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## **Recognizing the political economy of capitalism? Toward a critical theory of global poverty**

### **Introduction**

Why bring Frankfurt School critical theory and global poverty into dialogue? Do contemporary critical theorists have anything to say on the subject? Or have they lost their critical momentum? In this article, I try to investigate whether the theoretical tools of critical theory as conceived by scholars linked to the Frankfurt School and then by contemporary theorists are valuable and useful to understand, criticise and eventually transform present social circumstances. The research field chosen to test these tools is global poverty, for two main reasons. First, critical theory, at least from Jürgen Habermas onwards, has assumed that the initial research programme should have been reformulated in order to diagnose the contradictions of the social order. Methodological issues have gradually taken the place of detailed sociological analyses. At the same time, critical theory has ideologically dismissed any critique of political economy due to the fear of succumbing to Marxist economism. Quite the opposite has happened to recent scholarship in the social sciences, with a resurgence of publications questioning the global capitalist system.

Secondly, despite being one of the central and most discussed challenges of modernity, the issue of poverty has not been sufficiently investigated within the tradition of critical theory. Having dismissed since long time any reference to revolutionary political actors, as was the case with the Marxian proletariat, there is a lack of analyses specifically dedicated to the topic adopting a systematic and critical point of view, as opposed to moral or human rights-based denunciation. This is particularly astonishing in that poverty represents one of the most common social and material conditions that hinder human emancipation and the possibility of expressing one's own "potentialities"<sup>1</sup>, as Horkheimer wrote. A person

<sup>1</sup> M. Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, Continuum, New York 2002, p. 245.

in poverty is not satisfied with idealistic responses – be it morality, justice, or recognition. In this sense, I will try to combat the growing methodologism and idealism of political theory, far from practical problems of living people.

## §1 What poverty?

Poverty is a temporary condition, not a permanent identity, and must be conceived as the result of dynamics of social mobility. It can be understood “not just as a disadvantaged and insecure economic condition, but also as a shameful and corrosive social relation”<sup>2</sup>: material conditions, economic circumstances, and social position go hand in hand. Drawing on Amartya Sen’s contributions, in particular his *Development as Freedom*, anti-poverty language increasingly refers to “human flourishing” or individual “capabilities”, understood as the possibility to express and develop one’s own potential. The United Nations speak of “a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information”, depending “not only on income but also on access to social services”<sup>3</sup>. The experiences of poor people themselves illustrate this. When questioned by World Bank researchers, they highlight how their view of poverty involves many dimensions, such as precariousness, spatial and social exclusion, physical problems, gender issues, insecurity, power abuse, institutional disempowerment, and overall powerlessness<sup>4</sup>.

The World Bank, the international organisation whose aim is to end extreme poverty, defines it as “the inability to attain a minimal standard of living”<sup>5</sup>. It supports a quantitative definition of absolute poverty, i.e. individual physiological efficiency without reference to social context or norms: its international poverty line determines that anyone living on less than \$2.15 a day is considered to be living in extreme poverty, which corresponds to 8.5% of world population in 2019<sup>6</sup>. Some scholars have pointed out that considering poverty through such standard does not “reflect assessments *by* the poor about their daily survival requirements” and is directed more “towards the collection of data about the poor rath-

<sup>2</sup> R. Lister, *Poverty*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK 2021, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, *Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development*, New York 1996, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> D. Narayan, R. Chambers, M. K. Shah, P. Petesch, *Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change*, Oxford University Press for the World Bank, New York 2000.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank, *World Development Report 1990: Poverty*, Washington, DC 1990, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/>. Accessed 24 August 2023.

er than trying to understand how the poor exist and reproduce themselves through relations with the non-poor”<sup>7</sup>. Sanjay Reddy criticised the “money-metric” methodology in that it “is not specified in relation to an explicit conception of human well-being”<sup>8</sup>. World Bank methodology thus leads to a misleading representation of global poverty, which is significantly underestimated.

