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Working Poverty in the Framework of the Work Anthropology: A Literature Review and Considerations on Care-related Labour

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Abstract

The phenomenon of working poverty is significant and involves an important percentage of population in many countries. This paper focuses on sketching, without being exhaustive, the state-of-the-art on working poverty in terms of definition and size. It also considers possible recent correlations of working poverty with the COVID-19 pandemic and with the rise of the digital labour platforms. This paper also shows the difference between labour, work, and action according to Hannah Arendt, together with the concept of anthropology of work of Maria Pia Chirinos. Finally, highlighting the pioneering works of Chirinos, the study suggests a picture in which human being, or a rational animal (Lat.: *animal rationale*; Gr.: *zoon logon echon*, ζῷον λόγος ἔχων), essentially acts in endeavours, such as labour which is devoted to self-preservation and care. Under such picture, society should take into account the richness of the traditions and skills of different types of jobs and also in terms of minimal wage.

Keywords: Working Poverty, Hannah Arendt, Anthropology of Work, Labour, Work, Action

Introduction

The phenomenon of working poverty is widely studied in literature with noteworthy works that discuss the shades of the meaning of working poor

by taking into account the labour market and local living costs in a certain country or in regions of a certain country (Peña-Casas & Latta, 2004; Van Winkle & Struffolino, 2018; Wuyts, 2011). Without being exhaustive, the paper gave some examples of literature studies on working poor. Although the definition of working poor is not an easy task and the official measurements are controversial for different countries, these examples were given to highlight the importance of the phenomenon.

Empirical Studies on the Working Poor

In 2004, Ramòn Peña-Casas and Mia Latta wrote the superb publication *Working Poor in the European Union* (Peña-Casas & Latta, 2004). Based on their extensive report, the first chapter focuses on the definition of working poor. After a literature research on the topic, Peña-Casas and Latta wrote the minimal conditions that the individual must fulfil to be categorized as working poor:

- “be living in a household considered as poor;
- be working or searching for a job;
- have worked or searched for a job during a period (one month to six months) of the previous year, or have accumulated a corresponding number of working hours.” (Peña-Casas & Latta, 2004)

Consequently, there are several approaches to define the working poor in different countries and in the whole world. Peña-Casas and Latta in Chapter 2 discuss the incidence of working poor in the European Union in 1999, and they report a number of working poor that is around 11 million, corresponding to 7% of the EU population (Peña-Casas & Latta, 2004). Gundogan, Bicerli, and Aydin, at Anadolu University, report that 550 million people in the world are working poor (Gundogan et al., 2005). Thus, this was done using the working paper written by Steven Kapsos in 2004 (Kapsos, 2004). In 2018, Lohmann and Marx (Lohmann & Marx, 2018), mentioning the International Labour Organization (ILO) report of 2014 (*Global Employment Trends 2014*, 2014), stated that 839 million people lived on 2 US dollars or less a day in 2013. In 2020, Estelle Sommeiller reported her own calculations of working poverty based on the employment of EU-SILC Microdata, which shows percentages for Spain, Italy, and Portugal to be around 15% and that of Greece to be around 30% (Sommeiller, 2020).

Jeannette Wicks-Lim (Professor at University of Massachusetts Amherst) has written in 2012 the article *The Working Poor: A Booming Demographic* (Wicks-Lim, 2012). Being an expert of minimum wage, Wicks-Lim focuses on a discussion concerning salary. Thus, employers should align the payment of workers to their increasing production of goods and services. Wicks-Lim gave a reminder on the importance of a powerful union movement

that should fight against poverty wages, and denounces the absence of such powerful union movement (Wicks-Lim, 2012).

In 2020, Marianna Filandri and Silvia Pasqua (Professors at Università di Torino), together with Emanuela Struffolino (Researcher at the Berlin Social Science Center, now Professor at Università di Milano), wrote the article *Being Working Poor or Feeling Working Poor? The Role of Work Intensity and Job Stability for Subjective Poverty*. In this article, they stated that “having a job is not a sufficient condition to avoid poverty, either in terms of (monetary) objective or subjective poverty” (Filandri et al., 2020). Indeed, this aspect leads to an additional degree of freedom in a discussion on working poverty.

Recent Studies in the Working Poor

The appearance of SARS-CoV-2, and the subsequent pandemic of COVID-19 as of 2020, has strengthened problems already existing (Patel et al., 2020). In 2020, Andrea Neri and Francesca Zanichelli, at Banca d'Italia, have written a report of the wealth of Italian families (Neri & Zanichelli, n.d.). According to Neri and Zanichelli, more than half of the interviewed people (the studied sample includes more than three thousand people) have stated that due to the pandemic, there has been a contraction of the family income (Neri & Zanichelli, n.d.).

