

## Middle class alliances to end poverty?

### Commentary on Victoria Lawson with Middle Class Poverty Politics Research Group's 'Decentring poverty studies: middle class alliances and the social construction of poverty'

Jutta Gutberlet

Department of Geography, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada

Correspondence: Jutta Gutberlet (email: jutttag@uvic.ca)

What role do 'middle classes' play in ending poverty, or do they, rather, perpetuate continuous impoverishment? How is poverty socially and racially constructed? What can we learn from comparative and decentred research on poverty? These and other questions are at the forefront in Victoria Lawson's (2012) essay, which analyzes and theorizes processes and provides facts that cause and reiterate persistent poverty on a global scale. Her writing goes beyond common authoritative framings of poverty, where the poor are defined primarily in terms of lack of income or as a consequence of specific class, gender or racial relations that generate exclusion and impoverishment. Furthermore, poverty is also hegemonically explained in terms of personal inabilities, inappropriate behaviour and lack of entrepreneurial engagement, often attributed to bad governance and overall cultural disposition. These predominant views in mainstream media and in political discourse frame popular perceptions and attitudes to poverty as a measurable fact expressed in statistics, categories and benchmarks used to indicate social change and progress. The results are primarily quantitative analyses of poverty trends and achieved goals, such as expressed in the UN Millennium Development Goals. Nevertheless, do these statistics and standards really tell us about the wellbeing of individuals or communities, and do they in fact help deconstruct the structural reasons and motivations behind poverty generation and poverty maintenance?

By introducing the concept of relational poverty Lawson provides the theoretical foundation for understanding persistent poverty as the result of deeply entrenched, historically developed economic and political relations (also see Mosse, 2010). The resulting social categorization reproduces and reiterates inequality and makes continuous exploitation possible. The fact that impoverished people are simultaneously excluded and dominated by the current social, economic and political system becomes the major argument in this thought-provoking essay. Lawson (2012: 5) provides a detailed critique of the conventional quantitative, authoritative approach on poverty research, which basically 'deemphasizes structural dimensions of poverty' and responds to these ideological and ontological limits by arguing that 'people are poor because of powerful others'.

This new spin to the debate on poverty in the work of Lawson and the Middle Class Poverty Politics Research Group focuses on the role of middle classes, and the mechanisms in place for acting in opposition to or in solidarity with the poor. Their investigation of the political potential of middle class/subaltern struggles around poverty in Argentina, Canada, South Africa, Thailand, the US and India is anchored in a comparative methodology that will help to understand the integration of communities and places into globalized processes and assist in the interpretation of resulting processes and structures that produce and maintain poverty.

Economic growth does not necessarily translate into redistribution and poverty reduction and wealth is actually shifting from middle classes to the rich (*New York Times*, 2002; Pressman, 2007; Hickey, 2010). Evidence on income concentration and the widening gap between the super rich and poor reveal that accumulation and exclusion go hand in hand under the capitalist development model, which is news and has been theorized by Harriss-White (2005) among others. Lawson points out that South Africa has become one of the countries with the largest disparity between the rich and the poor; that in Argentina the shift from middle class to poor over the past three decades has affected a large proportion of the population; and that similar situations of increasing hardship are being reported from Thailand, the US and Canada. Yet this new poverty has remained mostly ignored.

Neoliberal reforms under capitalist political and economic systems in the global South have also stimulated the growth of the informal sector, stirring further exploitation and exclusion. Collecting, separating and selling recyclable materials or street vending exemplify modes of survival for the long-term poor in Brazil, Colombia and India, and for the newly poor middle classes such as those in Argentina. Despite positive economic growth and global market integration, poverty has also widely increased in countries of the global North. Here too, for example, the number of people making a living from recovering recyclables such as beverage containers has increased and become as visible in large cities such as Berlin, Frankfurt, Paris or London as are the so-called bidders on the west coast of Canada (Gutberlet *et al.*, 2009).

Lawson's essay discusses theorization on poverty and provides comprehensive examples underlining the exploitative effects and processes related to capital accumulation, unequal sociospatial categorization and political systems that reinforce exclusion and poverty. Lawson (2012: 2) thinks of poverty as an 'ontological object, as a theoretical concept and as an object of intervention'. Following Marxist and feminist researchers, Lawson disentangles the sources that socially construct poverty and looks at how politics and discourse consolidate material inequality and solidify social categories, ultimately also shaping the political voicelessness of the poor.

Economic recession and austerity, environmental degradation, population pressure and diminishing reserves of and differentiated access to natural resources, together with the effects of global climate change, are already crisis factors that also drive increased poverty on a global scale. Although populations in the global South might be more often depicted as more vulnerable, no society is immune from the global consequences of capitalist economic growth and accumulation. Living on welfare in North America – with the devolution in social welfare since the mid 1990s (Habibov & Fan, 2010), and the consequent great variation in the design as well as willingness or fiscal ability to adequately finance social programmes (Pandey & Collier-Tenison, 2001; Whitaker & Time, 2001) – can still mean living in poverty. Despite the well noted affluence of North America and West Europe, deepening social inequality and marginalization are manifested in a broad spectrum of familiar ways, including increasing levels of reliance on food banks, of homelessness and living in overcrowded spaces, and of long-term unemployment and working full-time just for subsistence (on Canada see Morissette & Zangh, 2006). The research Lawson is involved in ultimately confirms the creation of a 'disappearing middle'.