## **§2 Poverty philosophers: morality, human rights, recognition**

Following both Ingram and Schweickart<sup>9</sup>, I will examine arguments of moral or human rights-based perspectives, as well as Honneth’s theory of justice, in relation to the problem of poverty.

I will start with an example of moral stance. Responding to the question why poverty should be fought and eliminated, Peter Singer argues that there is a moral obligation in each of us to do something to alleviate global poverty. Similar to a philanthropic proposal, he argues that those who can afford it should “do [their] part to end world poverty”<sup>10</sup>, as the subtitle of his 2009 book makes clear. If people, following the consumerist imperative, can spend money on unnecessary things, why should they not spend part of it for children in hunger, thereby increasing the well-being of the global community with minimal effort? In this, Singer retains his usual utilitarian framework. In addition to that, he suggests that “it may not be possible to consider ourselves to be living a morally good life unless I give a great deal more than most of us would think it realistic to expect human beings to give”<sup>11</sup>, thus adopting an ideal of “good life” as normative standard. One “good life” which would not be such if I did not help people in need, as the tradition of monotheistic religions teaches<sup>12</sup>. Despite being the theoretical grounding of charitable activities promoted by many philanthrocapitalists, Singer’s argument surprisingly implies that affluent individuals in the so-called “developed” and rich part of the globe should not be praised for their contributions to poverty

<sup>7</sup> B. Selwyn, *The Struggle for Development*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK 2017, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> S. Reddy, *Counting the poor: the truth about world poverty statistics*, in “Socialist Register”, vol. 42, 2006, p. 172.

<sup>9</sup> D. Ingram, *Critical Theory and Global Development*, in M. J. Thompson (a cura di), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2017, pp. 677-696; D. Schweickart, *Global Poverty: Alternative Perspectives on What We Should Do – and Why*, in “Journal of Social Philosophy”, vol. 39, n. 4, 2008, pp. 471-491.

<sup>10</sup> P. Singer, *The Life You Can Save: How To Do Your Part To End World Poverty*, Random House, New York 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, p. XIV.

<sup>12</sup> Ivi, p. 19 ff.

relief. Such people are merely doing what it is required of them. Likewise, affluent individuals who do not contribute to poverty relief should be regarded as individuals engaged in a serious moral wrong<sup>13</sup>.

From an opposite point of view, Thomas Pogge's account relies on a justice-based frame of reference, condemning poverty from a human rights-based perspective. Not only does his standpoint permit to answer the question of why poverty is deplorable, as it is contrary to the universal principle of human dignity. It also grounds the argument that we are ultimately responsible for the violation of the human rights of citizens in "developing" countries, since the current social and economic world order contributes to the affirmation of poverty in some regions of the globe. According to Pogge, the global governance order is morally unfair, since national states and international institutions like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations agencies have "set up a system that greatly advances the national interests of developed countries over those of developing ones"<sup>14</sup>. We, as citizens represented by the governments we voted, reproduce this order. Indeed, Pogge states that "we and the governments acting in our name are substantially involved in supporting such unjust rules and their coercive imposition"<sup>15</sup>. As individual actors, our moral obligation concerning poverty is therefore divided into positive duties, regarding the (omitted) charitable acts also discussed by Singer, and negative duties, namely, not to harm the poor through such unjust global governance<sup>16</sup>.

In more recent years, other scholars have instead interpreted the issue of poverty through the lenses of Axel Honneth's well-known theory of recognition. Although the category of "recognition" does not have a clear semantic determination and has a plurality of usages, since its various meanings depend on the specific moral perspective adopted each time<sup>17</sup>, one could understand it as an ideal intersubjective condition allowing the individual to acquire the basic skills necessary for a free self-determination. Rooted in Fichte's and Hegel's dissertations on the unfolding of self-consciousness, the concept of "recognition" is declined by Honneth in several forms of historical realisations in relation to three social spheres, namely, love, rights, and social esteem. These are linked to attitudes of

<sup>13</sup> V. Gauri, J. Sonderholm, *Global poverty: four normative positions*, in "Journal of Global Ethics", vol. 8, n. 2-3, 2012, p. 197.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 202.

