of the courses in financial management that are increasingly included among activation policies in general rather than work activation programmes only. Those attending such courses are taught how to use money, based on the idea of the family budget for example, in order to encourage "responsible", shrewd behaviour: such

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[1] This three-way division, named after the famous Sergio Leone film, is widely used in the literature. For a more detailed analysis of its application to studies of poverty, see Busso, Meo and Morlicchio (2018).

[2] The question of shame has been examined by numerous authors, including: Nussbaum, M (2004), Newman K.S. (1999). On the specific question of lunch-shaming, see the various studies carried out, mainly in the USA, including Goodman and Cook Britiny (2019).

behaviour consists mainly in adopting methods of saving for possible emergencies, and in conforming to the "good payer" model (Busso and Meo 2005). Such practices do not seem to be designed to get people out of a condition of poverty so much as to "better manage" such poverty on the basis of common practices not necessarily shared by the poor themselves. This infantilising approach often seems to ignore one key aspect, namely that the poor do not need to be better capable of managing the limited resources available to them, but rather they require greater resources in order to make ends meet. A similar interpretation may also be given of the introduction of procedures for cash transfers via pre-paid cards, which limit any such spending to the acquisition of basic necessities.

These policies are based on the idea of the "necessary constraints" underlying the paternalistic approach; according to this view, the poor do not possess the ability to manage their own finances, are incapable of spending money in a responsible manner, and for this reason they need educating in such matters. In truth, the international literature in this regard has focused on another aspect instead: it sees the problem of the poor not so much as that of learning the importance of the value of money, but rather that of managing their limited resources in such a way as not to be stigmatised for their conduct. This issue arises in particular with regard to their children. In low-income families, the difference between basic necessities and luxuries is a contingent one. Food, clothes, shoes, healthcare products and school items are obviously things that cannot be done without, whereas in the case of other goods the question of what can or cannot be done without, or reduced, is a more complex one (Daly and Kelly 2015). Certain luxury items become basic necessities in select cases. Absolute needs cannot easily be distinguished from relative needs, particularly when the establishment of an individual's social reputation is at stake. Children and adolescents try to avoid being treated differently from others, and try to feel at ease in the world they live in; and their parents are torn between not giving priority to activities deemed non-essential from a functional viewpoint, and the feeling that in a consumer society such activities or goods are nevertheless essential for a person's health, development and social identity. In order to create an acceptable public image, low-income individuals adopt creative coping strategies. However, these strategies could in fact increase stigmatisation, when for example they include restrictions on purchasing options (such as the non-use of credit cards, having to forego the purchase of costly original products and the latest models of goods), which feeds the impression of their being excluded from the consumer culture (Hill and Stephens, 1997; Bowring 2000). The characteristics of consumption and the social significance of money in the case of low-income families, could thus become incompatible with the generally perceived importance of such things in contemporary society (Hohnen 2007).

2.3 The bad

The stereotype of the bad poor person is, predictably enough, diametrically opposed to that of the deserving poor. Once again, the image in question is multifaceted. Taken to the extreme, the "bad poor person" is one who commits actions that may be classified as "subsistence crimes" (stealing from supermarkets or from orchards, the illegal squatting of empty properties), or who harasses people when begging. The "scrounging poor" are also deemed bad, that is, those who live off the backs of tax payers and who waste the help they are offered. In other countries, such as the UK and the USA, the most commonly chosen representatives of this particular category of bad paupers, are the eccentric, cunning "welfare queens", the immature, irresponsible "teenage mothers", and the idle, long-term unemployed: and these figures are often from ethnic or racial minorities (bearing in mind that "race" is a social construct, however).

