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**Poverty and Potential  
The Life Style Concept in Poverty Research**

**Lecture at ELIAMEP**

**Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy**

**Athens, Greece, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015**

## Introduction

The German-Greek BMBF joint project “Segmentation and Exclusion: Understanding and Overcoming the Multiple Effects of the European Crisis”<sup>1</sup> examines the impact of the crisis since 2008, and in particular the development of poverty in both countries. The focus is on the analysis of representations of the social process in the German and Greek collective consciousness. Germany and Greece are generally considered as contrasting “clear cases”: winner of the crisis on the one hand, loser on the other. The project proofs how adequate this perception really is and if we nowadays need a new understanding of poverty.

Subject of the project, directed by the University of Bonn, is the development of poverty in Germany during the past decade with particular emphasis on the financial and sovereign debt crisis. The sociological research on poverty in Germany is highly developed and advanced.<sup>2</sup> However, a desideratum is the analysis of social ideas and images on the subject (especially in the media and the public). In the following a description of the actual situation in Germany as a consequence of the political reforms in the last decade is given. The second chapter examines some of the most influential arguments on economic and social theory of poverty. In the last part a revisited lifestyle-approach to the problem of poverty is sketched to conceptualise the poor, normally addressed as objects of administrative and scientific procedures, as subjects of their life course.

## 2. The Actual Situation in Germany

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany was seen as the “sick man in Europe”. After the turn of the millennium the Schröder-Fischer-government (red-green coalition) initiated a rebound that mutates Germany into the economic “locomotive of Europe”. The “agenda 2010” with its core, the Hartz IV reforms of the labour market and the social welfare system – that amalgamate the social welfare for the poor (“Sozialhilfe”) and the long-time unemployment assistance (“Arbeitslosenhilfe”) under the activating but never the

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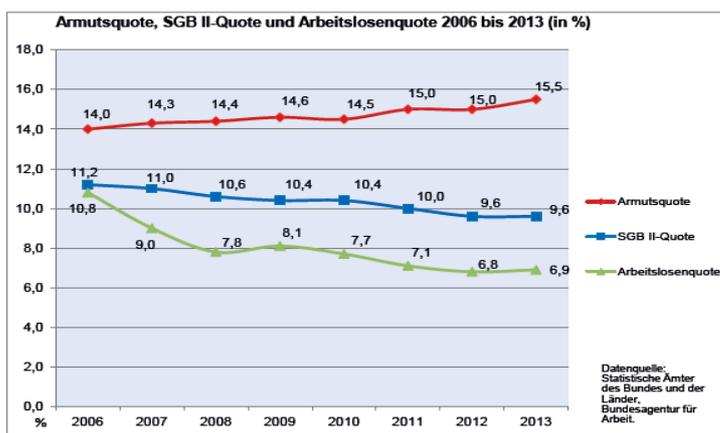
<sup>1</sup> For further details see: [www.fragmex.eu/](http://www.fragmex.eu/)

<sup>2</sup> An overview in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* Vol. 51–52/2010 („Armut in Deutschland“); Berthold Dietz: *Soziologie der Armut. Eine Einführung*. Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 1997; Christoph Butterwegge: *Armut in einem reichen Land. Wie das Problem verharmlost und verdrängt wird*. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus, [2009] 2012; Robert Castel/Klaus Dörre (eds.): *Prekarität, Abstieg, Ausgrenzung. Die soziale Frage am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts*. Frankfurt a. M./New York: Campus, 2009. Stefan Selke: *Schamland. Die Armut mitten unter uns*. Düsseldorf: Econ, 2013.

less authoritarian policy of “Fördern und Fordern” (patronize and postulate), accompanied by a deregulation of the financial and production system – inaugurated a fundamental change in the German society and a strong economic take off. The economic performance of Germany seems to be excellent:

- significant increase in employment relationships,
- decrease of the unemployment rate (to 6.9%), especially a cutback of the structural unemployment – the Achilles' heel of German economy since the 1970ies,
- rise of real wages since 2000 in contrast to the global trend,
- balanced federal budget (“zero new state indebtedness” in 2015).

A deeper look into the German society reveals a different development, the shady side of this economic take off. The structural reforms and social changes had unintended negative effects and collateral damages. The Hartz reforms came into force in 2005. Since 2006 poverty in Germany increased by 11%.<sup>3</sup> Today approximately 12.5 million people, i.e. 15.5% of the German population, live on or below the poverty level. Figure 1 shows the poverty rate (red line), the rate of social benefits (Hartz IV) (blue line) and the unemployment rate (green line) in the period from 2006 – 2013 in per cent.



