

How to Design Housing for the Poor?

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Abstract

In the second half of the 19th century, poverty is above all an urban problem. How do the first modern urban planners imagine the struggle against poverty, and can ‘wealth be in the service of the workers and the people’? Primarily using two Reports, John Locke’s 1697 *The Report on the Poor* and *A Philosophical Review of Poverty* (Wolff, Lamb, Zur-Szpiro) from 2015, I intend to explain and determine relative and absolute poverty, ghetto, the dark ghetto (Shelby), the suburbs, slums, ‘worker cities’ (Cités Ouvrières), the ‘social palace’, etc.

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What is poverty and how could we design housing for the poor today? Are the Roma, the *sans-papier* or migrants poor because they have no permanent dwelling place? Is it possible to design housing for those who travel or those who do not wish to dwell in one place or those who dwell together only temporarily? Who are we, the ones who dwell without the poor? If someone *has* an apartment (what would 'having' an apartment mean, and does 'having' have anything to do with dwelling?), does this mean that their poverty has ceased to be? All these questions show, perhaps, that poverty no longer resides among those all too rarely mentioned as the poor – workers, who usually have unstable and temporary jobs but live in a given place. It is as if the category of worker with temporary residence, those who work 'under the table', which for a long time functioned as a pseudo 'stand in' for the poor worker of the 19th century, has been replaced with new figures of the precarious poor. What kinds of apartments do the precarious need and how should they dwell? Reading various texts in various languages regarding poverty and the poor, it is becoming clearer to me that war and violence above all create and consistently maintain a 'poor group' that is supposed to somewhere, somehow build something (such as a group of migrants working together, attempting, a long time ago, in Babylon, to incorporate). Or else they constitute a group that ought to be pushed out to the periphery of a city, placed outside a city (how can a million migrants build apartments for themselves in Germany? Where? Will this work be what turns them into German citizens?), or a group that becomes either dispersed or is compressed into a ghetto or a 'city of refuge', etc.¹ If this is indeed our main problem today, and if we put aside that what is going on with workers in China corresponds with the terrible conditions of life and work in the West in the 18th and 19th century, then these issues would belong to a single family designated by phrases such as 'social equality', 'poverty (relative or absolute)' or 'marginalized group'. The thematization of these problems at present, which Jonathan Wolff designates as *the task of 'real world political philosophy'* corresponds to what Marx in the *Grundrisse* (1858) (entirely consistent with the Rawlsian spirit) calls 'general intellect' (even in the German original the phrase is in English), that is, 'social practice' or 'real life process'. Before I return to Wolff, and then Engels (and his large text 'Zur Wohnungsfrage' from 1872), I should mention two, almost complementary pseudo-projects from different epochs that add to the problem of poverty something that is in our day and age always latently present.² The first is *Draft of a Representation, Containing a Scheme of Methods for the Employment of the Poor* (or *The Report on the Poor*) by John Locke from 1697,³ in which he seeks a profound reform of social life. The second is Hegel's consideration of poverty in the context of civil society that necessarily produces it (from his lectures on the philosophy of right).⁴ Locke is excited by the statistical analysis published by Gregory King in 1696, which showed a 25% rise in the number of poor, and that despite the *Act of Settlement* from 1662, 50% of the population was poor. In brief,

1 - At this year's Venice Biennale, the German pavilion carried an exhibit entitled 'Making Heimat' with the explanation that Germany hosted some 12 to 15 million Germans expelled immediately after World War II from other European countries where they lived before 1945. Urban settlement models from the fifties were offered as examples of solutions for current problems of resettling refugees in Germany. There is nothing cynical in today's refugees building their *Heimat* in Germany, given that this country has a shrinking population. The problem lies in demography still being strictly tied to sovereign states and not with Europe.

2 - Ostensibly, there is really nothing problematic about poverty in Adam Smith's or David Ricardo's liberal theory. In *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, for example, Smith reiterates the analysis of Mandeville (*Fable des abeilles* [Fable of the Bees], 1714), regarding

the necessity of great spending by the rich to ensure work for the poor. Ricardo, meanwhile, offers few arguments against poor laws and insists that they be entirely abolished.

3 - It is now possible to deliberately connect this Report or memorandum Locke writes in his capacity as Commissioner on the Board of Trade with something entirely different, but nevertheless concerns England: *A Philosophical Review of Poverty* (Wolff, Lamb, Zur-Szpiro, 2015), which appeared as part of anti-poverty strategy of the UK, financed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Joseph is the father of Seebohm Rowntree, the author of the famous *Poverty. A Study of Town Life*. Both father and son were Quakers.)

