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## The oppressive construction of poverty in Brazil and its consequences in the psyche

*A construção opressora da pobreza no Brasil e suas conseqüências no psiquismo*

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### Abstract

The social configuration of reality constitutes the human psyche. We aim to analyze the historical process of poverty in Brazilian culture and its consequences in the psyche, starting from a nonsystematic literature review. Thus, in Brazil, poverty bears a stigmatizing process of social and ideological construction of the poor person. We also identified that in recent years there has been a series of government measures to combat poverty. We realize, therefore, the development of a complex web in which the relations of power and oppression are inserted in the form of recognition and in the psyche of this population in poverty situation, as well as the existence of resistance movements. It is necessary, then, to strengthen the potentialities of poor people and reveal these practices of oppression as part of the process of eradication of poverty in Brazil.

Keywords: **Poverty; Brazil; Oppression; Psyche**

### Resumo

*A configuração social da realidade constitui o psiquismo humano. Temos, então, como objetivo analisar o processo histórico de construção da pobreza na cultura brasileira e suas conseqüências no psiquismo a partir uma revisão de literatura não sistemática. Assim, no Brasil, a pobreza porta um processo de construção social e ideológica estigmatizante do indivíduo pobre. Essa dinâmica inicia-se no período de colonização portuguesa e repercute em premissas neoliberais presentes na estrutura política brasileira em períodos mais contemporâneos. Percebemos, portanto, a elaboração de uma teia complexa em que as relações de poder e de opressão são inseridas na forma de reconhecimento e no psiquismo dessa população em situação de pobreza. É necessário, então, fortalecer as potencialidades das pessoas pobres e desvelar essas práticas de opressão como fazendo parte do processo de erradicação da pobreza no Brasil.*

**Palavras chave: Pobreza; Brasil; Opressão; Psiquismo**

Brazil is one of the most unequal countries in Latin America, just ahead of Guatemala, Honduras and Colombia (Gazeta do Povo, 2012), but it has been going through a process of poverty reduction in recent years. However, in order to consolidate this change, specific policies and investments are needed, as well as a historical knowledge of the construction of poverty and its implications on the psyche of poor individuals. This understanding is important because the economic factor and the social configuration of reality influence how people relate to each other and develop their psyches. Thus, we aim to analyze the historical process of construction of poverty in Brazil and its consequences on the human psyche.

### **The oppressive process of the construction of poverty in Brazil**

We position this work from the historical dialectic materialistic perspective of reality, and from this view we conceive that the poverty conceptions in Brazil have a historical character originated in the colonial period. Darcy Ribeiro (1995/2005) argues that “the Brazilian society and culture are formed as variants of the Lusitanian version of Western European civilization tradition, set apart by the colors inherited from American Indians and African black” (p. 17). According to Marcia Sprandel (2004), poverty can be seen as a consequence of the slavery and the exploitation of Brazil by Portugal, of the monoculture system based on large landholdings, and of the lack of policies for the inclusion of freed slaves in the labor market.

Still under the influence of Marcia Sprandel (2004), we understand that the process of Portuguese settlement happened in such a way that most Portuguese immigrants were considered problematic and unoccupied in their country of origin, that is, with poor backgrounds. They were seen by the Portuguese as a solution to avoid invasions in the new colony. Later on, there was a new policy to promote the immigration of Italians and Germans to Brazil that, without the proper foundations, made Brazilians poorer and with no perspective of change, according to Izabel Piva (2006, pp. 17-29).

In the same lines of historical poverty growth, according to Maria Alice Siqueira (2006, pp. 9-16), the modernization that took place in the

twentieth century in Brazil brought a greater social fragmentation, reflected in uncontrolled urban development, lack of adequate infrastructure for growth, and rising poverty with an increasing number of slums and greater rural exodus. Poor individuals were the only ones blamed for their poverty situations and seen as the major cause of the country's problems. Therefore, we observed that in the Brazilian reality the understanding of poverty was based on an idea of criminalization of the poor, as well as individual responsibility for their condition.

We conceive that these understandings have origin in the end of Middle Ages, when there were many social conflicts, pests and an increasingly poor population, and practices of charity and philanthropy became inefficient. The poor started to be seen as bad, violent, dangerous, and responsible for the severity of the social situation (Piva, 2006, pp. 17-29; Sprandel, 2004). Similarly, we observe that the fundamentals of poverty in Brazil blame the poor as the cause for the Brazilian underdevelopment and lack of growth, according to Maria da Penha Siqueira (2006, pp. 9-16). These understandings of poverty oriented to individual responsibility and to the ability to work are historically positioned in the context of the emergence of capitalism, liberalism and neo-liberalism, preaching that the poor have bad character, do not want to work, and are responsible for their own poverty condition. Following this parameter, state interventions on poverty were null because it was considered as an individual responsibility, according to Gabriel Mendonça (2006).