**Figure 1: Poverty Rate (red line), Social Benefits (Hartz IV) (blue line), Unemployment Rate (green line) 2006 – 2013 in per cent**

<sup>3</sup> The statistical data are taken from: Deutscher Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband Gesamtverband e. V. : *Die zerklüftete Republik. Bericht zur regionalen Armutsentwicklung in Deutschland 2014*. www.paritaet.org 2015

According to the Federal Statistical Office 24.3% or approximately 20 million Germans are at risk of poverty, including especially old-age pensioners, single mothers, children. Children represent already 20% of the poor, 40% are at risk of poverty. A great amount (58.7%) of the poor in Germany nowadays are called Hartz IV beneficiaries. Among them are 15.8% academics in Western, 13.8% in East Germany. 20% of all German children live in Hartz IV-families. A somewhat curious statement of his perception of such living conditions and his personal future gave a Berlin secondary school pupil (with an immigrant background) who was asked about his biographical expectations. He answered that he will have a carrier as “Hartzter”! In short, there is a simultaneous rise of economic growth and poverty. Figure 2 illustrates this German paradox.

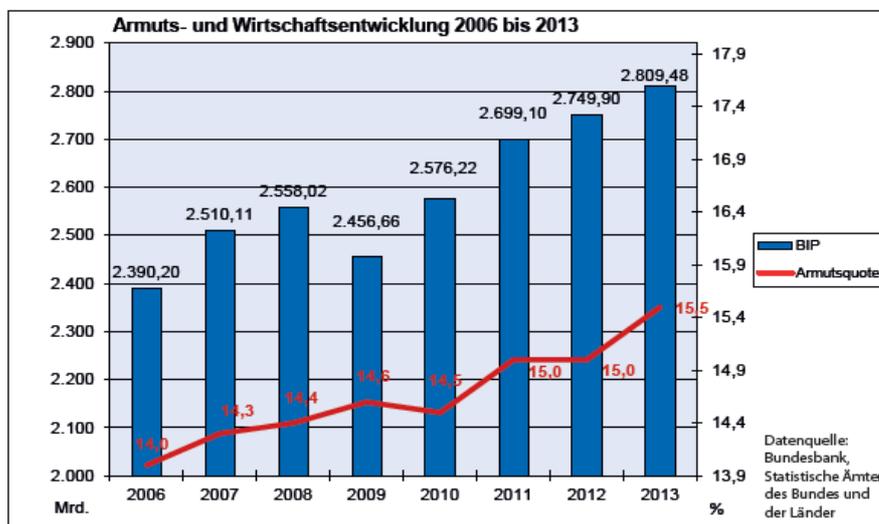
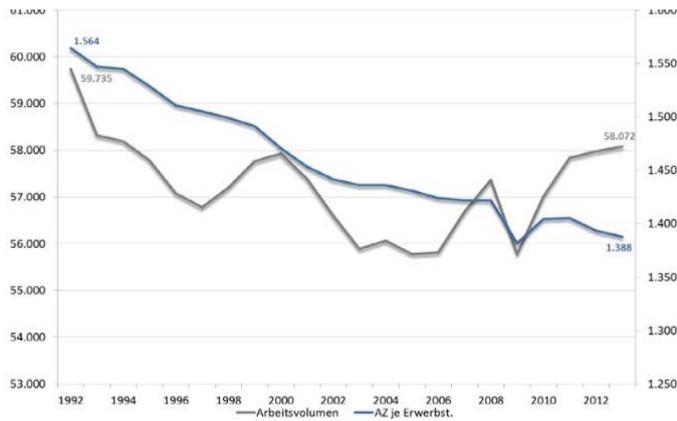


Figure 2: Economic and Poverty Development

What are the reasons for this development and the splitting of the German society? Figure 3 demonstrates the volume of work (grey line) and the working time of each employee (blue line). Since 1995 the volume of work rests nearly constant and is distributed to more people who work less and thus have less if not insufficient income. During the period between 1995 and 2012 we observe a decline of working ours per person in consequence of part-time or “mini-jobs”.



**Figure 3: Volume of Work and Working Time**

In addition, more and more Germans are employees without being subject to social insurance contribution, working in temporary employment relationships, part time jobs and suffering the relaxation of dismissal protection. In the end the reforms of a left government create a new social problem: the “working poor”. A growing part of citizens gets poor although they are working. They are actually living in precarious circumstances and with a high risk of poverty in the future as elderly people. The following risk groups can be identified:

- Unemployed: 58.7% are poor
- Single parents: 42.3% are poor
- Low or non educated: 39.3% are poor
- Children (under 18): 19.2% are poor
- Hartz IV recipients (under 15): 15.5%
- Elderly people (65+): 15.2% (2006: 10.3%), Recipients of old-age basic security insurance has doubled to 3.0% (2003: 1,7%) (500.000 people)

The splitting of the German Society became manifest also in the regional fragmentation between the post-socialist Eastern and the old capitalist Western as well as between the meanwhile deindustrialized North (for example the Ruhr area as the former homeland of coal and steel) and South Germany with its flourishing high tech and service industries (see Figure 4).