In the UK in particular, this has also led to the making of a number of successful TV series whose titles already offer a very negative idea of the poor, such as: *Saint and Scroungers* and *Nick and Margaret. We all pay for your benefits* (Romano 2017). In Italy, on the other hand, the working poor are in the main those who have been labelled as lazy scroungers, despite the fact that they are part of the labour market to all effects and purposes. This kind of blaming the victims in Italy emerged at the time of the introduction of the Minimum Income Scheme in 2019 (*Reddito di cittadinanza*), a measure that was criticised at the time for encouraging people to be passive ("lying on the sofa") or irresponsible ("the poor on holiday": see Anselmo, Morlicchio and Pugliese 2020). Another example

of the belief in couch-bound idleness as an inherited trait of poor families, is the "three generations of the same family that have never worked" meme. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation set out to identify and investigate such "never-worked" families in the deprived areas of Glasgow and Middlesbrough, but found not a single one. The authors of the study - Macdonald, Shildrick and Furlog - wrote that while they were trying to hunt down a Yeti, they shot a Zombie instead: in other words, the much-feared subject of their research simply did not exist, or was limited to a mere handful of cases (Macdonald, Shildrick and Furlog 2014).

The category of poor who "commit criminal offences", and that of the so-called "scroungers", have each been treated differently. The former has been the target of policies that Luigi Ferrajoli has classified as "criminal populism", in that they are designed to prosecute minor offences associated in the main with life on the streets and the need to survive, in an effort to indulge the public's "classist and racist reactions" (Ferrajoli 2007, p. 372). The poor who commit criminal offences have been targeted by conservative lawfare and zero-tolerance approaches to prevention and control (in this regard, see the important work by Wacquant, 2008), or by measures designed to promote a broader definition of public safety (Ceretti and Cornelli 2013).

The latter category of bad poor people - the "scroungers – on the other hand, have mainly seen their access to services restricted, including through tighter requirements in terms of their duty to look for work. Both types of policy – criminal punishment and the duty to look for work – fail to take account of the desire for redemption of those individuals who, for one reason or another, have hit rock bottom.

2.3. *The ugly*

The social construction of the ugly poor is based on the emphasis given to aspects of their appearance deemed disturbing, that is, the identifying features of those living in deprived conditions. A crucial role is played in this social construction by images of squalor and degradation associated with the state of poverty. Such images are designed to generate disgust and repugnancy in the observer, and thus a form of "aporophobia" that means fear of poor people (Cortina 2017) and "disgust" (Hancock 2004; Tyler 2020). Social distancing measures relating to this have recently emerged: walls, check points and passes, gated communities or towns, the massing of people in refugee camps and "collection centres"; hostile architectural measures, that is, the installation of benches and other items of urban furniture fitted with "deterrents" designed to prevent the homeless using them; and the demolition of encampments for reasons of public hygiene. These social distancing measures are not only designed to discriminate, exclude, stigmatize and punish the poor, but also to ignore them: this they do by denying poor people any form of recognition, thus condemning them to a state of social inexistence (which may frequently result in a threat to their very physical existence) (de Leonardis 2013; for a critical approach to the quantification of inequality see also 2021). In this case, not only do we see the mis-recognition of poor people, when society offers a demeaning or imposed image of such people – the social disqualification mentioned by Serge Paugam (1991) – but in some cases their lack of recognition and the negation of their identity as well (Pizzorno 2007). This is one of the characteristic features of those policies targeting poor people whose "ugliness" becomes something to be removed. It refers to those social categories whose mere presence contributes towards tarnishing urban spaces both in economic terms (e.g. by bringing down property prices in those areas frequented by beggars, the homeless, drug addicts and others who have dropped out of society and who live on the streets), and in terms of social capital and cohesion (by weakening the feeling of security and interpersonal trust, and encouraging closed communities and networks separated from the outside world; see Bergamaschi et al. 2014).

