POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN EUROPE: PERCEPTIONS AND EVOLUTION OF CONCEPTS

Gilles Rouet
Professeur des universités
GEPECS, Paris Descartes, Sorbonne Paris Cité
Chaire Jean Monnet ad personam

Abstract
The uses of the term “social exclusion” have been increasing from the late 1970s, particularly in France, and several approaches have followed: the "excluded" that must identify the determinants for people at risk for whom it is to prevent exclusion. French sociology, in particular, has renewed this field, Robert Castel Vincent Gaulejac, often calling into question the effectiveness and legitimacy of social policy.

Across the EU, it is encouraging member states to develop social inclusion policies, certainly, with the principle of subsidiarity, as close to the local, but the trend must continue and must break with social exclusion considered individually with answers almost always purely economic. It is about integrating a duty of solidarity in our active European citizenship under construction.

But perception of social exclusion and poverty is different from one to other side of our Europe …

Key words: Social Exclusion, Social Inclusion, Social Policies, Geopolitics of Exclusion
The “Social Exclusion” and its uses

The term "social exclusion" began to be used in France in the 1970s, in the frame of an important debate and with the evolution of new policies about social integration and solidarity, in a general context of improvement of living conditions and changing needs.

Rene Lenoir, Deputy Minister for Social Action does not use that phrase in his book *Les exclus* (excluded) who described the "other France", the France of those unfit: "Saying that someone is unsuitable, marginal or asocial is simply stated that in industrialized and urbanized society of the late twentieth century, this person due to physical or mental, behaviour or lack of psychological training, is unable to provide for needs, or requires constant care, or represents a danger to others, or is segregated either by his own decision or that of the community". These various forms of maladjustment may be characterized by a certain determinism and this people are often victimized.

The maladjustment would be almost natural: "The question is whether the phenomenon of maladjustment is not inevitable in any complex society, and if this 'other France' is reducible. In this case, what price should we put, what are the choices imposed to a policy limit, failing to eliminate this mismatch".

Rene Lenoir develops an explanation (more than a theory) of maladjustment, especially in introducing social maladjustment and then develops a proactive policy to prevent and redress through specific measures such different mismatches; some even evoke a sense of social “disability”, physical or mental.

This concept of exclusion is not similar than the concept developed by Michel Foucault in the years 1960-70, which describes the process of historical evolution of societal structures and exclusion of groups such as lepers or madmen: it is not then the person himself who is excluded from its origin. Note that poverty is an element of context, one of the determinants of maladjustment, and therefore of the exclusion, but the linking of the two terms is not so obvious.

At this period, the term “social exclusion” is not used yet but it evokes the “social withdrawal” which means an essentially economic poverty that should be eliminated by economic growth and a new welfare policy.

However, a few years later, from the mid-1970s, the term “social exclusion” is often used by politicians as by researchers, with an inflation of this use, especially to refer to people supported by social insurance programs or to those who are not, in France, recipients of unemployment benefits. Thus, gradually, it will be no more “social maladjustment” but an extension of this logic of exclusion that meant, originally, mental and physical disability, suicidal people, elderly, abused children, young “dropouts” people, adult offenders, drug addicts and single mothers (who become after “single parents” families…).

Representations change, the society discovers and recognizes the existence of the poor, of the “new poor”, characterized by weakness of their economic resources and impairments of sociability, in employment, education, housing, health, etc.

Also in France, continuing Rene Lenoir, the ATD movement defines the “Fourth World” from a very different conception of the concept of social exclusion. The Priest Joseph Wresinski, in particular, provides a cultural dimension to this social exclusion.

---

1 René Lenoir was Deputy Minister from 1974 to 1978, during the government of Jacques Chirac (1974-76) and Raymond Barre; under the Presidency of Valery Giscard D’Estaing. He tried to raise political awareness and public opinion to the problems of “excluded” and he passed a law in 1975 for persons with disabilities.


Indeed, culture is built from the resources given to a person to understand the society that surrounds it and to play a social role; there is therefore a culture of social exclusion. With this cultural dimension, the fundamental exclusion becomes the exclusion of the rights that installs the people in a particular and permanent state. Then assistance or support, including economic, are not enough. It becomes necessary to create new conditions of life, of education. This evolution of the concept is very important as the exclusion is no more considered individually, and therefore may be limited by measurement and social policies, to highlight a political and collective dimension, of solidarity and citizenship.