Between 2006 and 2013 poverty roses in 13 of the 16 federal states of Germany in varying degrees along a North-South and East-West gradient. This trend has accelerated and fostered the differences. The ratio between the least and the most affected regions

worsened (2006: 17.8 pps, 2013: 24.8 pps). The most affected areas are all in Northern Germany: Bremen (24.6%), Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (23.6%), Berlin (21.4%), Saxony-Anhalt (20.9) and the Ruhr Area (19.7%). The biggest changes took place in the wider area of Cologne/Düsseldorf (16.8% with an increase of 31% since 2006) and Hamburg (16.9% with 2.1 pps representing the largest increase to 2012).

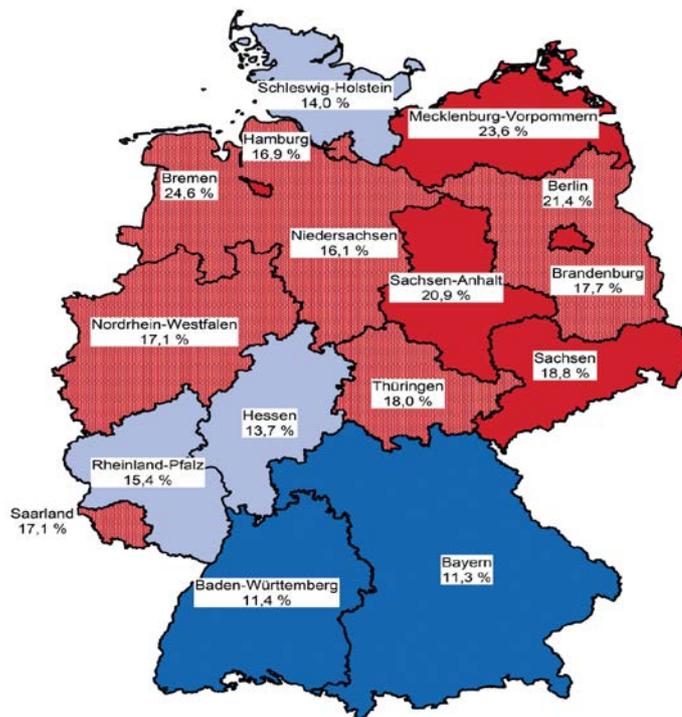


Figure 4: Regional Fragmentation (Unemployment Rate in %)

Berlin figures as a special case. The capital of the reunified Germany represents the German paradox or split of society like in a burning glass. Here high structural unemployment (ca. 10%) – a legacy of the cold war and the reforms after the fall of the wall – coexists with the emergence of new jobs operated by new, often highly skilled, citizens attracted from outside. Berlin registered a growth of the population that strengthens the divide.

It seems as if only marginal groups are affected by poverty or the risk of poverty. In fact poverty recently is a phenomenon not restricted to „lower social classes“, but the society as a whole. Germany has the largest wealth inequality in the euro-zone, as the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) warns currently. This means that since 2000 the

incomes of people in the lowest decile<sup>4</sup> dropped by an average of nearly 9 percent, while those of the top decile increased by almost 15 percent.<sup>5</sup> This significant gap between the edges of the income hierarchy illustrates the polarization of the German distribution of incomes and wealth.

As a legacy of war and displacement especially the middle classes possess less property compared with those in countries like Spain, Italy and even Greece. All these facts indicate a brake with the old social contract and the merit principle. The flexibilisation of the labour market, the industrial relations and the organizations in the public and private sphere led to an increase of precarious employment relationships and living conditions.<sup>6</sup> Therefore the question is: Who is poor?