4 - John Rawls noted this passage in his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Rawls 2000: 345ff). He concludes that Hegel does not have

a solution for the problem of poverty or that it does not fit into his system (which, when it comes to Hegel, is in itself impossible and entirely paradoxical). Rawls there refers to a few pages from Allen Wood's book *Hegel's Ethical Thought*.

Locke is looking for a way to put to work vagrants and saboteurs, whose number, despite stricter penalties, was ever greater – because only those who work will eat, drink, be clothed and sheltered (the age at which both boys and girls begin their working lives at this time is fourteen).⁵ Locke is *de facto* inventing punishments and strategies for the successful functioning of workhouses, opening all over England at the time.

Just like Locke, Hegel will construct a kind of group identity for the poor (although not only for them), ascribing to them a dangerous, generally unknown and inexplicable role. What is significant is that Hegel recognizes that a) civil society excludes many others (not only women, for example), which is entirely unjustified and inexplicable: ‘The emergence of poverty is in general a consequence of civil society and on the whole arises necessarily out of it’ (Hegel, 1983b: 193).⁶ Further, he insists that b) charity is no solution to the problem of poverty, opposing to it the solution in place in Scotland, where they sought ‘to leave the poor to their fate and direct them to beg from the public’ (§ 245). c) Probably under the influence of Adam Smith, Hegel becomes a ‘real world political philosopher’, preferring social analyses he reads (mostly) in English books and newspapers, to his own speculative constructions. d) Hegel is perhaps the first to recognize that the poor are excluded ‘from the spiritual benefits of modern society, from education, even from the consolation of religion’. Finally, e) Hegel concludes, introducing the moral degradation of the poor, that no entity, not even the state can resolve this problem (Hegel takes it as axiomatic that the state is immanently present in civil society). Here is Hegel:

The poor man feels himself excluded and mocked by everyone, and this necessarily gives rise to an inner indignation. He is conscious of himself as an infinite, free being, and thus arises the demand that his external existence should correspond to this consciousness (Hegel 1983b: 195).

Poverty in itself does not reduce people to a rabble (*Pöbel*) [this is the passage quoted by Rawls]; a rabble is created only by the disposition associated with poverty, by inward rebellion against the rich, against society, against the government, etc. (§ 244)

The ‘rabble’ is characterized by ‘envy and hatred against all those who have something,’ as well as laziness and the right to live by the work of others. ‘The rabble is a dangerous [social] ill, because they have neither rights nor duties’ (Hegel, 1973: 322). Finally, Hegel reverses himself and relativizes the link of poverty and the rabble, insisting on an entirely new point: the ‘rabble [is] distinct from poverty; usually it is poor, but there are also rich rabble’ (Hegel, 1983a: 608).⁷ This last point of turning the rich into the rabble (for example, a kind of *nouveau riche* who has all the characteristics of a poor person ‘who hates all those who have something or have more than him’) could be an example of the transformation of absolute into relative poverty, which often depends only on context and comparison with others.⁸

5 - 'He who does not work - does not eat' is a cliché repeated by apostle Paul, the utopians, the Quaker John Bellers, Locke's contemporary, who reminds his readers that in China literally everyone works (the feeble-minded, the blind), etc.

6 - 'When there is great poverty, the capitalist finds many people who work for small wages, which increases his earnings; and this has the further consequences that smaller capitalists fall into poverty'. (Hegel 1983a: 610)

7 - Many of the lines quoted here have already been translated into English by Allen Wood.

8 - It is comparison with others that turns the poor into rabble, allowing them to be recognized or connect with those similar, and then potentially be categorized as part of a group whose constitution is never completed (for the rabble is never a group, but a mass of people that lives in

pre-corporate or pre-institutional space). There is a passage in *Leviticus Rabbah*, where the English translator, Jacob Neusner, attempts to differentiate a few characteristics of the poor: 'Seven names were given to him [the poor]: poor (*ani*), impoverished, despised, dispossessed, denuded, crushed, and lowly. 'Impoverished' because he desires everything. 'Despised' because he is held in contempt by everybody (...) 'Dispossessed' because he is disposed of all his property. 'Denuded' because he is denuded of all his property. 'Crushed' because he is crushed. He sees something to eat but does not eat it, sees something to drink but does not drink it. 'Lowly' because he is lower than anyone, like the lowest threshold'. (Neusner. 1997: 226-227) Cf. Shalom. 2011: 43-44.