<sup>15</sup> T. Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK 2002, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> T. Pogge, *Severe Poverty as a Human Rights Violation*, in T. Pogge (a cura di), *Freedom From Poverty as a Human Right: Who Owes What to the Very Poor?*, Oxford University Press for UNESCO, New York 2007, pp. 11-54.

<sup>17</sup> A. Honneth, *Recognition or Redistribution? Changing Perspectives on the Moral Order of Society*, in "Theory, Culture & Society", vol. 18, n. 2-3, 2001, p. 45 ff.

trust in oneself, self-respect, and self-esteem respectively<sup>18</sup>. Intersubjective relationships through which recognition takes place thereby represent a condition of possibility for one's own autonomy as well as for a meaningful and "good" life. Social criticism, according to this view, should then be directed at those socio-economic conditions that prevent mutual recognition among social actors, and, consequently, self-realisation through trust in oneself, self-respect and self-esteem, i.e. human "flourishing"<sup>19</sup>. Contemporary social conflicts are in this way conceived as "struggles for recognition", thus acknowledging the important role played by social movements in realising human "development", beyond distributive issues concerning political power or economic resources<sup>20</sup>.

A recent collection of essays adopts this "recognition" framework in dealing with the topic of poverty, extending it to the global dimension and having the experiences of suffering lived by billions of people all over the world as starting point<sup>21</sup>. The main thesis is that "global poverty is unjust because those people living in poverty are severely misrecognized and this distorts the unfolding of their personal autonomy"<sup>22</sup>. The focus is on the individual living conditions of people living in misery, deprived of the three basic forms of recognition, i.e. love, rights, and social esteem. As Schweiger argues,

First, poverty disrupts families and relationships [...] Second, poverty makes it impossible to execute rights, whereby people living in poverty do not experience the respect they are entitled to and that they need in order to fully understand themselves as rational agents [...] Third, poverty is a state of unfreedom and forced dependency.<sup>23</sup>

He nevertheless does not forget to consider the structural and institutional dimensions of poverty dynamics. Analysed is then also what he calls the "global recognition order"<sup>24</sup>, namely, political processes of misrecognition taking place at the intersection between international institutions and states. In Schweiger's words, "misrecognition is made possible, yet in many cases induced, by institutional failure and the absence of proper institu-

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, p. 48 ff.

<sup>19</sup> R. Jaeggi, R. Celikates, *Sozialphilosophie: Eine Einführung*, Verlag C. H. Beck, München 2017, p. 67 ff.

<sup>20</sup> A. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1996.

<sup>21</sup> G. Schweiger (a cura di), *Poverty, Inequality and the Critical Theory of Recognition*, Springer, Cham 2020.

<sup>22</sup> G. Schweiger, *Introduction*, in G. Schweiger (a cura di), *Poverty, Inequality and the Critical Theory of Recognition*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, pp. 9-11.

<sup>24</sup> Ivi, p. 4.

tions of recognition”<sup>25</sup>. Even though he acknowledges that this perspective does not allow for an analysis of the structural causes of global poverty, he sticks to it even when discussing the international economic order, thus failing to have a comprehensive view of the phenomenon.

My thesis is that both Singer’s and Pogge’s perspectives, as well as the recognition approach, can certainly motivate a critical enquiry on the issue of global poverty, but they nonetheless lose sight of the primary objective of a critique of the institutional – i.e. political-economic – conditions of global poverty. Not that contemporary critical theory has put more effort into structuring such criticism. Even modern-day critical theorists, like Jürgen Habermas or Rainer Forst, have overlooked the issue of structural global poverty, settling for Kantian-type discourses either on the global political order or on international justice. It is up to a renewed critical theory to put these issues back in the spotlight.

