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Beyond Development: Local Histories of Global Poverty

Julia McClure

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Abstract

The UK-based Poverty Research Network received funding from the AHRC/GCRF (2017-2019) and developed a project which aimed to look beyond the way in which poverty has been represented by mainstream narratives in international development and to explore local histories of global poverty. It aimed to establish a network that examined the global problem of poverty from local perspectives and to expose the narratives behind the numbers of global poverty. The project was interdisciplinary, working with both academics and activists, but interrogated the importance of history in particular. It asked how history can deepen and diversify understandings of the long-term causes of poverty and how history can be used as a tool of resistance against impoverishment and stigmatisation. The articles in this special issue develop from these global conversations.

Author

Julia McClure FRHistS is Lecturer in Late Medieval and Early Modern Global History University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK: julia.mcclure@glasgow.ac.uk

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Introduction

The Poverty Research Network and its project *Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty* was born out of the need to go beyond the mainstream development narrative, which has fetishized economic growth and the expansion of the capitalist world-system. The aim was to use history to problematise how poverty has been measured, represented, and explained by global elites. It used these local histories to question the belief systems and political and economic infrastructure of economic-growth-based solutions to poverty reduction and to explore alternative understandings of poverty and means of resistance. Analysis of poverty has often been historically truncated, leading to a shallow understanding of causation. Here the historical analysis is placed at the centre. By taking a locally rooted long-durée perspective, this project offers new insights into the causes of poverty and how different communities have understood it. This challenges one of the strands of development economics that sees poverty as caused by a failure to grow economically and solutions to poverty as based upon economic growth. History shows that rather than a solution to poverty, the pursuit of economic expansion has often been one of the causes of poverty. Communities around the world are increasingly turning to their local histories as a source of resistance to global processes of impoverishment.

In 2015, the international community met with the United Nations General Assembly and pledged to 'end poverty in all its forms everywhere' through a programme of so-called 'sustainable development' (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg1> accessed 01.05.2019). Every year, billions of dollars are spent on development in order to bring about the end of poverty. In 2017 the EU invested 75.7 billion euros in development to help end poverty (Latek, 2019). The US invested 20.7 billion dollars in humanitarianism, and a further 6.5 billion was given by private US citizens (Global Humanitarian Assistance, 2018). Despite this multi-billion dollar spending on development, it is thought that by 2030 half a billion people will live in extreme poverty.

(<https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty> accessed 01.05.2019). International organisations such as the World Bank have promoted a good-news narrative that current economic-growth-based poverty reduction programmes are working (according to the World Bank, global poverty has decreased by 36% since 1990, as 1.1 billion people have 'escaped poverty'). (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview> accessed 05.05.2019), but this 'miracle' is more representative of a change in the way poverty is measured than a real reduction in poverty (Hickel, 2017). The World Bank now acknowledges that, by any measure, the rate of poverty reduction has slowed (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/09/19/decline-of-global-extreme-poverty-continues-but-has-slowed-world-bank> accessed 05.05.2019), and that climate change threatens to increase poverty in coming years (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/09/19/decline-of-global-extreme-poverty-continues-but-has-slowed-world-bank> accessed 05.05.2019). As Andy Sumners summarises, since the end of the Cold War the development industry has promoted a programme of 'catch-up capitalism' but has failed to end poverty despite economic growth (Sumners, 2016). Indeed, there are circumstances in which economic growth clearly increases poverty, when the possible gains of economic growth of off-set by the terms of corresponding trade deals, a phenomenon known as 'immiserizing growth' (Bhagwati, 1958, and Pyro, 2007).

It has become untenable to believe that economic growth can end poverty, as Jason Hickel has observed, 'to eradicate poverty at \$5 a day, global GDP would have to increase to 175 times its present size' (Hickel, 2017, 57). As Hickel has explained, 'sustainable development' is a contradiction in terms as economic development can never be environmentally sustainable (Hickel, 2019). Rather than ending poverty, this economic growth accelerates the degradation of physical and social environments that cause poverty. History can help us understand the link between economic growth and the creation of poverty and the forms of resistance that can help us engineer

new ways to end poverty that don't simply maintain the interests of the status quo.