Finally, the occurrence of platform workers is a very recent phenomenon. Many types of works, especially goods delivery, text translation and software programming, are coordinated by platforms and algorithms. In 2018, Pesole et al. have written a first technical report on platform work in Europe (Pesole et al., 2018). In 2020, Urzì Brancati, Pesole, and Fernández-Macías wrote a second extensive report on platform workers (European Commission and Joint Research Centre, 2020). In their executive summary, they wrote:

“Digital labour platforms are a new form of coordinating the provision of labour services enabled by the latest technological revolution. Many authors claim that digital labour platforms have the potential to disrupt the world of work, both positively by boosting participation in the labour market through better matching procedures, and negatively by circumventing regulation and lowering the quality of employment.” (European Commission and Joint Research Centre, 2020)

The fact that digital labour platforms could circumvent regulation and lower the quality of employment could be a new issue in the labour market. In cases like the digital labour platform, one can talk about *technoanomia*, since

the fast technological advancement leads to a breakdown of social norms (in this case it is related to work).

Interestingly, while the phenomenon of working poor has been studied from an economical and sociological point of view, a discussion that highlights the worker dignity, also in terms of reasonable wage tier, supported by philosophical and anthropological pictures of work in the contemporary world is missing. However, such pictures would lay the foundations for a more comprehensive understanding of the contribution and the reward of the workers in the society, together with the realization and the happiness of the workers. The publications of Maria Pia Chirinos (Chirinos, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009), which re-elaborate and criticize the well-known thoughts of Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1998), represent pioneering studies in the anthropology of work.

Arendt's Influence on Labour, Work, and Action

This study shows the difference between labour, work, and action according to Hannah Arendt. Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, distinguishes three different types of human activities: labour, work, and action. Labour is the human activity that is focused on biological necessities, self-preservation, and reproduction. Labour can be related to the “social reproduction” mentioned by Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 2016). Furthermore, work is the human activity devoted to the fabrication of durable objects that will become part of the world. The durability “gives the things of the world their relative independence from men who produced and use them” (Arendt, 1998). Action is the human activity by which humans intersubjectively interact with each other.

In this study, two initial assumptions were made: The first assumption is the correlation between working poor and low-skilled workers, since “[w]orkers with low education levels and little or no formal qualifications are more likely to be exposed to flexible employment types and poor income, as well as periodic unemployment spells” (Peña-Casas & Latta, 2004). The second assumption can be considered as a weaker assumption where the study shows a correlation between low-skilled work and Arendt's labour.

Chirinos Seminal Contribution

Maria Pia Chirinos focuses on human activities depicted by Arendt, highlighting the importance of labour and work. Within this framework, Chirinos, in the anthropology of work, has masterfully developed four theses.

In the first thesis, Chirinos states that it is necessary to recover the notion of matter in its two realizations: i) as metaphysical principle of substance and power; ii) as alive matter that, together with the soul, allows one to talk about various functions in the different levels of life.

In the second thesis, Chirinos proposes a model of humanism in which the corporeality, the dependence, and the vulnerability are positive values. Moreover, everyday life has to be a relevant aspect of such model of humanism.

In the third thesis, Chirinos presents the notion of work as an anthropological category, i.e., as a function able to shed light on the specificity of a human being: the rational and practical capacity, the power to transform the reality. Thus, work is an instrument for acquiring virtues and generating culture.

In the fourth thesis, Chirinos verifies that this notion of work is present at any level of the human action, even in the types of works that Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, considers as less representative of human being. This refers to the manual labours that are useful for corporal and daily necessities (Chirinos, 2007).

Along with the fourth thesis, Chirinos stressed how manual labours have been considered to be less representative of human being not only by Hannah Arendt. Manual labours have been considered less representative of human being by majority of the philosophers. Such picture is highlighted in the historical overviews, of the conceptions of work, sketched by Enzo Rutigliano and Maria Pia Chirinos.

The View of Rutigliano and Chirinos

Work (and labour) in Western culture according to Rutigliano (Rutigliano, 2011): Enzo Rutigliano gives an overview of labour and work from the Bible and ancient Greeks up to contemporary philosophy. First, Rutigliano stresses a particular meaning of the episode of the sirens and Ulysses in the *Odyssey*: the sirens are a metaphor of the knowledge, and the rowers have wax in their ears to pass unscathed such knowledge. Thus, labour demeans human being. Also, in the Bible (Genesis), work is considered as a punishment. For Aristotle, the proper endeavour of human being is the activity of the rational soul. In the Middle Age, it is evident that there is a contrast between *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*, with the exception of the rule of Saint Benedict “*ora et labora*”. For Luther and Calvin, work is a vocation (*Beruf*, which in German means vocation, call, duty). For Locke, work is a foundation and justification for the property, while for Smith work is primarily a human activity. In Marx, and Hegel, work is again primarily human, but it should be relieved from the rough conditions due to capitalism. Furthermore, Nietzsche recalls the ancient Greeks that work demeans human being. Lastly, Rutigliano stresses the bivalent perception of work in the second half of the 20th century that work is not anymore the goal of human being, but it is the material basis for human preservation.