In this context and until the Constitution of 1988, poverty in Brazil was, in general, not the focus of government interventions. Until the early twentieth century, the comprehension of poverty at the national level was usually oriented towards explanations based on climate, mixture of races, illnesses, social disorganization or in the absence of popular movements among Brazilians. Before the Second World War, the Brazilian reality was seen from the understandings of race and from a connection between the poor, the countryside and the rural reality. After this period and until the 1970s, conceptions of the reality in Brazil were built based on hierarchy and social classes. At that moment, the poor were seen as rascals and unwilling to work

(Sprandel, 2004). Only with the Episcopal meeting in Medellín in 19681, poverty became the focus of the understandings of Brazilian reality, because according to Ignácio Martín Baró (1998) the Church, from the creation of the Base Ecclesial Communities (BECs), began to support more the poorest, strengthening popular and social movements.

However, poverty only really became central in national politics when a new constitution was adopted in 1988. It solidified the conception of poverty associated with human rights and the prospect of social equality. We believe that the Constitution of 1988 was important, but a national mobilization above the political spectrum coordinated by Herbert de Souza<sup>2</sup>, aiming to fight hunger, generated greater evidence of poverty in Brazil. Therefore, emergency strategies against hunger were developed, as well as government movements and civil society organizations. However, with the implementation of a monetary reform in the government of Itamar Franco and other policies aligned with neoliberal ideals of globalization, privatization, and technological innovation during the Fernando Henrique Cardoso government, the strategies against poverty moved from a political and governmental level, as outlined in the 1988 Constitution, to a nonpolitical position associated to First Ladies philanthropy in the municipal, state and federal levels. Thus, the critical sense in the interpretation of poverty was lost, and poverty was understood as something inherent to modernity and as a consequence of the economic development (Sprandel, 2004).

According to Raquel Guzzo Jr. and Fernando Lacerda (2007), these government policies created more unemployment and informal labor relations, worsening the social issues and poverty. In this perspective, Sprandel (2004) states that the Brazilian elite, including politicians, do not feel responsible for poverty, and relate poverty with individual responsibilities and with financial understanding associ-

ated to the quantification of insufficient income. Thus, poverty has the function of being the focus of patronage and assistencialism for Brazilian politicians. Mendonça (2006) affirms that social policy models in Latin American had a hybrid approach, assuming certain values of the Welfare State, assistencialism and neoliberal perspective.

The former values are present in the Constitution of 1988 and in the Organic Law of Social Welfare (Lei Nº 8.742: Lei Orgânica da Assistência Social) in Brazil, where social assistance became a citizen's right and an obligation of the State, guided by the fulfillment of personal basic needs through integrated and universal actions. On the other hand, the neoliberal and assistencialism values are present in the culture of Brazilian politics, hampering the view of social policies as a citizen's right and strengthening the view of welfare assistance as a gift or favor. Thus, the poor were identified in conceptions of violence, dependence, conformity, belief in the responsibility of divine forces and certainty in the immutability of reality. We understand that these characteristics are linked to the notion of fatalism present in the work of Ignácio Martín Baró. According to Martín Baró (1998), the oppressive social structure can cause the dependence and submission of the poor to the logic of maintaining the status quo.

This becomes even more evident in Brazil because the actions oriented toward poverty were limited to assistencialism and to philanthropic and discriminatory perspectives. However, we observed a change in government policies over the last 10 years, between 2003 and 2013, regarding the performance of the Federal Government. The fight against poverty<sup>3</sup> has become central for the Brazilian government under the administration of the former president Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, when a Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger was created, alongside with a broad policy of income redistribution with the program "Bolsa Família" (Brasil, 2010). According to Alessandro Pizzani and

<sup>1</sup> Since that date, a School of Latin American Liberation was structured, consisting of several knowledge areas, such as Theology, Philosophy, Pedagogy and Psychology of Liberation, and composed of common principles, such as knowledge oriented to praxis, to a concrete reality and to poor living conditions of Latin American people (Martín Baró, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Herbert José de Sousa was a sociologist and an activist of the Brazilian human rights.

<sup>3</sup> We understand that in the previous government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, there were policies of income distribution, such as "Bolsa Escola", "Programa do Cartão Alimentação" (the Food Card Program), the "Vale gás" (Valley Gas) and "Bolsa Alimentação", but they were structured in a disintegrated way, as well as there was no social facilities facing the prospect of strengthening the autonomy and criticality in the poor.

Walquiria Domingues Rego (2013), this conditional cash transfer program was an important tool to reduce the oligarchy and decrease the conformism in the poorest.