Hegel's conceptual theater (to be sure, Hegel is not alone, I use him as an example) carries at least three quasi-opuses of problems always present in the case of 'poverty' and the poor. The first concerns the general problem of description and evidence of the existence of the poor and poverty, sometimes even testimony and experience of one's own indigence or poverty of others (as if poverty must be felt; or that, for example, the smell of a French or Russian vagrant is not the same; and the question of how to detect, explain, and produce motives for the construction of action or productive social action?).⁹ The second refers to differences, levels and gradations of poverty (a problem probably unwittingly opened by Seebohn Rowntree at the turn of the 20th century). The third refers to the group or pseudo-group of the poor. And only at this point does the issue of housing appear – the poor is such because of lack of dwelling or permanent residence (the politically correct acronym for the homeless in Paris is SDF, '*sans domicile fixe*' [without permanent residence]); but at the same time, the poor dwell huddled, in groups, together, in blocs. The study produced by Seebohn Rowntree and his associates in 1901¹⁰ includes two thirds of the population of York, or some 46,000 people. They excluded 'those individuals who were able to afford to employ a domestic servant' (such criteria make matters more complicated, since the proportion of the population of the Italian city of Udine, for example, in the same year who can employ a domestic servant is certainly much smaller than in York, which does not necessarily speak of poverty in Udine, but of culture of dwelling in York; and let me be upfront that I do not know what a 'culture of dwelling' would be). Rowntree's book, *Poverty. A Study of Town Life* shows that 20,000 people in York live in poverty, while 28% live in 'most serious poverty.' In the introduction, obviously written when the book was already finished, precisely because of its research result, the author explains:

As a primary object of my inquiry has been to ascertain not only the proportion of the population living in poverty, but the nature of that poverty, I have divided the population so living into two classes:

- a) Families whose total earnings are insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency. Poverty falling under this head I have described as 'primary' poverty;
- b) Families whose total earnings would be sufficient for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency were it not that some portion of them is absorbed by other expenditure, either useful or wasteful. Poverty falling under this head is described as 'secondary' poverty. (Rowntree, 1908: x)

This pair, 'primary' / 'secondary' poverty, which might have seemed entirely arbitrary a hundred years ago and refers to families and not individuals, has been transformed into the pair absolute / relative or extreme / intermediate (Hennie Lotter), and then further into subsistence / status

9 - Martha Nussbaum speaks of the significance of narration (mentioning Dickens, Thomas Hardy and others) in the course of presenting data, specifically in order to be 'inclined to think of the lives of the poor (especially, perhaps, the distant or foreign poor)'. (Nussbaum, 2012) For example in *Social Equality, Relative Poverty and Marginalized Groups*, when Wolff talks about his visit to the city of Katatura, 'a township built 5 miles outside Windhoek, the capital of Namibia', the information that 'Katatura' translates as 'the place we don't want to go' is more significant to the readership than any statistic (Wolf, 2015).

poverty?' (Rowntree, 1908: vii)

10 - In the introduction opening, Rowntree writes: 'My object in undertaking the investigation detailed in this volume was, if possible, to throw some light upon the conditions which govern the life of the wage-earning classes in provincial towns, and especially upon the problem of

poverty, etc. There are another two passages usually quoted to further complicate matters regarding ‘secondary’ poverty, and which serve to reconstruct poverty or create ‘a radical redescription of poverty’ (a phrase from Shaw, 1988: 27). The first passage is Peter Townsend’s 1979 definition of relative poverty.¹¹ The second is a famous sentence from Adam Smith in discussing the concept of necessities in *The Wealth of Nations*, probably first referred to in this context by Amartya Sen:

By necessities I understand not only commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but what ever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even the lowest order, to be without... Custom has rendered leather shoes a necessary of life in England. The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them. (Smith, 1776: 351-352)¹²