Armutsquote und SGB II-Quote nach Bundesländern seit 2006 (in %)		2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Deutschland	Armutsquote	14,0	14,3	14,4	14,6	14,5	15,0	15,0	15,5
	SGB II-Quote	11,4	11,1	10,7	10,5	10,5	10,0	9,6	9,6
Baden-Württemberg	Armutsquote	10,1	10,0	10,2	10,9	11,0	11,1	11,1	11,4
	SGB II-Quote	6,0	5,8	5,4	5,5	5,7	5,3	5,0	5,1
Bayern	Armutsquote	10,9	11,0	10,8	11,1	10,8	11,1	11,0	11,3
	SGB II-Quote	5,6	5,3	4,9	4,9	4,9	4,4	4,2	4,2
Berlin	Armutsquote	17,0	17,5	18,7	19,0	19,2	20,6	20,8	21,4
	SGB II-Quote	21,7	22,1	21,7	21,4	21,4	21,9	21,1	20,7
Brandenburg	Armutsquote	18,9	17,5	16,8	16,7	16,3	16,8	18,1	17,7
	SGB II-Quote	17,5	17,2	16,4	15,5	14,8	14,0	13,7	13,5
Bremen	Armutsquote	20,4	19,1	22,2	20,1	21,1	22,0	22,9	24,6
	SGB II-Quote	19,5	19,1	18,6	18,1	18,5	18,3	18,0	18,1
Hamburg	Armutsquote	14,3	14,1	13,1	14,0	13,3	14,7	14,8	16,9
	SGB II-Quote	14,4	14,3	14,0	13,7	13,7	13,5	13,0	12,8
Hessen	Armutsquote	12,0	12,0	12,7	12,4	12,1	12,8	13,3	13,7
	SGB II-Quote	9,5	9,4	9,1	9,1	9,1	8,6	8,4	8,5
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	Armutsquote	22,9	24,3	24,0	23,1	22,4	22,1	22,8	23,6
	SGB II-Quote	21,1	20,6	19,2	17,9	17,2	16,4	15,8	15,5
Niedersachsen	Armutsquote	15,3	15,5	15,8	15,3	15,3	15,5	15,7	16,1
	SGB II-Quote	11,1	11,0	10,7	10,3	10,3	9,9	9,7	9,6
Nordrhein-Westfalen	Armutsquote	13,9	14,6	14,7	15,2	15,4	16,4	16,3	17,1
	SGB II-Quote	11,7	11,7	11,5	11,4	11,7	11,5	11,3	11,5
Rheinland-Pfalz	Armutsquote	13,2	13,5	14,5	14,2	14,8	15,1	14,6	15,4
	SGB II-Quote	8,1	8,0	7,7	7,7	7,7	7,1	6,9	6,9
Saarland	Armutsquote	16,0	16,8	15,8	16,0	14,3	15,2	15,4	17,1
	SGB II-Quote	10,8	10,8	10,4	10,3	10,4	9,8	9,6	9,9
Sachsen	Armutsquote	18,5	19,6	19,0	19,5	19,4	19,5	18,8	18,8
	SGB II-Quote	17,9	17,4	16,7	16,1	15,6	14,7	13,9	13,4
Sachsen-Anhalt	Armutsquote	21,6	21,5	22,1	21,8	19,8	20,6	21,1	20,9
	SGB II-Quote	20,8	20,5	19,9	19,1	18,4	17,8	17,2	17,0
Schleswig-Holstein	Armutsquote	12,0	12,5	13,1	14,0	13,8	13,6	13,8	14,0
	SGB II-Quote	11,5	11,3	10,9	10,5	10,5	10,3	10,1	10,1
Thüringen	Armutsquote	19,0	18,9	18,5	18,1	17,6	16,7	16,8	18,0
	SGB II-Quote	15,5	15,3	14,3	13,8	13,3	12,3	11,6	11,3

Datenquelle: Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, Bundesagentur für Arbeit, eigene Berechnungen.

Figure 5: Regional Fragmentation

<sup>4</sup> The lowest decile includes the 10 percent of the population with the lowest income.

<sup>5</sup> Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung: Wochenbericht 9/2014.

<sup>6</sup> See also: Heinz Bude: *Die Ausgeschlossenen. Das Ende vom Traum einer gerechten Gesellschaft*. München: Hanser, 2008.

**3. Polit-economic explanations of poverty trends and their limits**

“Rich” and “poor” mark the extremes of social inequality. Social inequality is a structural feature of modern, functionally differentiated societies and, according to liberal doctrine, the ultimate incentive for social and economic development, in particular, the production of social wealth. From this perspective, poverty is the expression and result of insufficient motivation or lack of performance of the poor that in the end led to reduced participation in society (for census suffrage even exclusion from political participation). On the contrary richness or property is legitimized as a bonus for excellent performance.