Márcio da Cruz and Huascar Pessali (2011) claim that cash transfer policies are the most efficient because they provide freedom for the individual to make decisions. Moreover, this policy acts in a structural and cyclical way to alleviate poverty. This latter scope is related to an issue of distributive justice, focused on the non-acceptance of the existence of people living in adverse conditions of poverty. The structural perspective is focused on the implementation of concrete actions leading to a solid eradication of poverty in the medium and long term. This can be understood with the implementation of “Bolsa Família” conditionalities, which are: minimum school attendance of 85% for children aged 6 to 15 years; minimum school attendance of 75% for teenagers aged 16 to 17 years; proof of mandatory vaccinations for children aged 0 to 7 years; health care for the pregnant or breastfeeding women; and attendance of 85% in educational and recreational activities for children and teenagers that were removed from child labor.

Berta Castiñeira, Luis Nunes, and Paolo Rungo (2009) conducted an analysis of the main results of this program with different sources of evidence. The authors emphasized that this policy led to a reduction of poverty and chronic child malnutrition. Likewise, there are other policies of the Brazilian government acting in the structural scope, such as the policy of access to private higher education with the ProUni program (University for all), and to public higher education, with the regulation that 50% of admitted students in public universities (quota system) should be people in poverty, who studied in public high schools or that are Afro-Brazilian or indigenous. In a survey conducted at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RIO), Clarissa Santos (2012) identified that ProUni really functions as an integration mechanism for students in poverty, as well as black, multiracial and indigenous people in the higher education, leading to an improvement in the quality of life and income of these individuals and their families.

The implementation of the “Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio” - ENEM (High School Nation-

al Exam) as a path to access higher education is an action that has also contributed greatly to the admission of these populations to the university. Thus, the access to higher education is a way to allow people in poverty to go to college; however, there is a concern about how these people are able to remain in these institutions due to the costs of travel, course materials and food. Students benefited by ProUni and by the quota system face these problems, which hamper their quality of life. Thus, public policies that prevent student dropout in public and private higher education are required.

Moreover, social facilities have been implemented, such as the Reference Center for Social Assistance (“Centro de Referência de Assistência Social - CRAS”) led by the Ministry of Social Development (2005), an intervention focused on citizenship strengthening, fostering the critical nature and the social participation of the poorest. This commitment was scaled up with the creation of “Plano Brasil Sem Miséria” (Brazil without Extreme Poverty Plan) in Dilma Rousseff’s government (Brasil, 2013), which aims to the eradication of extreme poverty until 2014. However, according to Boa Ventura de Souza Santos (2013), despite the progress, the government of Dilma moved away of its pillars, grounded the in social movements. This distance is one of the hypotheses for the demonstrations that took place in different cities across the country in June 2013. On the other hand, the president of Brazil understands that these demonstrations strengthen democracy, and that they can be explained by the improvement of the living conditions of Brazilians over recent years, a population that became more critical and with greater power of indignation. Because of these social movements, the Federal Government increased investment in urban mobility and education, and created the program “Mais Médicos” (More Physicians) that has allowed foreign physicians to work in poor communities suffering from the lack of health professionals (El País, 2013). Therefore, we understand that Brazil is currently going through movements of resistance and change, although it still shows practices of poverty criminalization due to its oppressive historical process.

### **The impacts of the historical construction of poverty on the psyche**

Poverty, in general, is historically constructed and stressed by government regimes, claim Alberto Cimadamore and Antonio David Catani (2007). However, according to Elívia Cidade, James Moura Jr. and Verônica Ximenes (2012), poverty is not limited to an economic context, but also covers social, political, ideological and structural conditions, as well as ways of being and ways of doing. From the understanding that the social setting has repercussions on the form of constitution of the human psyche, according to Lev Semenovich Vigotski (1931/1991), it can be observed that reality plays a central role in the way that a person is constituted psychologically. Aluísio Lima (2010) and Antonio Ciampa (1987) conceive that the forms of recognition imposed upon an individual by social relations and, consequently, disseminated in the society, have an impact on their identity construction.

Therefore, there are singular ways of structuring the psyche in a society where poverty prevails. In addition, we observe a preponderance of an ideological character in the structuring the human psyche. Luis Ibañez (2000) states that ideology is the instrument that maintains this domination-oppression dialectic, with the capacity to maintain individuals with no power to break out of the dominant and oppressive structure. According to Cezar Wagner Góis (2008), oppression means the denial of identity to the Latin American people by the oppressor, so their existence becomes compressed and contained. The problem with this ideological relevance is the existence of a dominant mode of subjectivity focused on the maintenance and the reproduction of the status quo, and on blaming and criminalizing poverty, as in the Brazilian reality.