The INSEE, the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, then introduce the concept of “market exclusion”\(^5\): then the exclusion would be dependent on measurable variables, allowing government to demonstrate statistical thresholds of exclusion level. This model has been used primarily for the labour market and the INSEE defines an “unemployment exclusion”\(^6\) as a form of unemployment that leads to permanent exclusion from the labour market, especially for older workers or unskilled. This very long-term unemployment leads to a deterioration of work skills, discouragement and finally abandoned even any job search. This “market exclusion” describes some social consequences and installs them in neoliberal market logic. This is an “instrumentalisation” of the concept of exclusion that is then reduced to a variable, a threshold, unrelated to the historical circumstances or to the political and economic situation and processes.

Nevertheless, the term "social exclusion" gradually becomes part of the social and political daily, beyond the simple logic of economics of poverty. The question of social rights becomes then predominant. Housing rights, health, retirement, work, education: all basic duties that may be guaranteed by law or by the constitution. Fight against exclusion is then to defend and create social rights.

This expression is enshrined in its use in the public space and, at the same time, social exclusion becomes a process, first with the research of sociologists. Robert Castel defines it as a process of “disaffiliation”\(^7\). After the two classical approaches of marginality and exclusion, with poverty or dependency, this new approach is transverse because the objective is to understand the situation of persons who are dismissed from the circuit of ordinary social interaction. With this logic of process, it seems possible to reverse the dynamics of exclusion before trying to fight the effects that are sometimes irreversible. Robert Castel defines the “areas of vulnerability”, for example, a divorce can cause emotional fragility, or a worker has no longer a steady job but earns precarious jobs, or a youth leaves the school without any qualifications and attempts to integrate the labour market. These people can then be drawn into a process of “disaffiliation”, and could be marginalized if they have not, in particular, in the context of a family solidarity. This approach, overall, is also that of Serge Paugam who goes one step further with its “process of social disqualification”\(^8\).

---


The marginality is thus a direct consequence (or choice) of a refusal of the assistantship, the humiliation caused by assimilation to a sub-category of citizen that causes a disruption of social ties. The state of poverty disqualifies and causes a feeling of social uselessness. Thus, the disqualification of Serge Paugam leads to a sort of reverse of identity building, people then forge specific behaviours for the institutional support, making them ineffective. Social exclusion is a social anomic that fits well in building a culture of exclusion, in particular lifestyles, installed in deviance or dangerousness to the society. Consequently, social exclusion can cause a threat and justify policies of insertions, integration or assimilation. But with this analysis, the programs and the policies for fighting against exclusion cause institutionalization of the poor; the situation of poverty can be exacerbated and sometimes and simultaneously could institutionalize a “culture of poverty”. The analysis of Robert Castel leads to a conclusion much less pessimistic since the disaffiliation does not necessarily lead to social exclusion remains an extreme case.

A major social problem is obviously related to the problem of building a collective identity based on community, regional or national cohesion. The fragmentation of society, this “social fracture” involves new questions about how to maintain relationships in a society where exclusion is found unable to be easily defined. Moreover, how can society accept a loss and increasing its human resources (and therefore financial) consequences of the exclusion of much of its members?

The term "social exclusion", by dint of having become popular, lost in precision and became bound “polysemic”. A quick reading of the media and of the political speeches in recent years reinforces this impression, if only by the richness of semantic relationships or expressions used synonymously insert, insecurity, vulnerability, marginalization, social discrimination, social segregation, integration, etc. Nevertheless, our universalism about human rights leads to widely dominant characterization: exclusion is primarily a serious malfunction of the society. The forms of exclusion are recognized as multiple, which now prohibits the focus on the “poor” or the “crazy” and the exclusion is not only a social statement but also a process. This last aspect involves every citizen in the logic of exclusion as there is no absolute protection against social exclusion against this part of a destiny (who may become excluded, who is excluded around me?).

The uses of “social exclusion” referring to dominant dimensions, such as poverty (in terms of lack of resources), labour (exclusion of market of labour), education, housing, health… but the situation, especially the last two years, almost trivialize a new multi-dimensionality and the theme of exclusion has enlarged urban exclusion, exclusion of any form of expression, digital exclusion with social networks, ethnic exclusion, etc.

Definitely, this year is, therefore, at the European Union, the year of social exclusions and not of social exclusion, the plural valid the evolution of the uses and of the concepts, the representations and the policies.

European Policies: From the Struggle against the Exclusion to Incentives to Social Inclusion

These ideological and societal changes will indeed influence policies in words as in acts, but in quite different ways.