The debate over urban cleanliness and degradation extends the category of ugliness to include not only passive conduct and acts of renouncement (Merton 1938), but also those actions challenging and rebelling against the existing use of public space, which in turn call for administrative and trade-regulation measures of a strongly disciplinary nature: examples of this include anti-graffiti, anti-youth actions (MacDonald 1997) where a negative connotation is attributed to all and sundry, regardless of whether they are poor or not, but simply because they behave as if they were (for example, by drinking

in the street rather than inside a bar, by sitting on the ground rather than strolling around, by being noisy rather than observing silence, by appearing more unkempt and scruffy than radical fashion dictates as acceptable, and so on). The category of ugliness can itself take on different meanings. If, for example, rather than referring to ways of acting and behaving that are deliberately irreverent and not in keeping with the context, it refers to the presence of physical features, impairments or forms of disability, as expertly analysed by Erving Goffman (1963), this may result in a different, more empathetic evaluation. However, if the physical stigma exists in addition to other stereotyped personal or collective traits (being a foreigner, a drug addict, etc.), then a short-circuit may be triggered between judgements of worthiness or guilt (Hancock 2004).

The three labels illustrated here are particularly well-suited to accounting for modern-day forms of welfare chauvinism, that is, hostility towards foreigners requesting the same social service provisions as those enjoyed by the native population. Poor foreigners are probably more likely to be classified as ugly or bad than impoverished native citizens are. The former are more often seen as opportunists or as a discordant/disturbing presence than are national citizens who in the majority of cases are perceived as among the "deserving poor". However, this typology is a dynamic one, and there are exceptions: the native poor can also become ugly or bad when their image, otherwise not particularly negative, is marred by another aspect of "dangerousness" (for example, they may be classified as undeserving poor if they are young, and therefore seen as potentially opportunistic or as deviants, or when they come from a stigmatised part of the country or city).

3. *The effects of objectified poverty: the loss of the capacity to aspire*

So far we have seen that the simplified representations of the poor are accompanied by certain types of policy and of directions/aims promoted by such policies. The question remains, however, as to what happens to the poor themselves. What effect does labelling people as being "poor" have on them? That is, what is the impact of the objectification of poverty that people suffer, according to those principles established by society and its institutions? What are the necessary preconditions for the collective processing of individuals' own experiences of deprivation in the absence of a common class condition?

One of the effects of long-term poverty is, in fact, the loss of the "capacity to aspire" according to Arjun Appadurai (2004): that is, the specific cultural capacity to develop aspirations with regard to the future, to make decisions relating to the achievement of those aspirations, and to have one's voice and demands heard. Unlike the rich, who can count on a much more diversified range of experiences, who are more aware of their own desires and who possess the means of achieving them, the poor on the other hand do not own a "cultural map" offering pathways towards the realisation of their aspirations, and are less able to exercise control over their own destiny and to produce narratives in their favour.

Going back to Goffman's reflections on psychiatric hospitalisation (1961), it is reasonable to assume that weaker, more exposed individuals are less capable of reacting to judgements and assessments made regarding them, and even the solution of the "conversion" (the internalization of those labels they are burdened with - "*RMiste*" (recipient of minimum income support), unemployable, NEET (Not engaged in Education, Employment or Training) – pretend to be "as they want you to be") becomes a compromise solution dictated by circumstance. According to Appadurai, this lack of "navigational capacity" among the poor is not the result of any individual cognitive deficit (particularly when considered as part of the cultural inheritance passed down by one's family, as in the idea of a culture of poverty), but rather of the limitation of the social space in which needs, plans and aspirations are formed, and democratic protest takes shape (Albert Hirshman's "*voice*", 1970). As we have seen, notwithstanding being the object of contempt or reification, poor people do not stop aspiring to recognition; what they do lose, however, is their capacity to symbolically reassess their own social standing and confirm their own identities, insofar as they no longer see themselves as holders of rights and of claims in regard to such rights; and thus, as Ruth Lister has ironically pointed out: «"Proud to be poor" is not a banner under which many are likely to march" (2004, p.154). This

limitation of their capacity to act collectively is something that regards all poor people; however, the many forms and conditions of present-day poverty have a variety of different effects. The capacity to develop a counter-narrative or to advance economic demands, depends on both economic and non-economic factors (e.g. being young, educated, existing in a situation where bridging social capital can favour connections and create bonds), on the length of poverty, on the opportunity or otherwise to escape the cultural "control" of the situation in which one lives (having other role models, experiences, usable contacts), and on the presence or otherwise of associations and parties capable of sustaining any protests.