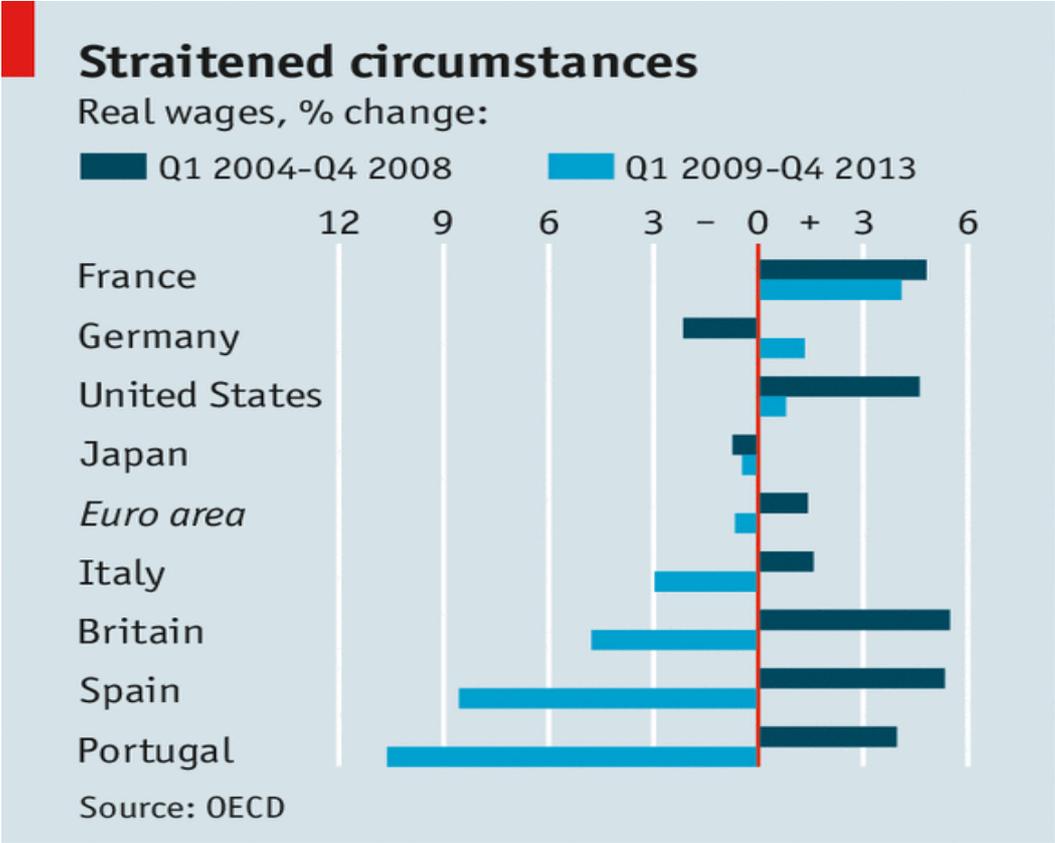


Figure 6: Changes in Real Wages. *The Economist*, Sep. 6<sup>th</sup>, 2014

In the 19th century wealth increased, but also wages. This trend did not continue in the 20th century. Since 1980, the median wage of male employee stagnates, for example in the USA, and is currently lower in real terms. This trend is shown by the following figure taken from *The Economist* (Figure 6).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Wage stagnation. The big freeze. Throughout the rich world, wages are stuck. *The Economist*, Sep. 6<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Striking is the opposite trend in Germany after the reforms of the red-green government under Schröder, as well as the actual wage policy against the trend in response to the crisis. Considering these developments in the context of the *longue duree* structures, we can tell the following story:

While, according to Marx, capitalism is intrinsically digging his own grave because of its self-destroying reproduction logic, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, actually the formula of the economic law formula is:

$$r > g$$

The return on investment is always greater than the economic growth rate. This famous argument in Thomas Piketti's best-seller *The Capital*<sup>8</sup> is, as Karl-Heinz Paqué commended, a "self-evident assumption"<sup>9</sup> which becomes significance only when combined with a second argument: that in fact this inequality  $r > g$  is interfering with the distribution of income. The economic law determines the causal nexus behind the social structure.

For our purposes, this means that the rich get rich faster than the poor can escape poverty. Thus, the liberal doctrine pretending that the "rich" ("top performer", in German: "Leistungsträger") push the "poor" and "weak", i.e. the less competent citizens, does not coincide with the facts. Following Joseph Stiglitz, we can derive the hypothesis for our discourse analysis that material inequality lead to social and political inequality, because the rich have a strong influence on politics.<sup>10</sup> In fact, it can be shown that not only the economic but also the political elite increasingly becomes a closed shop.<sup>11</sup> The liberal economist Karl-Heinz Paqué identified a counter-trend. He suggests that due to a lack in capital as well in skilled labour income, i.e. interest and wages, will probably rise in the future and will expand the scope for political action again.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Piketti: *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Karl-Heinz Paqué: Gibt es doch Gesetze des Kapitalismus? *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* No. 212, Sept. 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph E Stiglitz: *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers our Future*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> For Germany and Europe: Michael Hartmann: *Eliten und Macht in Europa. Ein internationaler Vergleich*. Frankfurt a. M./New York: Campus 2007.