International development is designed and financed by international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, which are invested heavily in maintaining the status quo of the current economic system. The slogan of the World Bank is 'working for a world free of poverty,' but it seeks to achieve this through promoting a model of economic development based upon economic growth, which integrates the national economic framework of so-called 'developing countries' further into global financial systems. Developing countries have been encouraged to take loans and engage in structural adjustment programmes and quantitative easing, supposedly to stimulate economic growth, which will 'trickle-down' and help end poverty. One of the former heads of the IMF, Joseph Stiglitz, observed that many of these policies created structural dependencies that limited the capacities of 'developing' countries while serving the interests of 'developed countries' (Stiglitz, 2002). The institutional infrastructure of international development is part of the same economic system that has created poverty.

The international development industry emerged in the twentieth century as a coalition of governmental and non-governmental organisations seeking to reduce poverty through programmes of modernization designed to boost economic growth. Since then, as James H. Mittelman summarises, 'different development paradigms have emerged upon which different scholars have shown profound interests and to which they gave extensive criticisms—modernization, dependency, Marxism, postcolonialism, and globalization' (Mittelman, 2010, 930). There have been many waves of critique of development, starting with the dependency theorists, who argued that rather than reducing poverty development policies ingrained inequalities by creating structural dependencies (the dependency theorists' critique of development began with Andre Gunder Frank (Gunder Frank, 1966)). More recently, post-development theorists have maintained that 'the goal of development is intimately linked to

modernization, which for them entails the extension of the Western world and its nationalist allies in the developing countries' (Rapley, 2004). History is starting to play an important role in these critiques of development by exposing the connections between regimes of poverty and poverty reduction and colonialism.

History-based critiques of the development industry's understanding of poverty and the links between development and colonialism have tended to focus upon macro-historical connections and have often come from disciplines outside history (Brooks, 2017). Here we explore the connections between global and local histories as well as the role that history can play across different disciplines, including law and sociology. This approach reveals that there are many different historical traditions and ways of using history. History can be a professional method of analysis, a way to pinpoint and understand the interface and dialogues between global processes and local experiences. History can also be a form of collective memory, a valuable cultural resource and tool of resistance for marginalised communities. This historical approach also provides the tools for critical contextualisation to understand the meanings and causes of poverty and to lengthen perspectives to historicise attempts to end poverty and the shortcomings of these attempts. Here history provides the tools for analysing the connections between the local and the global.

This special edition is based on workshops held in marginalised communities around the world, in Bangladesh, Brazil, Mexico, Senegal, and Slovenia. In each case, academics from different disciplines met with activists the role of history in understanding the processes of poverty creation and the politics of poverty reduction, as well as the regional cultural variations in meanings of poverty. These conversations revealed different understandings of history and poverty and signposted different plans for futures without poverty. In Brazil, scholars and civil society organisations discussed the ongoing problem of forced labour in Brazil after its historical legal abolition, and the problems of poverty that facilitate the continuation of these forced labour

regimes. We also interrogated the colonial and neo-colonial perspectives on poverty and the poverty solutions proposed by the tourist industry, such as 'favela tourism', which make Brazil's local poverty into a global tourism commodity. In Bangladesh, workshop participants explored the impact of economic migration cycles on the lives of marginalised women, and how literature and oral history are important resources for resistance for these communities. In Mexico, scholars and activists met at the San Pablo Centre, an indigenous language centre in Oaxaca City, to discuss both the historical processes of impoverishment faced by indigenous communities and to problematise the way in which indigenous communities have been associated with poverty in a way that has increased their stigmatisation. Activists reported on the long history of collective action against impoverishment and stigmatisation in the south of Mexico. In Slovenia scholars and activists met at a Roma settlement to discuss the ways in which Roma communities have been impoverished historically, especially during the breakup of Yugoslavia, and how associations with poverty have contributed to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of Roma communities. In Senegal, scholars from the University of Cheikh Anta Diop University and the University of Glasgow and civil society organisers met at the West African Research Centre (WARC) to discuss the 'urban niches' of poverty. In this workshop we explored the spatial dimension of poverty, how poverty is unevenly distributed across centres and suburbs, how different niches of poverty are created, and how poor people, such as prostitutes, beggars, and child workers, interact with urban environments and manage resources. This workshop was an opportunity to explore the urban ecology of poverty, and the multiple forms of resistance to the structural inequalities faced by many.