In France, René Lenoir, as we have seen, passed a law voted in 1975 that installs the issue of disability in a context of support by associations, thus a new kind of solidarity that transcends the role of the state, which fail, therefore, for the guarantee of fundamental rights. In 1987, Joseph Wresinski publishes its report “Extreme poverty and social economic insecurity” in the framework of the Economic and Social Council, and the fight against social exclusion then became a political priority for the government of Michel Rocard. The report is use as a basis for the establishment of Minimum Integration Revenue (RMI) in 1988. This allocation is then presented as a means of avoiding the threat to social cohesion in France, especially in the context of the new problems related to continuing unemployment, in new or old “ghettos”, with the development of new delinquencies, the changes in family structure but also the bankruptcy of the ideal of “prevention” developed during the 1970s.

In 1995, Jacques Chirac popularized the term “social fracture” that he uses in his campaign speech for the presidential election. His speeches about exclusion and its consequences helped to develop a new use of these concepts in politics until the 2000s. The concepts of poverty and unemployment are now linked in a paradigm that installs very often value judgments, by separating people into two categories: on one hand, quite privileged, fearing for their future and their self-advocacy, guilty for their own situation but with a fear that settles permanently; on the other hand, the destitute, in uncertainty of the daily, the dependence by assistantship or habit, the shame of this otherness.

At European level, the term “social exclusion” seems to be first used about 1989 by the European Commission. The social exclusion was connected with the insufficient implementation of social rights. In 1990, is created the European Observatory for National Policies against social exclusion.

The evolution of the use of the term “social exclusion”, related to social policy within the European Union, since the early 1990s, obviously coincides with the continued worsening of economic conditions but also with increasing pressures on the welfare state (persistent poverty, long-term unemployment, changes in family structure) and with the new migration policies. So appears the term “social inclusion”.

In its Fourth Framework Programme (FP4), the European Commission states that social exclusion is characterized by fragmentation and disintegration of social relations and, consequently, a loss of social cohesion. Thus, for particular groups of people, social exclusion is a progressive marginalization, economic deprivation and various forms of social disadvantage, political and cultural. Moreover, in summary, social exclusion is not an infringement of the principle of equality of results, but that of the freedom to enjoy their rights as citizens.

Overall, since the late 1990s, we can highlight common features in European official texts on this issue of social exclusion, which allows drawing a conceptual outline. In particular, “social exclusion” is opposed to “social integration” because each citizen should be a part of society (in both law and representations). Moreover, “social exclusion” is link with the economic, the social, the cultural and the political aspects and therefore affects the logics of power, of identities and the labour market. “Social exclusion” is thus linked both
with poverty, deprivation or lack of access to goods or services and with the precariousness of social rights. Finally, as “social exclusion” is a process rather than a state, it is possible to consider an analysis of the mechanisms and the institutions that are in charge of social policy, instead of focus the analysis on the determinants of state of people who are excluded!

If one considers that social integration and “inclusion” are economic and social means to fight against “social exclusion”, it begs the question of the nature of the specific societies in an increasingly diverse. Is there not a danger that the fight against “social exclusion”, under an apparent universality, might lead to a realization of equality, of integration and an assertion of citizenship rights like so many hegemonic mechanisms that deny differences? In other words, we should ask themselves the following questions: “social inclusion” in what? By whom? And why, to what effect? Clearly this does not encourage the respect of the status quo with a legitimation of the existing structures as social practices, attitudes or representations, but that danger exists obviously.

How, indeed, to reconcile our collective, philosophical and political commitment, with the universalism in maintaining compliance with the particularities and the differences, how to accept multiple otherness without questioning our social (societal) model?

The increase of uses of the term “social exclusion” is an indicator of the current crisis of contemporary capitalism. In this society focused on the market, even if the economy is or is not “social market”, the fragmentation has worsened, causing these multidimensional potential exclusions.

These market mechanisms also concern, now, the social services themselves of many Member States and the (re)conciliation between the consideration, the acceptance, the advocacy of a collective responsibility and the widespread market mechanisms seems difficult. This would rather encourage disinvestment by government policies against the polymorphism of “social exclusion”.

It is now to go beyond the model of “social exclusion” that has been dominant in recent years, with priority given to job creation, and to break with the traditional view that defines the poverty and social exclusion as an individual problem. All factors of social exclusion should be taken into account, not just economics. EU citizens can also expect a new solidarity, linked to new forms of distribution of wealth and resources.

**Perceptions of Poverty and Social Exclusion**

Policies to fight against social exclusion are diverse in Europe. Just as social inclusion policies. But perceptions are also different. This second part is based on the results of the *Eurobarometer* No. 321, *Poverty and social exclusion*, to propose a mapping of perceptions of poverty and social exclusion.