### **§3 Recognising the existence of political economy**

The idea according to which misery “is not the consequence of unbridled capitalism, but of a capitalism that has been bridled in just the wrong way”<sup>26</sup>, namely through heavy legal regulations, has become so dominant in the public debate that even some critics of the capitalist system do not even think at it as a possible concurrent cause of mass impoverishment. That is why, as Schweickart makes clear, the connection between capitalism and global poverty is a question never taken up systematically by Singer, Sen or Pogge: capitalism therefore turns out to be a veritable elephant in the room<sup>27</sup>. It is curious to note that the authors analysed above recognise for themselves that their approach is incomplete and insufficient. Schweiger admits, for instance, that it is “a serious shortcoming that recognition theory, which understands itself as a critical theory, has yet to aim for a thorough understanding of the causes, effects and alleviation of poverty that are certainly produced and sustained by modern capitalism”<sup>28</sup>. In this way, he reveals his purpose of bringing “recognition theory closer to the material and economic reality of modern capitalism and the reality of the billions of people living in poverty and suffering from it”<sup>29</sup>. Honneth’s focus on the subjective experiences of social agents, be they

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> R. Hausmann, *Does Capitalism Cause Poverty?*, Project Syndicate 2015 [<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/does-capitalism-cause-poverty-by-ricardo-hausmann-2015-08>], accessed 28 August 2023.

<sup>27</sup> D. Schweickart, *Global Poverty*, cit., p. 479.

<sup>28</sup> G. Schweiger, *Introduction*, cit., p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

experiences of suffering, injustice, or lack of recognition, also discards any analysis of capitalism as an institutional condition that contributes to the establishment of poverty. Hence, Honneth does not explain the origins of economic injustice but just provides a theoretical framework for understanding the *subjective experience* of economic injustice. His work contains no systematic explanation of the causes of the phenomenon of poverty. Nevertheless, as Emmanuel Renault claims, “it is clear that, on its own, a theory of recognition is incapable of producing a theory of capitalism, but it never intended to do that anyway”<sup>30</sup>. Instead, as Deranty writes, it is meant to “complement, rather than replace, a structural critique of political economy”, as it adds “the critique of pathologies from the experiential perspective to the structural analysis”<sup>31</sup>.

One can accept and even endorse this perspective, as it lays the foundations for a critical-philosophical investigation on forms of life impeding the practical realisation of the normative ideal of human emancipation, although from a subjective point of view. Anyway, a thorough investigation on poverty must not dismiss the socio-economic order of capitalist society. As Fraser has rightly shown, moral and cultural claims, such as those relating to recognition, have to be related to the economic dimension, as many of the lived experiences of injustice have their roots in the global systems of production and exchange<sup>32</sup>. From a transformative point of view, struggles for recognition, to be successful, must take into account the structural processes that generate injustice and misrecognition, and thus require an understanding of the dynamics of contemporary global capitalism. As Fraser argues against Honneth’s perspective, the guiding aim of critical theory should be “to investigate how precisely institutionalized patterns of cultural value interact with capitalist economic dynamics”, and to understand how this generates phenomena like “maldistribution and misrecognition”<sup>33</sup>, or, I would add, poverty.

Moreover, “every Hegel must have his Marx”<sup>34</sup>. The capitalist structure must be recalled in order to avoid falling into the fallacy of idealism.

<sup>30</sup> E. Renault, *The Experience of Injustice: A Theory of Recognition*, Columbia University Press, New York 2019, p. 116.

<sup>31</sup> J.-P. R. Deranty, *Critique of political economy and contemporary critical theory: a defence of Honneth’s theory of recognition*, in H.-C. Schmidt am Busch, C. Zurn (a cura di), *The Philosophy of Recognition: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Lexington Books, Lanham MD 2010, p. 296.

<sup>32</sup> N. Fraser, A. Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, Verso Books, London/New York 2003, p. 215 ff.

<sup>33</sup> Ivi, p. 218.

