

Book Review:

Dimensions of Poverty: Measurement, Epistemic Injustices, Activism

George Regkoukos*

Dimensions of Poverty: Measurement, Epistemic Injustices, Activism, edited by Valentin Beck, Henning Hahn, and Robert Lepenies, 2020, Cham: Springer Nature.

The effect of the global pandemic on the fight against poverty has been detrimental. With World Bank projections thrown into disarray,¹ it is likely that major strategising exercises and corrective measures will be necessary if we are to meet the UN's benchmark Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the next quarter century. In this respect, the appearance of *Dimensions of Poverty* could not have been timelier. As the second instalment of Springer's series on 'Philosophy and Poverty', the volume promises philosophical analyses which can enhance our understanding of poverty, its causes, and its effects. Beck, Hahn, and Lepenies deliver on that promise by creating a space for interdisciplinary dialogue between philosophers and more empirically-oriented researchers.

The editors begin their introduction by pointing out that the ultimate goal of alleviating poverty may be indisputable but the measurement of poverty is 'unexpectedly contested' (2). *Dimensions of Poverty* enters the contest as an anthology advancing interdisciplinary debate on poverty conceptualisation and measurement, epistemic injustices inherent in poverty research, and strategies of activism. What unites the twenty contributions is a critical approach to widely used poverty metrics and resulting alleviation policies. For this reason, and given that the volume is predicated on an eponymous conference (Berlin, 2017), one can expect a fair amount of references to Benjamin Rowntree, Peter Townsend, Amartya Sen, and Sabina Alkire. The volume reads more like the proceedings of a roundtable rather than a compendium on poverty research.

Dimensions of Poverty is helpfully divided in five parts, preceded by a sizeable introduction laying the foundations for a revision of poverty measurement models and a solid critique of resulting alleviation strategies. Part I discusses 'Poverty as a Social Relation' through research by Jonathan Woff, Daniel Putnam and Phillip Lepenies. Part II explores 'Epistemic Injustices in Poverty Research' via the work of Franziska Dübgen, Jonathan O. Chimakonam, Sharon A. Omotoso, and Mitu Sengupta. Part III, the shortest section, explores 'Philosophical Conceptions of Poverty in Context' through chapters by Patricia Illingworth, Gottfried Schweiger, and Bettina Mahlert. Part IV, 'Measuring Multidimensional Poverty', regroups contributions on quantitative research and methodology. All but two chapters (those by Sabina Alkire and Sanjay G. Reddy) are ably co-authored by Caroline Dotter & Stephen Klasen, Xavier Godinot & Robert Walker, Franceso Burchi, Nicole Rippin & Claudio E. Montenegro, Nicolas Brando & Katarina Pitasse Fragoso, Nicole Hassoun, Anders Herlitz & Lucio Esposito. Part V examines 'Country Cases', or more appropriately, a number of case studies across different world regions. Hans T.A. Mpenya, Francis M. Baye & Boniface N. Epo's chapter on Cameroon, Eda Keskin's case study of Germany, and Julio Linares & Yu-hsuan Su's research on Bangladesh contribute to a locally comprehensive look into specific countries. Overall, the structure serves the unenviable task of interweaving scholarship from the Global South and the Global North.

1 <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty> [accessed July 2020].
* E-mail: georgios.regkoukos@yahoo.com

Sabina Alkire's contribution is commendably self-critical in admitting that poverty research is *ab initio* 'strewn with imperfection' (198). Conscious that her paradigm-shifting methodology (jointly developed with James Foster) is repeatedly discussed elsewhere in the volume, Alkire focuses instead on how methodology translates into policy. Expanding on poverty measurement, she offers tangible examples of how the method was used in poverty alleviation and explores how the versatility of Multidimensional Poverty Indices (MPIs) allow policymakers an insight into the causes of poverty. Alkire freely admits that establishing a causal relationship between successful campaigns to reduce poverty and the adoption of MPI measurements (e.g. in Colombia) is challenging. This brings to focus an overarching debate on the interplay between poverty analytics and exogenous economic factors such as shifting international trade patterns. There is little discussion of how campaigns such as China's Accurate Poverty Targeting programme (211) are conditional upon the degree of authority central governments can exercise on their populations. On the other hand, Alkire argues astutely for the establishment by poverty researchers of direct linkages with people suffering from poverty (taking the example of Chinese civil servants and 'hotlines' for poor households). This is just one of the many recommendations on policymaking made in the volume.

Yet most policy suggestions are founded on one of two analytical units: the household and the individual. As an historical networks analyst, I read closely the contributions of Godinot and Walker, Brando and Pitasse Fragoso, and Keskin searching for references to a further unit of analysis: the social network. To varying degrees, all three chapters may be read as incorporating, however implicitly, network-based methodological criticisms of the MPIs. Godinot and Walker mention that the method is overly dependent on the availability of data rather than theoretical considerations (263), Brando and Pitasse Fragoso give a more focused discussion of its shortcomings with respect to minors and dependents (303), and Keskin ponders whether as an analytical tool it can be sufficiently applied given the complexities of contemporary social stratification (369 *passim*).

In their chapter, Godinot and Walker introduce Merging of Knowledge (MOK) as an 'iterative and integrative strategy' (269) which takes into account the views of people facing poverty directly into scholarly debate. MOK helps overcome many of the methodological problems and statistical shortcomings of the MPI-HPI binary, but is not without problems, particularly in terms of implementation. One of MOK's main benefits, which by extension lends itself to the chapter as a whole, is the consideration of social networks without which 'co-developed' and 'co-produced' knowledge (270) would be unthinkable. Another evident benefit of MOK, according to the authors, is that it meets the requirement of a multiscalar analysis as it is applicable on both global and regional levels. In the same vein, Brando and Pitasse Fragoso provide case studies exemplifying the need to consider poverty primarily through the lens of capability deprivation (303). They argue that all three commonly-used reference frameworks (HPI, MPI, and the York Model) are found wanting.

The demands and difficulties of introducing regional variations in poverty research feature prominently in Keskin's contribution. She posits that revisiting the principles of Neurath's *Lebenslage* may be helpful in defining twenty-first century social hierarchies in the Global North, with the rising numbers of insecurely employed and underemployed (the 'precariat') substituting for the proletariat of Neurath's times. Keskin's proposal is made robust by her consideration of what precariousness can mean for specific social categories such as single parents, women, sick and disabled people, and immigrants. She brings attention to the fact that entire strata of population – the denizens – are overlooked by poverty researchers who subscribe to the modern definition of citizenship, paradoxically and unhelpfully lying somewhere 'between universalism and particularism' (381).

Human poverty should leave none uninterested. *Dimensions of Poverty* is a meticulously edited volume containing many well-argued observations on what we are doing well and what we are doing wrong. The book could have benefitted from a concluding chapter by the editors, perhaps summing up the policy implications of the various suggestions on improving poverty research made throughout the book. A criteria statement on why these twenty contributions were chosen among the over one hundred papers presented to the conference would have been welcome.

Such a statement would doubtlessly inform and enthuse young researchers to direct their findings for future collections. Some of the raw data, for example in Doter and Klasen, could have been presented more succinctly. Nevertheless, the editors honour the premise of inclusivity by orchestrating both the voices of prominence and those of early-career researchers. Scholars of philosophy, economists, and policymakers stand to gain most from reading this anthology.

George Regkoukos is a historian who works for the Department for Continuing Education in the University of Oxford. His research interests include the formation and evolution of social networks, Imperial Russia, and transnational histories of Russia.