These examples are not always exactly aligned with the concept of poverty, nor do they correspond well with the intentions of Seeborn Rowntree (‘leather shoes’ in public are not dissimilar to the institution of ‘employ[ing] a domestic servant’). Still, they help in considering poverty as a certain impossibility of participation in the work of a group (a corporation) or simply be part of a group (status, custom). Here we reach the social exclusion of which Townsend speaks. Even if a poor man or woman, for example, participates or thinks he/she is participating in society or in a group, sub-group (Jo Wolff gives an example analogous to that of Smith, citing that citizens of Katutura, on the verge of hunger, nevertheless all have mobile phones), it still does not mean that this whole group is not socially excluded or marginalized.¹³ What is far more important, and this is certainly Jo Wolff’s effort, is to defend an elementary definition of poverty as low income compared to capability deprivation.¹⁴ I think that it is not only that poverty is more easily measured this way, but that income already implies the existence of membership and belonging to various groups – in other words, inclusion, connection with society and ties to others. It is not sufficient to have a mobile phone, hold it in hand, play games, and treat it as ‘equivalent to Adam Smith’s linen shirt’ (Jo Wolff). It is necessary to communicate, to speak, to write. Of course a mobile phone in the hands of someone on the streets of Katutura, or in destroyed cities of Afghanistan, is certainly an opportunity and a great chance for them to soon be on the border or a ship, on their way to Munich. If their action is not careful enough, and speech acts are not precise enough (producing and accepting responsibilities ‘with those who matter to him or to her’), the poor become migrants who could perhaps join the conglomeration of poor on the peripheries of large Western cities.¹⁵ Even though in this search for a better life, it is possible to see some elements of the first groupings and joint dwelling with members of one’s extended family for the sake of common work (i.e. the first forms of incorporating),¹⁶ it is certain that two hundred years after the identification

11 - It is often quoted by Wolff as well as others: 'Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies in which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities' (Townsend, 1979: 31). Shaw comments that 'The abolition of relative poverty seems, in principle, incapable of achievement. For as Townsend has argued, even if societies become wealthier and living standards rise accordingly, the relative poor will always be with us. Rising living standards will increase the proportion of the relative poor whose income does not permit access to all the goodies an

affluent society can provide for its citizenry'. (Townsend, 1979: 33)

12 - Cf. Sen 1983: 159. Commenting on this passage, Jo Wolff says: 'Relative poverty is a matter of not having the resources that will allow you to fit in' (Wolff. 2015: 9)

13 - In Pierre Bourdieu's famous book *La misère du monde*, whose great novelty consists in the poor speaking, in that they are interviewed by Bourdieu and his assistants (Wolff, De-Shalit, 2013: 54-55, also speak in detail of an interview with an anti-poverty officer), there are testimonies of a certain married couple Demoura (of Portuguese origin) who have lived a very long time in a small apartment in Paris, without any furniture or drapes, under 'conditions défavorises' (the French translation of 'disadvantaged'), with the state's help. They are happy in France and they consider themselves well integrated in

society. However, when they fall victim to quite rare and complicated illnesses, they suffer great injustices, and realize that it would be much better to have the French name Dupont, rather than Demoura (Bourdieu, 1993).

14 - In Chapter 3 (9-16) of *Philosophical Review of Poverty*, Wolff (along with Lamb and Zur-Szpiro) present a detailed review of Amartya Sen's position, while Chapter 5, 'Is poverty 'capability deprivation'?' (25-27) is ultimately a critique of Sen's position (Wolf, Lamb, Zur-Szpiro 2015). It seems to me that this redefinition of poverty is complementary to the strong efforts of Claudia Card for reconsideration and relativization of genocide, previously having to do with a great number of victims, now proclaimed to be acts that generally speaking destroy the entity of a group (for example, rape of women in civil war).

15 - Thirty or forty years ago,

it was possible to apply, and with a few strings pulled, receive (provided one had regular employment, on the books - which on the other hand one could not get without proof of residence, a basic trap immigrants often find themselves in) an HLM (*habitation à loyer modéré*) apartment on the periphery of Paris. The phrase exists since 1945, having taken over from the so called HBM (*habitation bon marché*), established in 1889 by contemporary hygienists and paternalists of the modern bourgeoisie of the Second Empire to prevent revolutionary outbreaks. Today it is very difficult to acquire such an apartment, with rent for a three-piece apartment some 600 euros (or a small one-piece apartment, 500 euros). Minimum guaranteed pay in France is set at 900 euros. Such apartments in France are not only for (active) workers, but also retired workers, disabled workers receiving payments from the state, in a word,

they are social apartments.