These workshops aimed to root a global conversation about poverty in local realities. In this way, poverty became the critical space for thinking about the relationship between the local and the global and bridging the analytic distance between micro experiences and macro-designs. Poverty is not accidental or incidental but is historically made. Poverty is created at the

interface of the global and the local.

Patterns of poverty around the world today have been created by the joint processes of capitalisation and colonisation, which have constituted the macro-process of globalisation. These historical processes have been driven by the pursuit of economic growth, increasingly monopolised by the few at the expense of the many. The first fitful trends of economic growth began in Europe in the sixteenth century. At this time, European societies were beginning their shift towards capitalism, increasing private property, enclosing common lands, and increasing wage labour, while they were developing their first overseas colonies and extracting resources and labour from increasingly subjugated populations. These joint processes increased poverty and inequality in Europe and around the world. Processes of decolonisation in the twentieth century did not end processes of capitalisation. They were linked to projects of modernization and industrialisation which offered opportunities for the continuation of colonial forms of governance and labour relations. Bruno Latour and others have described the development project as 'the latest wave of colonisation' (Latour, 2017, 9).

The pursuit of economic growth, within colonialism or development, has created poverty through a prioritisation of global connections over local environments. As Johanna Luttrell argues, 'expropriation was always, and remains, a matter of the poor being cast out from their place in the world' (Luttrell, 2015). Since the early-modern period, economic growth has been underpinned by the expansion of private property regimes, the enclosure of lands, the exploitation of resources scarring our lands with mines, the pollution by 'growth-accelerating' agro-chemicals, the diversion of water for irrigation for cash-crops, the reduction of leisure-time and social relations, the expansion of intellectual property, all of which have accelerated the expansion of poverty. Dispossession of land and resources created the labouring poor, who own nothing more than their labour. The combination of the fight to maximise production and increase profits with the increased precarity of the dispossessed labouring poor

facilitated the expansion of forced labour, a cheap pathway to more economic growth. International investors in development have been unable to find an end to poverty since they have had a stake in the economic system that produces it.

The project *Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty* aimed to explore how the arts and humanities are important to deepening our understandings of the causes, experiences, and representations of poverty as well as to understand poverty as a critical juncture between the global and the local. This was explored in a multi-media exhibition which show-cased newly commissioned films from artists from artists Luna Máran from Mexico, Keyti from Senegal, and Stuart Platt from Scotland. These artists critically engaged with aesthetics of poverty, which has been an important research theme of the Poverty Research Network. In the first article, Tommaso Ranfagni, an independent curator, provides a reflection on the processes of curating this exhibition and the politics and ethics of the aesthetics of poverty.

Despite the formal abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, the poor are still subjected to various forms of forced labour today. The second article in this special edition examines the role of history in understanding and resisting the forced labour of the poor today. Norberto Ferreras, a history professor at the University of Fluminense, argues that when the new international institutions such as the League of Nations and the International Labour Organisation addressed the global problem of slavery, they defined slavery in terms of freedom and labour but did not fully take into account the material conditions of poverty. While 'slavery' was officially abolished, the material conditions of poverty continued to facilitate the reproduction of forced labour, obligation, and dependency, which were often akin to systems of slavery in all but name. Ferreras analyses how the shallow understanding of the relationship between poverty and slavery not only led to missed opportunities during the abolition of slavery, but also helped shape the problems faced by indigenous communities throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In the third article, Dieynaba Gabrielle Ndiaye, a social psychologist from the University of Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar Senegal, looks at the impact of processes of capitalisation and neoliberalisation on the poor today, arguing that the commodification of society has led to the dehumanisation of the poor. Ndiaye explains that the international institutions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund neoliberalised the Senegalese economy through its structural adjustment programmes, which had disastrous consequences for people and the social cohesion of communities in Senegal. The expansion of the consumer society in Senegal in the changing landscape of the 1980s and 1990s created new a new value system and new associations between commodities and life, underpinning the dehumanisation of the poor. Ndiaye asks whether this commodification of society and dehumanisation of the poor plays a role in the deadly lure of migration which leads so many young Senegalese to their deaths.