<sup>34</sup> David A. Borman, *Labour, Exchange and Recognition: Marx Contra Honneth*, in “Philosophy & Social Criticism”, vol. 35, n. 8, 2009, p. 935.

Honneth's inability to provide a view of capitalist dynamics because of his rejection of any economic determinism makes his commitment to the goals of critical theory – of which he is moreover considered one of the living most prominent exponents – questioned<sup>35</sup>. If Thompson denounces the actual “domestication” of critical theory, which explicitly neglects its Freudian and Marxian origins, Harris highlights that critical theory has become neo-idealist and conservative, no more concerned by emancipatory trajectories<sup>36</sup>. From a political point of view, the recognition approach not only dismisses any qualitative transformation of the capitalist system, but compromises with market logics, as these are considered able to “produce healthy recognition relationships”<sup>37</sup> in Honneth's *Freedom's Right*. However, these also generate extreme poverty. How, then, can we conceive of a renewed critical theory of global poverty, one that takes up the original theoretical insights?

#### §4 Welcome back, capitalism!

Poverty is a founding and unavoidable element of the capitalist system. I contrast the idea according to which poverty can “only be explained by causes decreed to be outside of economic logic, such as population growth or policy errors”, and certify that “the relation of poverty to the very process of accumulation is dismissed by conventional economic theory”<sup>38</sup>. I assume that “there are no deserving poor, and people living in poverty are not responsible for their condition”, and that poor people can be considered “victims of interlocking practices and structures of capitalistic production and administration from the local to the global level”<sup>39</sup>.

Since “critical theorists were probably hasty in dismissing Marx's contention that poverty is endemic to capitalism”<sup>40</sup>, I will follow Fraser's suggestion to regain a wide-ranging theory of capitalism<sup>41</sup>. Against a “black box” view of the economy, I argue for a critical social theory that does not

<sup>35</sup> Ivi, p. 947.

<sup>36</sup> M. J. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory*, Rowman & Littlefield, London 2016; N. Harris, *Critical theory and social pathology. The Frankfurt School beyond recognition*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2022, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> N. Harris, *Critical theory and social pathology. The Frankfurt School beyond recognition*, cit., p. 56.

<sup>38</sup> S. Amin, *World Poverty, Pauperization and Capital Accumulation*, in “Monthly Review”, vol. 55, n. 5, 2003.

<sup>39</sup> G. Schweiger, *Introduction*, cit., p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> D. Ingram, *Critical Theory and Global Development*, cit., p. 682.

<sup>41</sup> N. Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do About It*, Verso Books, London/New York 2022.



dismiss political economy, all while avoiding the pitfall of economism. As Jaeggi highlights, “part of the tendency to abandon the topic of capitalism comes from this ‘fear of economism’”, with contemporary political and legal theory being more concerned with “questions of misrecognition, status hierarchy, ecology, and sexuality”<sup>42</sup>. In sum, it has forgotten “how capitalism is a system that operates through exploitation, oppression and unpaid-for wealth appropriation”<sup>43</sup>.

#### §4.1 A global reserve army of labour

First, capitalism requires a certain amount of unemployment to foster competition between workers and keep wages low. This rate of unemployment is considered “natural” by neoclassical economics. Unemployment also functions as a disciplinary mechanism and guarantees the existence of cheap labour. Ingram highlights how,

Small producers, shop owners, and subsistence farmers [...] join the ranks of the unemployed, or if they are lucky, find employment in low-paying sweatshops. [...] thanks to a very large and growing number of the world’s unemployed in the Southern Hemisphere, multinational retailers at the top of the “food chain” can squeeze local subcontractors below them to offer their services for the cheapest price possible, setting one against the other in a desperate rush to the bottom, where the lowliest laborer who is willing to work for less resides.<sup>44</sup>

So “not only have we not resolved the paradox of wrenching poverty within countries of astonishing wealth, but as capitalism has become truly global, the national pattern has reproduced itself on a global scale”<sup>45</sup>. Indeed, if one turns their gaze to low-income countries, one can see that more than 45% of the population lives with less than \$2.15 a day and 64% of it lives in slums<sup>46</sup>.