What can sociology do to promote the agency of poor people?

Sociology can play an important role in many ways in the process of the social recognition of poor people and in the reconstruction of their desire to aspire. For example, sociological knowledge is useful in showing the empirical weakness of the causal links taken for granted in public discourse and political debate. It possesses the tools needed to intervene in the planning of measures designed to counter social exclusion or to document the validity of such. It can draw attention to who/what lies at the margins, rather than who/what is in the centre (Saraceno 2004), and can even dispute the prevailing beliefs and the stereotyped representations we have examined up to this point.

Burawoy's well-known work on public sociology (2004) rightly re-launched the debate on the diverse aims – instrumental or reflexive – and on the diverse publics – academics or non-academics – of sociology. In Burawoy's view, the social sciences can play a key role in the construction of public space, by dialoguing with the collective actors representing civil society (trade unions, associations, groups, neighbourhood committees), and in particular with those persons who remain in the shadows, distant from, and invisible to, academia (*ibidem*, pp. 5-6). Public sociology is part of a broader branch of sociology, the components of which, although performing different functions, are all necessary and interconnected by a relationship of "organic solidarity" (Pisati 2007). Within this framework, the first type of sociology - "professional" sociology – is tasked with developing theories, concepts, questions and research methods (Santoro 2007). Although addressing academia, it provides legitimacy and knowledge to those branches of sociology that engage with the outside world (Burawoy 2004). This is complemented by "critical" sociology's focus on reflexive knowledge, by proposing debates, monitoring the descriptive and normative foundations of research programmes, and revealing the limits and interest characterising such (Scott 2005). The third type of sociology – that of "policy" – serves the purpose established by clients or institutions for whom it provides advice. Its importance is gauged in terms of its practical capacity, utility and effectiveness when proposing those measures to be taken (Ericson 2005). Finally, the mission of "public" sociology is to promote a constant dialogue between sociologists and the outside world, reflecting on the external image of sociology and bringing to light and collectively discussing any questions of public interest and relevance.

The four ways of "doing" sociology resulting from the interweaving of Burawoy's categories, take on specific importance when applied to the question of poverty, as they highlight the need to problematize and re-politicise the ways in which knowledge is produced and policy-making is conducted. For each of the different aspects of the discipline, specific contributions can be imagined, all of which go towards constituting a transformative, emancipatory social science.

Professional sociology, based on specialised knowledge aimed at its academic public, could undertake to redefine those areas in which it produces and collects data for the analysis of social phenomena. More specifically, it could apply methodological knowledge to an exercise enabling poverty to be seen as more than simply an economic problem. Given that figures for people's incomes and spending are more immediately available, it comes as no surprise that they tend to be used to measure poverty levels. However, as Andrea Brandolini (2010, p. 68) has pointed out, measuring poverty «exclusively within the sphere of available economic resources is only one aspect of the story, albeit an important one». An innovative approach, in this case, would consist in highlighting different, neglected aspects of poverty. Chiara Saraceno argued that there are various different things

at stake involving sociology, when constructing social indicators. These include: the capacity to produce and divulge knowledge that social actors may use; the relationship with the client; the formulation of the questions concerned; the production and utilisation of knowledge; the potentially conflicting multiplicity of final users (Saraceno 2004, p. 509).

As far as regards the second type of sociology – critical sociology – the emancipatory task envisaged is that of utilising academia's privileged position in order to readjust the prevailing representations of poverty, by intervening in the process of the construction of stigma and of the negative attributes that poor people are labelled with. In practice, critical sociology should focus on the problem of how inclusiveness is to be promoted, and should see that the distorted images of the phenomenon are not used to feed forms of selective access, which can result in the exclusion of certain categories or their being penalised as victims. In other words, critical sociology should reflect carefully on why certain categories are excluded, and on what this exclusion means for those concerned. In her works, Michal Krumer-Nevo (2017) highlights the importance of placing poverty within the context of power relations: as a lack of material capital, social capital (hindering opportunities for education, employment, relations and health) and symbolic capital (weakening opportunities to gain respect). She argues that politicising research questions implies being guided by reflexivity when establishing the questions and content of research. The reactions of marginalised individuals should always be documented and analysed as manifestations of the inequalities engendered in everyday life by the policies pursued, as consequences of the different ways in which people see their opportunities restricted. Instead of emphasising the negative aspects, sociologists should focus more on successful outcomes and on the forms of agency and resistance that poor people express.

