Rethinking Poverty

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Published by Bristol University Press

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Rethinking Poverty: What makes a good society?
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Introduction

In 1909, at the launch of her *Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress 1905–09*, Beatrice Webb said: ‘It is now possible to abolish destitution.’

In the intervening years, we have almost succeeded, though destitution’s close family relative – poverty – is still with us. Poverty spoils lives, costs public money and destabilises social relations in a cycle that passes from one generation to the next. We may have done away with the humiliation of the 19th-century soup kitchen, but we are fast replacing it with the humiliation of the 21st-century foodbank. Given the scale of our social, economic and technological advance, it is remarkable that we allow this continuing stain on our society.

The persistence of poverty was the starting point for the Webb Memorial Trust’s research. In surveying the field, the Trust found an abundance of research describing the problem of poverty, but little on solutions. Moreover, available remedies tended to rely on discrete technocratic policy fixes to address symptoms, rather than focusing on the complex societal processes that produce poverty in the first place.

The Trust’s research addresses those complex societal processes and, in so doing, suggests that success depends on reframing the approach. Rather than addressing what we don’t want – poverty – the research looks at what we do want: a society without poverty. Such positive framing helps to transcend the problem of poverty and address it at a
higher level. The task of this book is, therefore, not to repair an old system that appears incapable of eradicating poverty, but instead to support a process of redesigning a society in which poverty becomes obsolete. This entails dealing with normative as well as theoretical, empirical and practical matters.

The study had three main framing questions:

- What is a good society without poverty?
- How do we obtain that society?
- Who does what to implement a good society without poverty?

The research looks at these questions from many different angles. Studies include the perspectives of people living in poverty, the participation of community activists, children’s voices, and population surveys of more than 12,000 people. Topics covered include economic development, employment, social security, housing, planning, civil society and community development. A wide range of research partners were involved.

Answers to the framing questions suggest that the two narratives that have dominated Britain since the Second World War no longer have resonance among the mass of the population. First, society can no longer rely on the ‘social administration’ approach, in which state policies are designed from the top down to meet social needs. Pioneered by Beatrice Webb, adapted by William Beveridge, developed further by Richard Titmuss and brought to fruition by Peter Townsend, the social administration approach worked reasonably well for the three decades following the Second World War, but has now lost its purchase. Second, the neoliberal narrative, pioneered by Frederick von Hayek and Milton Friedman and based on the idea of economic growth, a free market, low tax, individual liberty, rewards for entrepreneurs and ever-decreasing public investment no longer works either.

The new narrative developed here is dominated by social factors rather than economic ones. While being bold in asserting this, the Trust is aware of what Tony Crosland called ‘the vulgar fallacy that some ideal society can be said to exist, of which blueprints can be
drawn, and which will be ushered in as soon as certain specific reforms have been delivered”.4

No research report can deliver answers from on high and expect them to be applied directly. Recent events, most notably the wholesale rejection of the views of the establishment in the referendum on Britain’s future in the European Union, make it clear that such an approach has lost whatever currency it may once have had.

Rather than offering any sort of blueprint, the Trust’s approach is to produce ideas based on robust research that other people, policy makers and agencies can make use of in striving to develop the society we want. Perspectives come from different parts of the political spectrum and have been disseminated through the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty. This aligns with a key finding in the research that, if we are to make progress towards a good society, there is no monopoly of view that can or should hold sway.

Positive developments will occur when people move beyond their fixed opinions and narrow organisational interests to think about an inclusive process of development. The narrative set out here is meant to be the first draft of a guide for such a process. The text should be developed organically so that it has wide ownership based on the principles lying behind what people want their society to be.

In compiling this volume, the Trust is aware that the report is not comprehensive. While in all the areas described here there is more data than can be reported in the space available, some important areas – education and health, for example – have not been addressed at all. The main goal is not comprehensiveness, but to promote a new way of framing how we see poverty and to report material that might be helpful in enabling us to move society forward.

A central tenet of the approach, emphasised throughout the book, is that we cannot lay down hard-and-fast rules to prescribe what a good society would look like or how we can achieve it. Such top-down technocratic fixes have been shown not to work. The book sets out five principles for a good society without poverty, based on the research.

But the five principles are merely a starting point; they are to be developed, modified and applied by people and organisations who want
to take the ideas forward. In constructing a good society, process is as important as product. If we are to produce the society we want, we need to engage people over time and use creative methods to develop ideas and approaches. The book is intended as a step along the way.

Notes