Karl Marx put the processes of competition among workers and of wage struggle at the centre of his analysis of the relations of production and of class consciousness. ‘As’ he writes in *Capital*, “capitalist production requires for its unrestricted activity an industrial reserve army” in-

<sup>42</sup> N. Fraser, R. Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK 2018, pp. 7-8.

<sup>43</sup> B. Selwyn, *The Struggle for Development*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> D. Ingram, *Critical Theory and Global Development*, cit., p. 682.

<sup>45</sup> D. Schweickart, *Global Poverty*, cit., p. 480.

<sup>46</sup> Source: World Bank (<https://data.worldbank.org/income-level/low-income>). Accessed 27 August 2023.

dependent of demographic limits<sup>47</sup>. Borrowed from Friedrich Engels, the expression “industrial reserve army” simply denotes “the mass of workers who are willing (or impelled) to sell their labor-power but who don’t find any buyers”<sup>48</sup>. Even though the extension of production requires more labour-power (the “employment effect of accumulation”), an increase in productivity leads on the contrary to a decrease in demand for labour-power (the “labor redundancy effect of rising productivity”)<sup>49</sup>. Due to technological development and centralisation, capital develops at “a much quicker rate” than the means of employment<sup>50</sup>. Hence the “constant transformation of a part of the working population into unemployed or semi-employed ‘hands’” as a necessary “condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production”<sup>51</sup>. That is why, following the assumption of an ever-growing reserve army, “capitalism with full employment is always an exception”<sup>52</sup>. Marx concludes that

the greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the greater the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productivity of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army [...] Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, the torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation at the opposite pole, i.e. on the side of the class that produces its own product as capital.<sup>53</sup>

Concerning relative surplus population, Marx distinguishes between poor workers and *Lumpenproletariat*, including only the latter in the sphere of pauperism. Summarising,

The lumpenproletariat – consisting of the unemployed, the criminals and other extremely poor individuals – ensures that there is always a workforce willing to accept low wages. Unemployment and job insecurity mean that there is always a “reserve army of labor” able and willing to take their place if workers insist on too high wages.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>47</sup> K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, Penguin Books, London 1976, p. 788.

<sup>48</sup> M. Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital*, Monthly Review Press, New York 2004, p. 125.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, cit., p. 781.

<sup>51</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 786, 784.

<sup>52</sup> M. Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital*, cit., p. 126.

<sup>53</sup> K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, cit., pp. 798, 799.

<sup>54</sup> J. Lönnroth, *6 Marx and his followers on poverty*, in M. Lundahl, D. Rauhut, N. Hatti (a cura di), *Poverty in the History of Economic Thought: From Mercantilism to Neoclassical Economics*, Routledge, London/New York 2022, p. 89.

Patnaik and Patnaik point out that, in reality, capitalism

has always used two reserve armies of labour and not one: one of these located within the metropolis, which, as Marx discussed, has served to “discipline” the workers who are directly employed by capital; the other one located within the periphery, which has served to keep down the money wages/incomes of those engaged in producing goods for the capitalist sector, and also to keep them “disciplined”.<sup>55</sup>

Between these two armies, only the former “can strictly be called a reserve army”, while the latter is simply a massive labour reserve “whose disciplining role for the workers directly employed by capital in the metropolis can at best be an imperfect one”, as its components lack the basic skills required by the job market in the “metropolies”<sup>56</sup>.

## §4.2 Primitive accumulation as ongoing expropriation

In addition to unavoidable unemployment, Ingram adds the threats of domestic overproduction and underconsumption, which push economic actors to invest in foreign markets, provoking the dismantlement of local agriculture and industry. He also mentions the “increase in global temperatures [which] will bring in its train more extreme weather events, flooding, and desertification that will disproportionately harm the world’s poorest”<sup>57</sup>. As a matter of fact, a recent World Bank report estimates hundreds of millions of people to be pushed into poverty in the next years because of the impact of climate change<sup>58</sup>.