Piketty's law would loosen its relevance and his recommendation for a redistributive policy would become obsolete. Anyway – from a sociological perspective this political-economic discourse suffers in a loss-determination of the social, in our case, the autonomy of the system of social policy on the one hand and poverty as a social construct on the other hand.

#### 4. The Social Policy Discourse: The Social Construction of Poverty in the Welfare State

The usual definitions of poverty:

absolute poverty	poverty line currently \$ 1.25 per day
relative poverty	less than 60% of the average disposable income in Germany currently at € 1,200
perceived or socio-cultural poverty	precarity exclusion

can be related to the history of poverty in modern times:

Until the 19th century, the question of poverty was considered as a charity problem (*caritas*). The good Christian saw himself morally obligated to alleviate the worst hardship of the wider population. But the solidarity did not go so far to recognize the plebs as part of civil society. With the rise of the labour movement, the question of poverty changed into the problem of the proletarian labour force. The view of the *exclusion* and unselfish assistance through charitable civil society organizations (churches and other moral institutions) shifted towards a state governed and centralised regulation of poverty<sup>12</sup> or policy of *inclusion*, i.e. participation in society on the basis of an extension of civil rights by social entitlements.<sup>13</sup> Social policy, in the 19th century instrumentalised by Bismarck in his fight against the Social Democratic Party and the workers' movement in general (incl. prohibition of the Social Democratic Party),

<sup>12</sup> Bronislaw Gemerek: *Geschichte der Armut. Elend und Barmherzigkeit in Europa*. München: Artemis, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Franz-Xaver Kaufmann: Zum Begriff des Wohlfahrtsstaates und seiner Krise. In: *Sozialpolitik und Sozialstaat. Soziologische Analysen*. 2. Aufl. Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2002, pp. 186-191.

in the 20<sup>th</sup>, so-called Social Democratic century<sup>14</sup> and under the rule of Social Democratic Party in the Weimar Republic, established the modern welfare state that guarantees the life pension of the population (“Lebens-“ or “Daseinsvorsorge”) on the basis of social legislation (“Sozialgesetzgebung”).

The neoconservative, today called neoliberal policy under Reagan, Thatcher and Kohl that had been continued if not radicalized in its authoritarian style by “New Labour” under Blair and copied by Schröder, finally ends in a fundamentalist discourse of “no alternative” by Merkel. During this historical phase of restoration since the 1970es a durable trend in social policy and social inequality became. obvious. Heiner Geissler, Christian Democrat and member of Attac, was the first who in the 70s spoke of the new social question and new poverty,<sup>15</sup> the sources of the recent phenomenon of precariousness.

In the beginning, i.e. 70s, the lower classes became victims of this trend, but since the 90s it has reached the centre of society. Therefore one has actually distinguish *poverty* of the lower layer (s ) from *impoverishment* of the middle class to which in Germany, related to income, assets and voting behaviour, large sections of the working class are to be counted to. Poverty would then be understood as a social status (“lower class”) and impoverishment as effect and expression of a fundamental change in society to flexibility in the organisational structure and precarity in the life-course.<sup>16</sup> The new precarity is not so much an objective social status of the excluded, often associated with populations having a migration background, as the lower class discourse of the elite tries to make us believe.<sup>17</sup> “Precarity” refers to a subjective state and means exactly what the experts call “perceived poverty”. The sociologist takes feelings either as a representation of a social situation or a pre-reflective, socially determined definition of an existential and social situation, usually called habit in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ralf Dahrendorf: *Life Chances: Approaches to Social and Political Theory*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979.

<sup>15</sup> Heiner Geissler: *Die Neue Soziale Frage. Analysen und Dokumente*. Freiburg: Herder, 1976.