Lawson (2012: 6) draws our attention to 'racial capitalism' as a major factor in uneven development by highlighting that 'poverty is produced through profoundly racialized processes and white privilege is intimately connected with economic power'. The example from South Africa, where after the transition 'economic elites remain

predominantly white and [black] Africans remain mostly poor' (citing MacDonald, 2006: 178), well demonstrates this. Discourse and language play a crucial role in reiterating and reordering social standing and solidifying symbolic boundaries. There is a negative stigma attached to informal recyclers, who are mostly poor and often marginalized, which reiterates social ordering. In Argentina they are likened to vultures (*cirujas*), while in Egypt they are dubbed 'garbage people' (*zabaleen*, from *zbel* or garbage). In Morocco 'garbage sifters' (*mikhala*, in Moroccan Arabic) (Gutberlet, 2008), and the English terms 'scavenger' or 'waste picker' also link this work to unwanted 'trash' (Gutberlet & Jayme, 2010). The informal recycling sector epitomizes the perpetuation of racial capitalism insofar as it engages particular groups. Most recyclers in India, for example, are the so-called 'untouchables' (Bhatt, 2006) while in Brazil they are primarily individuals of African descent representing socially excluded groups (Gutberlet, 2008).

Spaces of impoverishment, first transformed by capital accumulation and then devalued by economic restructuring, are a global reality within the geographic reach of capitalism. Intense resource exploitation and farming have often transformed these spaces into environmental disasters where water and soil are contaminated, the natural flora and fauna destroyed and the local population and workers left in poverty. The tragic environmental impacts of the expansion of capitalism corresponding with colonialism, in particular, demonstrate such outcomes in many parts of the world (Enfielda & O'Haraa, 1999; McNeil, 2003). Lawson (2012: 6) and colleagues highlight similar outcomes in the cases of ranchland and mining claims in eastern Montana in the US, the industrial sector in southern Buenos Aires in Argentina and remote oil extraction in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In other regions in the US, industrial decline has created pockets of poverty, such as in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania or Detroit, Michigan (Sugrue, 2005). In Brazil, agrobusiness expansion (soybean and sugarcane) and cattle ranching in the Cerrado, the savannas in the midwest and Amazon regions, has, from the 1970s, expelled small-scale farmers and indigenous/traditional populations from the land, creating disparate urban spaces of impoverishment and accumulation (Gutberlet, 1999).

Middle class groups are often vulnerable to economic downturns, as Lawson highlights with examples from the economic crises in Argentina (2001), Thailand (1997), the US and Canada (2008) and the 1994 transition in South Africa. Collaboration, solidarity and acting in alliance could become necessary social traits in order to face ecological, social and economic threats coupled with environmental destruction, resources shortness, rising living costs and expanding poverty. Nevertheless, middle classes are also known for having a key position in consolidating hegemonic political discourses of market reforms and social improvement, as currently happens globally with the neoliberal discourse. Lawson resists class reductionism but takes a rather organic, context-related perspective on complex middle classes. Yet many questions are left unanswered, such as how can the status quo of capitalist markets and neoliberal politics (based on unequal exchange, exploitation and resources extraction) be effectively challenged by forming new alliances? Who is involved in middle class alliances? What are key motivations for middle class organizations to collaborate in tackling poverty? And what are the real outcomes for the poor from this? Lawson's essay does not provide persuasive responses to these as much as it stimulates critical reflection that gives rise to more inquiry.

The project on decentring poverty research and middle class alliances, from which Lawson's essay draws, is very important in helping to understand the processes in place that are shaping impoverished spaces and people, and in highlighting the role of

cross-class alliances and networks that can disrupt social polarization and more effectively address poverty reduction. But it has yet to find whether middle class alliances are able to address poverty and powerlessness on a larger scale, or even whether these alliances can effectively contribute to politicizing the concerns of the poor. Personally, I find it a challenge to discern such a potential: despite the broadening ramifications of global socioenvironmental injustices, I still believe that the voices and mobilizations of the underprivileged themselves are more capable of provoking long-term change for sustainable development.

International gatherings such as the World Social Forum, World Urban Forum, the forthcoming Rio +20, and the various Solidarity Economy Forums as well as other UN or nongovernmental organization initiatives attest the existence of widespread concerns with inequality and socioenvironmental injustices. Certainly middle class alliances exist, not just within international but also grassroots contexts. Furthermore, there is already a momentum to expand interclass solidarities and networks opposed to the dominant categories and counteracting the current destruction of the environment and livelihoods. The theoretical discussion, cemented with important facts and data from poverty studies, arouses and stimulates interest in concrete findings on whether middle class alliances are important and effective in provoking a necessary paradigm shift towards social inclusion, equity and justice. It remains to be seen whether the relational studies of the Middle Class Poverty Politics Research Group will contradict Marx's view of the middle class as a conservative force impeding revolutionary trajectory of capitalism. Given my own interests and outreach involvements in work to challenge models of unsustainable development including simplified and segmented orientations in poverty reduction through the Participatory Sustainable Waste Management project (<http://pswm.uvic.ca/en/>) – another international, cross-class and decentred research initiative, hosted by the Community-Based Research Laboratory at the University of Victoria – I am particularly intrigued.

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