Harriss-White indicates many other ways in which capitalism creates poverty: the persistence of small-scale, unregulated petty production through familiar, informal labour; the commodification of service labour; the growing levels of private consumption; the effects of damaging commodity and by-product consumption, e.g. weapons or nuclear waste, which could damage and incapacitate human bodies; the pauperising dependent status of unemployable people (e.g. people with disabilities); and the marginalisation of social enemies<sup>59</sup>. She finally

<sup>55</sup> U. Patnaik, P. Patnaik, *A Theory of Imperialism*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016, p. 50.

<sup>56</sup> Ivi, p. 51.

<sup>57</sup> D. Ingram, *Critical Theory and Global Development*, cit., p. 683.

<sup>58</sup> World Bank, *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune*, Washington, DC 2020, pp. 27, 138 ff.

<sup>59</sup> B. Harriss-White, *Poverty and Capitalism*, in “Economic and Political Weekly”, vol. 41, n. 13, 2006, pp. 1241-1246.

adds another one, which is dispossession of labour and land, the so-called “primitive accumulation”.

Introduced by Marx at the end of volume one of *Capital*, the category of “primitive” or “original accumulation” (*ursprüngliche Akkumulation*) defines the historic rise of capitalism as a process of separation of direct producers from their means of production. In other words, it is the violent dispossession or expropriation of land, labour and human beings perpetrated by emergent capitalists with the backing of political institutions. It represents the “pre-history of capital”, when peasants were “suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labour market as free, unprotected and rightless proletarians”<sup>60</sup>. Together with environmental crises and political violence, land grabbing and the impoverishment of independent agricultural producers have engendered massive migrations to urban centres, thus generating the “planet of slums” excellently described by Mike Davis<sup>61</sup>.

It was Rosa Luxemburg who first conceived primitive accumulation not only as a historical process at the origin of capitalism, but rather as a systematic feature of it. To emphasize the ongoing “persistence of the predatory practices of ‘primitive’ or ‘original’ accumulation”<sup>62</sup>, David Harvey suggests instead talking of “dispossession”, which reveals itself through various phenomena like slavery, financialisation, privatisation<sup>63</sup>. Like Harvey, who sees expropriation as an ongoing process present in contemporary capitalism, and an essential feature of it, Fraser conceives of this source of accumulation as a background condition of possibility of the capitalist social order. Preferring the term “expropriation”, Fraser defines primitive accumulation as what lies behind exploitation in the Marxian sense and renders it possible<sup>64</sup>. She identifies two epistemic shifts in Marx’s discourse. One is from exchange to production and from formally free labour to exploitation, corresponding to the shift from political economy to its critique. The other is from production to primitive

<sup>60</sup> K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, cit., pp. 875, 876.

<sup>61</sup> M. Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso Books, London/New York 2006.

<sup>62</sup> D. Harvey, *The ‘New’ Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession*, in “Socialist Register”, vol. 40, 2004, p. 74.

<sup>63</sup> More precisely, it includes “the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; conversion of various forms of property rights – common, collective, state, etc. – into exclusive private property rights; suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative, indigenous, forms of production and consumption; colonial, neo-colonial and imperial processes of appropriation of assets, including natural resources; monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; slave trade; and usury, the national debt and ultimately the credit system” (D. Harvey, *The ‘New’ Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession*, cit., p. 74).

<sup>64</sup> N. Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, cit., p. 13.

accumulation, from exploitation to expropriation as a hidden but necessary background of the former. The link of such “expropriation” with poverty is explicit:

The expropriated subjects may be rural or indigenous communities in the capitalist periphery – or they may be members of subject or subordinated groups in the capitalist core. They may end up as exploited proletarians, if they’re lucky – or, if not, as paupers, slum dwellers, sharecroppers, “natives”, or slaves, subjects of ongoing expropriation outside the wage nexus. The confiscated assets may be labor, land, animals, tools, mineral or energy deposits – but also human beings, their sexual and reproductive capacities, their children and bodily organs.<sup>65</sup>

It is now evident how, in addition to unemployment, expropriation can also be considered a way through which capitalism fosters mass poverty.