<sup>16</sup> See: Richard Sennett: *The Corrosion of Character*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998; Luc Boltanski & Éve Chiapello: *Le nouvel Ésprit du Capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Thilo Sarrazin: *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen*. München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Bourdieu: *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit 1979

This habit or life-style of the new poor arises in what Dörre et al. call zone of *precariousness*, which results from a process of erosion of objective societal normative standards.<sup>19</sup> Traditional normal working conditions became precarious under the fake of pseudo self-reliance in the service industry (parcel services, health care, restaurants, etc.) and other areas incl. academia. German Universities are one of the most precarious working places in the country. Subject in particular to the Bonn project is to reconstruct the .crisis in particular. This habit or lifestyle (in the plural) of poverty is closely related to the development of the welfare state and the establishment of a system of social policy. The Socialist utopia lived from the idea of the integrating power of labour, especially skilled labour. Therefore, reform of the educational system always (not for Schröder) was a central domain of the Social Democratic or Labour Party. Since the oil crisis and a caging structural unemployment (“Sockelarbeitslosigkeit”), which could not be resolved by redistribution in terms of a reduction of working time, it became apparent that the living (services of general interest, in German: “Daseinsvorsorge”) cannot be reasonably ensured by work. At the same time it came to the crisis of the system of social policy that was and still is linked to the labour market. The reforms of the red-green government put in right here. But the apparent solution increased the problem.

Moreover the social security system as a property of the people were and are plundered by the politicians for financing extra-expenditures to recover critical social problems in other fields: from the pots of the social security system were not only paid the biggest part of the costs of the German reunification but also election gifts to the clientele of the parties (mothers pension for conservatives: beneficiaries, especially central and upper class, early retirement for the SPD beneficiaries paid especially skilled workers and civil servants). In addition, the private pensions (savings accounts, life insurances) are used by fiscal manoeuvres to rescue the banks and the reorganization of the national budgets. Additionally people are treated by so-called solidarity contributions and the bracket creep. All this leads to uncertainty of the middle class and big risks in the political system: abstention or protest vote (AfD), radicalisation (PEGIDA), and the social system: individualization and lack of solidarity.

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Castel/Klaus Dörre (Hg.): *Prekarität, Abstieg, Ausgrenzung. Die soziale Frage am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts*. Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2009.

Summing up we realize that the definition of poverty shifts from issues of deprivation to those of social participation.<sup>20</sup> Although there still exists material poverty not only in the third world but also in rich countries like Germany, questions of the distribution of opportunities, the quality of life and life-styles dominate the actual discourse. We are aware that even material poverty is the effect of the poverty of potentials: people are poor because of lacking know-how and techniques of managing their life. In short, regarding to the analysis of poverty there is a shift from economy to culture and politics Ernest Gellner<sup>21</sup> defines culture – more precisely bourgeois culture – through participatory opportunities to the community, especially political citizenship.

### **Outlook**

For the early stages of modernity Michel Foucault demonstrates a scientification of the social assistance of the poor. He speaks of “biopolitics” as a new type of domination by “self-discipline” of the body, including the social body with the “intention” to integrate the poor into the reserve army of the labour force in the rising Capitalist economy.<sup>22</sup> The social policy in the Social Democratic century generated the professionalization of certain contexts of action (medicine, education, social work). In the neoliberal era the therapeutisation of society – an old idea related even to Platon who often uses the therapeutical practice of a physician as model for politics –is replaced by management. The dismantling of the welfare state by privatising the public services established precariousness as a social normality for great parts of the population on the one hand and initiated a process of de-professionalization in the system of social policy on the other hand.

But there is hope: Beyond market and state and the neoliberal redesign of their relation (for example in the form of private-public-partnerships) we realize the emergence of a new power, the third sector of grassroots organization: citizens are looking for solutions of problems neither state nor market can offer, because often they unintentionally produce them.

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<sup>20</sup> Amatiya Sen: Equality of What? In: Amatiya Sen (ed.): *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*. Oxford: Blackwell 1982, pp. 353–369.

<sup>21</sup> Ernest Gellner: *Nations and Nationalisms*. London: Blackwell, 1983.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault: *“Society Must Be Defended”*. *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*. Ed. Mauro Berani and Alessandro Fontana. New York: Picador 2003, pp. 242–243.

<b>Poverty in Traditional Society</b>	<b>Community Caritas Moral</b>	<b>Almshouses</b>	<b>Exclusion</b>
<b>Proletarianism of the Labour Force Class Society</b>	<b>Etatisation Entitlements</b>	<b>Social Welfare State</b>	<b>Inclusion</b>
<b>Precarity in Middle Class Society</b>	<b>Individualization Performance / Life-Style</b>	<b>Civil Society</b>	<b>Exclusion</b>

Figure 7: Types of Poverty and Society

Since state benefits are insufficient one million poor are sustained by the food banks – in Germany euphemistically called “Tafeln”, the traditional word for luxury dinner. Food banks offer food for a symbolic payment of one EURO. Only registered poor with a special allowance card have permission to visit the food banks. The food, offered by the food banks, is the unsold and littered rubbish from supermarkets collected by civil society organisations. These civil society organisations compete with the anarchic form of collecting food from the container of the supermarkets, the so-called “containern” or “dumpstern”. The German expression „Mülltauchen“ means diving through the waste. Now “containern” is forbidden and prosecuted, because the donation of rubbish became an important marketing campaign of the supermarkets.