Social exclusion is a social object now at the heart of EU social policy, but an ill-defined object, variously conceptualized. The history of representation of poverty is well known and studies show that the social situation of “poor” has evolved over the centuries: the state of poverty is not an invariant historical or geographical.

---


6
The Eurobarometer survey conducted in September 2009 is the first one about poverty and social exclusion. Its results are used to measure the level of consciousness of citizens of Member States related to the extent of poverty within the EU. The survey gives also information about the causes of poverty: personal, social, or economic, and about the populations with risks. The survey also assesses the intensity of the threat of poverty perceived by citizens. Finally, the survey focused on perceptions of respondents in relation to government policies and European fight against poverty and the level can be considered relevant to these issues.

Overall, 84% of respondents consider that poverty has increased in their country during the last three years (2006-2009), 73% of them have the impression that poverty is somewhat or very “common” in their country. The map n° 1 provides cartography of the answer to the question “What would you say that poverty in (our country) is widespread?”. We can see positive response for more than 30% of the citizens of south-east of the EU but also for Portugal and for Latvia. Scores of France, in particular, are probably more related to the strong media coverage of the financial and economic crisis.

This perception is it in relation to the actual distribution of people who are in “objective” situation of poverty? The map n° 2 draws this reality. As defined by the European Union, any person whose income is less than 60% of average household income in a given country may be considered as poor. Thus, about 80 million citizens, 16% of the population live below the poverty line.

Poverty is not concentrated in the less industrialized countries or even in countries in transition. The poverty rate in the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Austria are established between 11 and 12%, which helps explain the scores mapped in map n° 1. The “poor” are in Romania and Bulgaria, respectively 23 and 21% of the total of the
population. It is not surprising that in these countries 44 and 48% of respondents see poverty as widespread. The analysis of these two statistics in France, Germany and in the United Kingdom, however, is surprising and must be linked to specific sociological background: 13% of people are poor in France and 26% of the total population consider poverty as a widespread. In Germany these statistics are respectively 15 and 17% and in UK 19% and 17%. These differing sensitivities of the populations confirm the assumption of a level of acceptability of poverty much higher in the United Kingdom and France, among others.

Map 2: Percentage of people below the poverty line

Sources: Eurostat 2009

But this “European poverty” has not the same sociological intensity everywhere. Indeed, sociological studies have shown that the poor suffer less social exclusion in the poorest countries. This phenomenon has been described in particular by Serge Paugam. For him, it is “integrated poverty”, one of three categories of poverty he highlights. This installs integrated poverty in countries or regions economically “backward”, the poor are not stigmatized because poverty is widespread for a long time on these territories and, above all, they benefit from family solidarity and / or socialization induced especially by religious practices. Moreover, the informal economy is more developed in these areas. Thus, overall, poverty is not necessarily a disqualifying factor that has other determinations. The analysis of the situation of minorities in central Europe, for example, confirms this analysis. In particular, the Roma suffer discrimination, whether they are objectively poor or not!

Second type: the “marginal poverty” for a small portion of the population in a prosperous society. These poor people are often regarded as “social cases” whose maladjustment is often stigmatized.
Finally, “disqualifying poverty” grows with the crises in the post-industrial societies. The poor are experiencing economic and often social decline and a large part of the population may fear being directly confronted with this situation.

This categorization helps to identify several regions in Europe: in particular with the Southern Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal, where the poor are more numerous in percentage but well integrated and not stigmatized, the North (the Scandinavia) where the prevention of economic poverty is widespread and thus helps maintain the standard of living of the poor, but with a control of their privacy. In France, “disqualifying poverty” now dominates. Working will no more protects from exclusion and the studies can estimate that about 8% of the working poor in Europe are living in poverty.

This observation invites to think about the perception of determinants of poverty in member states. The Eurobarometer n° 321 invites respondents to comment with five descriptive criteria (not explanation) the situation of poverty: the lack of resources, the position in relation to poverty, the social status, the dependence to public charity, and the inability to provide basic goods (food, shelter, and clothing). The following analysis retains the first four criteria and adds the distribution of rates of being below the poverty line in the country and the question concerning the impression of a widespread poverty.