In the case of policy sociology, the challenge appears to be a particularly complex one. Expert knowledge, when called on by the institutions, may confirm and legitimise the policy agenda, or point out, when deemed necessary, the need to introduce discontinuity in the underlying logic and the methods of application of public policy. A case in point is the question of dependency on assistance. In this case, sociology seen as an emancipatory discipline could encourage institutions to adopt a different approach to the way in which poor people are defined, judged and classified, not only by society but also in terms of their access to welfare provisions. This could help challenge the idea of the inadequacy and incapacity of the social services in dealing with the problems concerned, by encouraging reflection on the appropriate levels of resources to be made available to poor people, on the best ways of providing support (emphasising, for example, the risks of one-off measures), and on how to prevent certain styles of consumption appearing as opportunistic, rather than as attempts at integration into consumer society or the sparkling world of employment (for example, as previously mentioned, young people's need for social recognition through the possession of symbolic goods such as smartphones and so on).

Likewise, another very recent, albeit rather vague, concept - that of activation - needs to be deconstructed. How do institutions assess poor people's capacity to be productive at work and to behave in a civil, responsible manner? How much weight do they give to any progress such people make? What importance do they give to the specific nature of cases, of personal histories, of the limited space in which a poor person moves? As the literature on this question suggests, the policies adopted in this regard can be of a contradictory nature. Louis Wacquant's studies of single mothers in the USA clearly show how such women are systematically stigmatised: they are considered to be bad mothers if they work, and opportunists if they choose not to work but to remain at home to look after their children (Wacquant 2009).

One final possible future direction for sociology lies with the multifarious world of civil society. In this case, mention should be made of the universities' so-called "third mission", which has become increasingly important in recent years. Broadly speaking, this third mission consists in displaying the universities' capacity to play an economic and social role, involving actors outside of the academic sphere (Pitrone 2016; Boffo and Moscati 2015). From an emancipatory viewpoint, talk of relations with the local territory implies shifting the focus of the mission towards the pursuit of new forms of interaction with actors on the fringes who are not formally organised, but are currently emerging in social practices and are often marginalised by public opinion and the media (Tarsia and Tuorto 2021). The involvement of non-academics in research is not a new thing, as shown by the long history of

action research, participatory action research, and community-based participatory action research. Nevertheless, despite being aware of the problems, communities do not always possess the required tools with which to deal with such problems (Nyden 2010). By applying this consideration to the question of poverty, sociologists busy working outside of their academic sphere should be capable of creating and proposing spaces for cooperation in which the parties in question – in our case, those persons with fewer resources and limited visibility – can be active participants and can acquire knowledge that can then be used to build their careers in a self-determined manner. Universities should bear in mind the way in which poor people reflect on their own condition, and thus encourage occasions for interaction and rethink the arenas in which such interaction can take place, so that said experiences and the materials produced can be used by the social actors concerned.

To sum up then, in the light of the various different directions that sociology can take, it appears clear that it is capable of having a significant effect even on such a complex, multidimensional phenomenon as poverty. However, it also remains true, as Saraceno has pointed out, that sociology runs a risk if it sees its studies and analyses as having an impact on public discourse: "it is not sociology's task to tend towards the good and just. Even though each one of us may (and I personally believe should) be motivated to conduct sociological research by some notion of what is good and just […] Sociology's social responsibility is not only to respond to society's questions and stimuli, or even to constitute a democratic or participatory activity. It is to formulate good, theoretically and methodologically meaningful research questions supported by empirical findings permitting middle range explanations to be provided" (Saraceno 2004, pp. 505-506).

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