According to Vigotski, (1931/1991), the psyche of marginalized human beings is built upon the characteristics of oppression because the higher psychological functions have a dual development, what is considered by Adolfo Perinat (2009) as a communicative social action. The constitution of the intrapsychic aspect is a reflection of the social reality in which the person has contact with, while language is the path for the reproduction of this reality to the psyche (Góis, 2008). Language

consists of signs that human beings learn to use for external communication and, later, for communicating with himself. The sign, then, becomes a psychological instrument of creation of new connections between psychic functions when interiorized. According to Vigotski (1934/2003), this process only happens because of the existence of meanings, which are stable concepts of words, creating a common ground for communication and generalization, allowing semiotic and dialectic mediation of the psyche.

We observed that these meanings also hold at its base a social valuation, which represents the prevailing ideologies in a culture that dictates the creation of new connections. Thus,

It is necessary to point out, on the one hand, the connection that some new systems maintain not only with social signs, but also with ideology and the meaning that this or that psychological function acquires in the conscience of people, while on the other hand, the process of emergence of new forms of behavior, from a new content, is extracted by man of the ideology of the environment that surrounds him (Vigotski, 1925/2004, p. 117).

Vigotski (1925/2004) states that there are differences between social classes with respect to psychological characteristics. “The social and class characteristics are formed in humans through internalized systems, which are nothing more than the systems and the social relations transferred to personality” (Vigotski, 1925/2004, p. 133). This means that the social interactions, the cultural context of the development of a person, the ideologies in place, and the meanings that this individual has learned to handle can create certain forms of psychological constitution. We then understand that the poor population makes contact with meanings that exist in Brazil and that are related to feelings, thoughts and ideas of impotence, passivity, conformism and violence. In the Brazilian society, there is a creation of the oppressed and exploited identity, which according to Góis (2008), can generate different personal positions of servility, fatalism and violence, building a petrified style of live that aims to protect the subjects from the adverse socio-psychological conditions in which they are immersed.

However, the human being is also constituted by more personal connections that transcend the stable formations existing in the meaning of a word, according to Vigotski (1934/2003).

These more personal conceptions refer to the meanings that are marked by motivations, by affective experiences and by their context. The senses are more unstable and they refer to the sum of all the psychological facts that a word evokes in the psyche, thus having a multiple and indeterminate character, according to João Paulo Barros, Luana Colares, Jesus Garcia Pascual, Veriana Colaço and Verônica Morais Ximenes (2009). In this regard, sense has a wider range, extrapolating the bases of meanings. Therefore, we understand that the historical construction process of poverty in Brazil is composed of meanings that reproduce the existing social order, that carry the system of beliefs and values that reality is immutable; that blame the poor population by their life conditions, and that reinforce individualistic ideas. Thus, the meanings that create the common ground for understanding reality and for the construction of senses may provide a limited understanding of the creation of senses. Affective experiences, life experiences, and contexts for the use of meanings in an oppressive reality can be reduced to the existing meanings, that is, those that regard the poor as incapable, servile and dependent.

However, we understand that the people living in poverty must be recognized for their potentials. In this perspective, James Ferreira Moura Jr. (2012) and Cidade, Moura Jr. and Ximenes (2012) identify that people in such living conditions carry movements of resistance that emerge from creative processes and from strong bonds of solidarity and cooperation. The celebration of carnival, capoeira, popular festivals, and even religious movements may become spaces for strengthening and resistance for people in poverty situations, in face of the oppressive social order. Therefore, the meanings of the dominant ideologies can be questioned by specific interventions based on an ethic of liberation that values these popular movements (Ximenes & Góis, 2010).

Likewise, we observe that these new meanings focused on potentials, and by the recognition of the poor as citizens with rights, are part of the new government policies in Brazil. Cash transfer policies, such as the program "Bolsa Família" and "Brasil sem Miséria" (Brazil without Misery), as well as policies to increase access to higher education, may lead

to changes in the psyche of individuals in a poverty situation. These meanings and senses would be related to a movement of strengthening identity and questioning the depreciative and oppressive forms of recognition of people in situation of poverty historically built in Brazil. Therefore, there is a possibility for the creation of relations, spaces and activities that are filled with new ways of living and permeated by meanings that are opposed to the dominant ideologies of oppression.

## Conclusions

We have identified a macro-social structure in Brazil that positions the poor individual in a situation of impotence, submission, and blame for social ills. Thus, poverty, besides being related to a state of deprivation, must be addressed as a practice of symbolic oppression. We also understand that the poor population creates movements of resistance to this oppressive social order. However, in recent years, on account of government actions, specific policies for poverty reduction have been implemented, questioning the existing understandings about the poor as well as enhancing their potentials. Thus, to overcome poverty, the destruction of these ideological, symbolic and concrete barriers must be a priority, which, in our view, has been implemented gradually in recent years by the Brazilian Federal Government, but needs to be strengthened and escalated due to the historical process of depreciation and marginalization of the poorest populations in Brazil.

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