16 - Perhaps the best description of the medieval origin of the Joint Economic Household of the Family, that is, Household Communities Outside the Family come from Max Weber in his thesis *The History of Commercial Partnerships in the Middle Ages* (1889).

of the problem of poor conditions of life in poor and working class neighborhoods, such pseudo-joint dwelling still exists, and such neighborhoods are still erected.¹⁷

A hundred and fifty years ago, Engels, a master of description of cities and terrible life conditions (his descriptions of Manchester or Wuppertal are unforgettable), held before him a multitude of books and texts from various hygienists and so called bourgeois urbanists, a few manifests and appeals to the bourgeoisie,¹⁸ as well as books and texts of socialists such as Proudhon – all of whom he criticizes sharply for their ignorance and counter-revolutionary positions that workers dwelling could be radically improved.¹⁹ I will end here by listing a few problems, agreed upon and registered by all (without any major differences), and with a few suggestions that have of course never been fulfilled. In 1872 Engels finds (the reform by Haussmann [or, as he calls himself in his memoirs, *'artiste démolisseur'*] is already complete and known to all) that the workers have already been pushed out to the periphery, that smaller apartments are rare and expensive because the construction industry produces large apartments more profitably. Further, Engels (in what is at the time perhaps a unique position of a European intellectual, familiar with the conditions of social justice in countries across Europe) identifies the better position of the English worker (he speaks of England and the continent), all of which is insufficient since the capitalists are lying when promising to build new apartments, leaving aside the question of hygiene in workers' neighborhoods. Rather, they simply displace out of the city center the cesspools of disease, i.e., workers. (This, in any case, is how Engels defines Haussmann's strategy.) The extraordinary speed and development of capitalism (over the course of at most thirty years) has resulted in 1870 no longer having twenty or thirty families living a single house (something that will appear in the Soviet Union after the revolution), nor any more talk of fatigued workers deprived of sleep, working thirteen hours a day, or child labor and death.²⁰ Similarly, there are no more projects (some of which are indeed ingenious) of monstrously large social houses or blocks in which several thousand workers live and eat in common kitchens. There are not many optimistic protocols in 1872, but the difference from 30 years prior, it seems to me, far greater, than in the last 150 years. In 1872 there is still an almost unnatural enthusiasm that the mobilization of a large group of people which would destroy the few who rule was possible, just as it is possible – perhaps more interesting for us – to pass from one class (those who have nothing but their labor) into another. One great idea certainly speaks to this (although Engels calls it minimally positive, he allows himself to fantasize about it): that the solution to the housing question consists of each renter becoming the owner of his apartment, transferring the value difference between the initial cost of a house and its current market value to society.

From the point of view of movement of the population rendered precarious by war and poverty, taking place the last few years – completely

17 - The only alternative I would mention here, of which there certainly has not been enough written in English, which could potentially satisfy the social parameters of equality and productive social action, refers to the incredible engagement of Otto Neurath, in Vienna, immediately upon WWI. Neurath attempted to build settler communities, to unify urbanism with an organization of work and life. Two passages from his writing are as follows. 'The similarity of the apartment, the similarity of the building's parts (norms) is an expression of modesty, but also an expression of the sense for equality, which roots in both, fraternity and envy alike. Not one singular building is like the brick within a house. A new community is created from the class solidarity of the labor-forces'. And: 'A complex of low rise buildings with small gardens, which has not been born out of a collaborative cooperative

companionship's organization, is of similar lifelessness as a large Kamienica tenement Only via a life based on cooperative association will a new common life style emerge.' Cf. Hochhäusl, 2011: 146.

18 - Perhaps the most famous appeal to the bourgeoisie comes from Georges Picot in *Un devoir sociale et les logements d'ouvriers*, in which he calls for a struggle against socialism in order to achieve something better still than socialism and to restore the family, custom and life of workers in a healthy and moral household (Picot, 1885).

19 - Proudhon (for Engels this is probably a forerunner of Rawls) is one who seeks 'eternal justice', who speaks only of justice... *Fiat justitia, pereat mundus!*, writes Engels - may there be justice, even if the world burns. Cf. Engels, 1872.

20 - Only twenty years prior, in *Des classes ouvrières en France*

pendant l'année 1848, Jérôme-Antoine Blanqui describes workers' housing in Rouen and Lille and carries a report by a famous doctor from Lille, Gosselet, saying that 21,000 children are stillborn in France each year, and another 20,700 die by the age of five (Blanqui, 1849).

uncertain of place of residence, poverty, work or ownership over real estate – the concept of dwelling, apartment or group living have completely changed. The new concept of design or project certainly depends on these changes.

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