Work (and labour) in Western culture according to Chirinos (Chirinos, 2008): Chirinos starts the historical overview from Plato: In the cave people that work are like sleep-walkers, since they do not know the good and the truth. In Aristotle, the human perfection is in the *polis*, as location, and in the *otium* (Gr.: *scholé*, σχολή), as activity. The view of Middle Age by Chirinos is similar to the one by Rutigliano. Interestingly, for Chirinos with Reformation and modern philosophy, especially Descartes, work is considered a proper human activity: a new model of humanism, the *homo faber*, arises (Chirinos, 2009). With the technological advancement, work becomes again a mechanical activity. Both Adam Smith and Karl Marx conceive the work as a mere means of production. In the 20th century also the non-manual labours can be monotonous and demeaning (*low-tech* works).

Chirinos states that, many years after the publication of *The Human Condition* by Hannah Arendt, a criticism of Arendt's position, i.e., the distinction between labour and work, cannot be procrastinated. In fact, Chirinos underlines that activity like nutrition, cooking, care of fragile and vulnerable living being unravel a plethora of cultural and historical manifestations, which allow to talk about arts and traditions in which reason and freedom play a major role. Chirinos states that the fact that labour does not lead to durable products does not diminish the richness of such labour (Chirinos, 2008). It is remarkable that Chirinos evens out the *zôon logikon* to the *animal laborans*: labour and work are both human activities. Such activities require practical intelligence, willingness, imagination, sensitivity (Chirinos, 2008).

Animal Rationale in Labour Context

In this work, recalling the aforementioned works of Chirinos, the study shows that the rational animal (Lat.: animal rationale; Gr.: *zoon logon echon*, ζῷον λόγος ἔχων) is essentially active in terms of labour, work, and action. There are many straightforward examples. An example that is also mentioned by Chirinos is the endeavour of a cook in preparing dishes. Such activity can be considered as a labour for nutrition and, thus, self-preservation. Through this way, we would neglect the ensemble of skills of the cook to make palatable dishes, the cooking traditions, and the research and development in gastronomic science (Aguilera, 2017; Cassi, 2011). Another example is the ability of construction workers to make temporary structures for festival and events, in which activities like the Arendt's action can find a suitable environment. Also, the skills in organizing an event in terms of decoration and arrangements of proper items (e.g., stage, seats for the audience, audio system) are remarkable.

Another important aspect is care. The words of Nancy Fraser in *Contradictions of Capital and Care* are absolutely notable. In fact, Fraser states that “social-reproductive contradiction of capitalism lies at the root of the so-called crisis of care” and that without *social reproduction*, “there could be no culture, no economy, no political organization” (Fraser, 2016). By *social reproduction*, Fraser means affective and labour works like birthing and raising children, maintaining households, etc.

Thus, the two assumptions that label working poor’ jobs, that can be in many cases correlated to Arendt’s labour and low-skilled jobs, can be strongly criticized. Society is evidently enriched by the labour related to working poor. This aspect should be recognized and rewarded by the society, and also in terms of wage laws that takes into account the importance of the labour. On the one hand, it is important to clarify the differences between the outputs of labour, work, and action according to the distinction of Hannah Arendt. On the other hand, the interconnection between such outputs, labour, work, and action should take into account, as underlined also by Nancy Fraser, that in many cases the action needs work and labour.

Conclusion

A debate on working poverty began in the 1970s and 1980s in the United States. Nowadays, the concept of working poor has become increasingly applicable in the labour market of developed and developing countries (Peña-Casas & Latta, 2004). This study uses a different approach in discussing working poverty within the framework of the anthropology of work, which was developed in the pioneering works of Maria Pia Chirinos. Working poor can be related to low-skilled works, and low-skilled work can be related to Arendt’s labour, i.e., the human activity that is focused on biological necessities, on self-preservation, and on reproduction. Such two assumptions can be strongly criticized. In fact, Chirinos sheds light on the importance of labour, which unravels a plethora of human cultures and traditions. The study integrates Chirinos’ appreciation of labour stressing that such manual works and care-related jobs are foundational for human being. The rational animal, *zoon logon echon*, is essentially and entirely active also in the labour. Thus, Arendt’s labour should not be labelled as low-skill work and, at the same time, working poor’ activities should not be labelled as low-skill jobs also. In this picture, the appreciation of the different typologies of jobs, in terms of minimal wage laws and welfare strategies, should be pursued.

Methodology

First, a literature review on the definition and size of working poverty was carried out in this study. Also, working papers (e.g., of the European Commission) and original works of several experts was used. In this study, no

data (primary data) was generated but data published in previous works (secondary data) was mentioned.

Second, the study analyzed the concepts of labour, work, and action in the conception of Hannah Arendt and the concept of work anthropology of Maria Pia Chirinos.

Last, this study provided a speculative rationale that correlates the importance of the jobs performed by working poor, the richness of traditions and cultures of labour, and the importance of Fraser's social reproduction in the society.

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