Communities around the world have historically engaged in resisting processes of impoverishment, from colonisation to neoliberalisation. History itself can be an important tool for these communities. Rosie Doyle, a historian at the University of Warwick, and Julia McClure, a historian at the University of Glasgow, met with communities in Oaxaca, Mexico to understand how they have mobilised their history, especially their history of common resources, to resist the different waves of colonisation and capitalisation, and their work on this topic is still ongoing. In the fourth article Rosie Doyle traces the history of how intellectuals in Oaxaca in the south of Mexico developed an alternative to development, a movement known as Comunalidad, informed by anti-capitalist and anti-colonial values.

In the fifth article, Julija Sardelic, a sociologist at the University of Leuven, explains how history is important in understanding the creation of the poverty that the Roma communities in experience today in Eastern Europe. Increasingly, these marginalised communities are mobilising their local histories to defend their citizenship rights and their way of life. In the sixth article, Rifat

Mahbub, a literature professor at Brac University, explains how Bangladeshi labour migrants in Singapore narrate their local histories as a form of resistance to their impoverishment and a way of understanding their history of migration. This article demonstrates how historical storytelling is important for understanding the relationships between macro-problems and micro-experiences as well as how memory is an important resource for impoverished migrant communities. The special edition concludes with a critical intervention by Steven Serels, a global economic historian currently based at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin, who signposts the future for a general definition of poverty that uses history to bridge the gap between local and global understandings.

The aim of the special edition has been to explore the ways in which local histories can be used to deepen understandings of poverty and to understand it, not just as an economic condition, but as a historically created political condition. The articles in this special edition indicate the different ways in which history is being used across different disciplines and across diverse communities to resist poverty in ways that challenge the definitions and policy choices of the global elites that run the development industry.

We know that poverty is a global problem, but our understanding of global poverty has been historically shallow. The international development industry emerged in the twentieth century as part of the new global political economy and it produced a new global concept of poverty. International development pursued a new idealised global condition that aimed to end poverty through programmes of modernization and industrialisation. Bruno Latour has argued that the development project to pull people out of poverty through modernisation and industrialisation led to the abandonment of the provincialized Local in pursuit of an idealised Global (Latour, 2017, 26). This pursuit of the Global and an end of poverty through modernization and industrialisation led to the destruction of many localities. New understandings of poverty must begin with the

local in order to develop a transformed understanding of the global.

Definitions of global poverty have been dominated by statistical analysis. These statistics of global poverty are useful indicators of the problem's extent, but statistical representations of poverty are also dehumanising. It is important to understand and represent the narratives behind the numbers. Conceived and used in different ways in different places around the world, history was essential to these narratives.

In the conversations that we had around the world, we discovered that local histories are essential for communities defending the local values against the erosions of global historical processes. In Latin America, indigenous history has long been part of the struggle against colonialism, as people use history to defend their historic claims to land and resources. In Quilombos (communities set up by fugitive slaves) in Brazil and indigenous communities in Mexico, history is a valuable resource to defend communities' rights to resources against capitalist production expansions. Amongst marginalised Roma communities in Eastern Europe, history has political and cultural value as a form of collective memory for maintaining a way of life and defending a right to belonging within larger political communities. In Senegal, history has been important in the multiple moments of anti-colonial struggle and the forging of new independent communities. In Bangladesh, the collective histories are important forms of resistance for preserving the integrity of local values as people move between places and establish new communities. Language is also important to these historical narratives. In Mexico, we met with representatives of a female teachers' movement who have worked tirelessly to promote indigenous languages. In Bangladesh, we met with poets crafting language to make sense of mobility and help build communities. This special edition derives from these conversations and shows the importance of placing local communities and their histories at the centre of analysis of global poverty.

This special edition appears in a year when the covid crisis has disrupted global connections and ravaged some elements of the global economy while stimulating others. Despite the early rhetoric that 'we are all this together', the impacts of the covid crisis have been profoundly unequal. The health crisis of the covid disease has been entangled with an economic crisis, and these conjoined crises are symptomatic of the underlying sickness of society. The social malaise of poverty permeates the tissue of societies, rendering them incapable of responding to new crises. History teaches us that this poverty is rarely incidental, but often the result of political choices. History can also be mobilised by communities to resist the trajectories of impoverishment.

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