The horizontal axis of the mapping, at left, is linked with the rate of people who live under the poverty level in each country and, but at a lower level, with the variable about the perception of poverty. At right, this axis is related to two variables concerning the definition of poverty in relation to resource shortage on the one hand, and to dependence on charity, on the other hand, as well, but at a lower level, on the variable about the very low social status that defines the poor. Overall, the actual level of relative poverty threshold is correlated with the perception, but the mapping clearly reveals four groups of countries. In the upper left quadrant, the citizens of these countries tend to minimize the relative percentage of “poor” under the poverty line. That it is not surprising as the definition of poverty is based on the idea of a lack of resources, overall, and not on a logic of threshold, on the social status or even on an addiction to charity.

At bottom left, we found Bulgaria, Greece, Portugal and Romania. The perceived level of poverty is much more important than the actual rate of citizen below the threshold. In this group, the citizens do not consider that poverty is linked to social status, but tend to accept the idea of a definition over the threshold. At bottom right, the perception of poverty is greater than indicated by the real rate of people below the poverty line. It is indeed a confirmation of this “poverty disqualifying” that threatens the citizens in a situation of economic crisis, while for the previous group, the logic of “integrated poverty” explain the repartition. The last group, at top right: the Scandinavian countries that have a special relationship with these logics. Poverty is defined rather by a lack of resources and dependence on charity but is generally uncommon from citizens who seem to minimize highly reality of poverty in their countries.
In another section, the Eurobarometer survey provides information on the perception of the main causes of poverty. There are two main social explanations: high unemployment (52% of respondents) and inadequate wages and salaries (49%). The lack of social benefits and pensions (29%) or the excessive cost of decent housing (26%), the lack of education, training or qualifications (37%), the poverty “inherited” (25%) and, finally, the dependence on alcohol or drugs (23%) are the other causes mentioned most often. No surprise, then, if 56% of respondents believe that the unemployed are people with most risks of poverty, followed by seniors (41%) and the low-educated (31%).

To conclude this partial operation of this Eurobarometer very insightful, some background. First, despite the high level of perception of poverty, respondents are generally more confident about their personal situation, 30% of them believe that they are easy to “make ends meet” financially, which is difficult for only 12% of respondents. This rate is lower than the percentage of people under the poverty line. However, in some countries the situation is perceived as very difficult. In Bulgaria, only 5% of respondents reported they are able to make ends meet easily and 40% have difficulty doing so. The economic problem is central: the respondents who have difficulty making ends meet have difficulty to obtain a mortgage (72%), a consumer loan (64%) or a credit card (56%). These questions suggest therefore obviously the logical policies that allow insertion of certain categories of citizens in the European economy.

For 89% of citizens, the national governments must take action against poverty. The EU is not the preferred level of power but nevertheless important for 74% of respondents.
An extreme case compared to the European average of 9%, 20% in Luxembourg think that the fight against poverty is primarily the responsibility of the EU.

Conclusion: Danger of the Concept of Social Exclusion

To conclude, poverty is part of a complex set of determinations, also linked to the stories of social policies in each country. It is a social construction that has obvious links with the roots and cultural changes but also, individually, in relation to each other as in the relationship with oneself, with the identities and citizenship.

It is well established that all countries have developed social policies based on similar concepts. For example, in France, the “exclusion” and thus the “integration” have predominated, while in Denmark the policy is focused on helping the “two-thirds society”, in the Netherlands, the “Social renewal” is central to social policy and, finally, in UK, the fight against poverty was essential.

The category “social exclusion” is also still under discussion. In particular, by inducing an “inside” and an “outside” of society, its widespread use a mechanistic conception of the social, indeed, is hardly feasible because it is impossible for anyone to live in an “outside” society. In this sense, social exclusion and its use within the logic of refusing an “outside” alternative within, from those who rightly consider themselves to be “inside”, which does not presuppose alternative.

But as we saw, we must not neglect the social, religious, familial, and political determinations and a widespread political use of this expression gives legitimacy rather than a shared sense. The generalization of a policy against this “social exclusion” is highly dangerous because the “social exclusion” induces the existence of an “excluded” from a person outside... impossible situation even if it may be reassuring, while a disqualifying poverty threatens the citizen. It therefore seems preferable to try to analyze phenomena such as discrimination, impoverishment and precariousness, stigma, marginalization, but also the mechanisms of identity, the “uprooting”, the social acceptance of differences, etc.

This discourse about exclusion and, for forty years in France at least, the interest for the excluded allow to focus social policy and to avoid an indictment of redistribution of wealth. With social exclusion, social policies install a balance between assistance / assistantship and solidarity and political strategies, in general, ignore the social evolution and, especially, the consequences of impoverishment described above.

Social exclusion and its political use are dangerous instrumentalisations and can lead to consequences with isolationism and rejection of communities through new ideological nationalism.