But even these foot banks cannot prevent from deficiency symptoms. The poor have lower life expectancy in Germany. The relationship between social inequality/poverty and life experience has been investigated by several research institutions, such as the Robert-Koch-Institute, which came to clear results: people with an income lower than 60% of the median income live about eight years shorter than people with an income higher than 150% of the median income.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore the risk of certain diseases is elevated in poverty. Individuals who are affected by poverty are often limited in coping with everyday life because of health problems.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Robert Koch-Institut (Hrsg.): GBE Kompakt 5/2010. Zahlen und Trends aus der Gesundheitsberichterstattung des Bundes, Berlin 2010.

<sup>24</sup>[http://www.rki.de/DE/Content/Gesundheitsmonitoring/Gesundheitsberichterstattung/GBEDownloadsK/2010\\_5\\_Armut.pdf](http://www.rki.de/DE/Content/Gesundheitsmonitoring/Gesundheitsberichterstattung/GBEDownloadsK/2010_5_Armut.pdf)

The link between poverty and health has not been reduced in recent decades, which is also shown in the “Datenreport 2013”.<sup>25</sup> A mentally ill Hartz IV recipient died from hunger, because his payments were blocked due to refusal of work. The reforms did not only merge social and unemployment assistance, but also slashed the psychosocial care by social services. In consequence, children are starving or are killed by acts of violence in the family. Social work is no longer based on social psychology and the idea of re-socialisation, i.e. help to self-help, establishing an autonomous life, but only to manage and administer the misery. Although civil society institutions as the food banks are morally praiseworthy, but structurally they are part of the problem, not the solution: the poor remain in poverty and also have to accept alms and thus public humiliation and social stigma.

Beyond this economic understanding and reflecting the rise of the modern welfare state at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the sociologist Georg Simmel gives a pure functional definition: poor is who receives help assistance.<sup>26</sup> Simmel’s theory helps to overcome the problems of Oscar Lewis’ and Michael Harrington’s “culture of poverty”<sup>27</sup> that has the tendency to a normative approach and a romantic idealisation of poor living. Not subcultural factors in a milieu, but the social position in the social structure determine the behaviour of the poor. From such a sociological perspective the poor is acknowledged by the community as a member, i.e. a citizen with rights and duties in contrast to excluded subjects like tramps, inmates of concentration camps, outlaws (“Vogelfreie”) especially condemned perpetrators and other kinds of dehumanised contemporaries. In accordance with this definition towns in the middle ages had lists of acknowledged poor people who live “intra muros”, were member of the commonality and as such get help contrary to errant folks like gypsies and vagabonds. With the rise of capitalism the poor had been detained in “working-houses” to get trained and finally to be fed to the proletarian reserve army of workers.

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<sup>25</sup> Statistisches Bundesamt (Hrsg.): Datenreport 2013. Kapitel 8, Gesundheit und soziale Sicherung, pp. 227 – 298.

<sup>26</sup> Georg Simmel: The Pauper. In: *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*. Ed. by Donald N. Levine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972, pp. 150-178.

<sup>27</sup> Oscar Lewis: *Five Families. Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. New York: Basic Books, 1959; Michael Harrington: *The Other America. Poverty in the United States*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962.

Since the 1970s and the neoliberal Revolution we observe the end of the Social-Democratic century, and after the Fall of the Wall in 1989 a decline of the welfare state accompanied with individualisation and the new phenomenon of civil society. In consequence the perception and performance of the poor and social help changed radically. Whereas the Social Democratic welfare state successfully realised the inclusion of the workers that had been excluded as the poor masses in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it seems as if we return to exclusion again in the age of neoliberal reform.

Following Simmel's functional definition of the poor as benevolent, i.e. as a bureaucratic category without any relation to the identity of the poor person, the poor is benevolent as citizen of a welfare state with personal rights and not object and sacrifice of the others' mercy. In modern talking, the poor is excluded under the precondition of being included as citizen. Poverty is one possible functional role; a citizen can play among others, not a substantial quality of his personality. In short: poverty is exclusion in inclusion. Beyond being poor, i.e. benevolent and object, the poor is citizen and subject of his life. This definition of poverty figures as hypothesis for the empirical research project that explores the "culture of poverty" from the "bourgeois" perspective of life as an autonomous trajectory. This seems to be the only alternative in times of budget cuts in the social system. The organisational form of such self-help initiatives is called civil society – a term that evokes a revival of civicness.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Putnam: *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.