## Conclusions

Highlighting the link between the capitalist system and poverty does not mean that “poverty is only created as a result of economic processes, or that capitalism does not create material wealth for working people as well as for capitalists”<sup>66</sup>. Nor that poverty does not appear in non-capitalist forms of production, or that the ambitious goals set by international organisations like the United Nations or the World Bank are not worthy aspiration. But the picture is not as rosy as we are told: indeed, provided one looks at capitalist accumulation in the global context, “Marx’s prediction of the accumulation of wealth at one pole, and of misery and impoverishment at the other, turns out to have been entirely correct”<sup>67</sup>.

The present contribution hopes to have shown how limited would be addressing the issue of poverty through the lens of intersubjectivity, as Honneth and Singer do, because its causes are more structural than usually thought. Its solution must then be structural too. Mere recognition in terms of love, rights and social esteem or charitable initiatives on a global scale would not be enough to solve the problem. Denouncing it from the universalist point of view of human rights, as Pogge does, is equally ineffective, since one claims to solve the problem by remaining within the system

<sup>65</sup> N. Fraser, *Expropriation and Exploitation in Racialized Capitalism: A Reply to Michael Dawson*, in “Critical Historical Studies”, vol. 3, n. 1, 2016, p. 167.

<sup>66</sup> B. Harriss-White, *Poverty and Capitalism*, cit., p. 1241.

<sup>67</sup> U. Patnaik, *Capitalism and the Production of Poverty*, in “Social Scientist”, vol. 40, n. 1/2, 2012, p. 5.

that generates it. Following Fama, their perspectives could be characterised as “metaphysics of poverty”, that is “a system of thought in which the gaze is systematically diverted from the social structures that produce and reproduce poverty itself to those subjects who are victims of them”<sup>68</sup>. Indeed, the theoretical approaches of those scholars ideologically suggest that poor people «inexplicably *lack* the means of subsistence, whereas in fact they have been *deprived* of those means»<sup>69</sup>. None of them strikes at the root of the problem, which lies in the very form of the dominant economic and social order. Poverty is a systemic problem, in need of a no less systemic solution.

Moreover, if it is true that critical theory, as originally conceived by Horkheimer, should not only comprehend a social reality which undermines the preconditions of human self-realisation and criticise it, but also construct a viable practical alternative, by identifying the actors and the modalities of social transformation, this is only possible if the root causes of the problem are clear. Contemporary critical theory has predominantly abandoned the transformative side of criticism and embraced the normative ideals of the existing order<sup>70</sup>. Recovering the tools of the critique of political economy – as I tried to do with reference to the categories of “unemployment” and “expropriation” – and adopting a structural approach would then both strengthen the radicality of social criticism and finally reconnect critical theory to social movements. Critical theory would thus be able to answer, again, the pressing questions of our time, which affect living people, be they expropriated peasants, working poors, homeless people or slum-dwellers.

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<sup>68</sup> M. Fama, *Il governo della povertà ai tempi della (micro)finanza*, Ombre Corte, Verona 2017, p. 19.

<sup>69</sup> N. Fraser, *Injustice at Intersecting Scales: On ‘Social Exclusion’ and the ‘Global Poor’*, in “European Journal of Social Theory”, vol. 13, n. 3, 2010, p. 369.

<sup>70</sup> See S. Kouvélakis, *La critique défaite: émergence et domestication de la Théorie critique: Horkheimer, Habermas, Honneth*, Éditions Amsterdam, Paris 2019; M. J. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory*, cit.; N. Harris, *Critical theory and social pathology. The Frankfurt School beyond recognition*, cit.

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