

# Agency and Other Stakes of Poverty\*

JIWEI CI

*Philosophy, The University of Hong Kong*

THE nature of poverty resides in the character of those basic human needs that require material resources for their satisfaction. The needs in question are various and point to what I shall call “the stakes of poverty.” It is these stakes that make poverty the evil that it is and give the task of preventing or removing poverty its importance. Every investigation of poverty, whether normative or empirical, expresses or implies some view of the stakes of poverty. In this inquiry I place the stakes of poverty in the foreground.

In particular, I shall distinguish three stakes, and three corresponding types, of poverty—which bear on subsistence, status, and agency, respectively—and examine the relations in which the three types of poverty stand to one another. This will allow me to present a reasonably comprehensive view of what significant forms poverty can take in our world, what is bad about each of them and about their combination, and how one might begin to think constructively and with some hope, at least in theory, about removing or reducing arguably the most damaging aspect of poverty without unrealistic expectations regarding the plenitude of material resources. The picture of poverty that will emerge in this way is one in which, to put it bluntly and perhaps simplistically, the problem of sheer material deprivation (what I call subsistence poverty) is, symptomatically and sadly, at once the most urgent and, in principle, the least important.

## I. SUBSISTENCE POVERTY AND STATUS POVERTY

It is something of a commonplace that poverty can affect both subsistence and status. To be poor is to suffer a shortfall in one or both of these goods, which correspond to two different dimensions of a human being—as a biological being with subsistence needs, and as a social being with an equally irrepressible need for respect or recognition.<sup>1</sup> This commonplace distinction is worth pursuing.

\*I am indebted to Thomas Pogge for getting me to engage seriously with poverty as a normative issue, to Mike Ravvin for perceptive comments on an earlier version of this article, and to three anonymous reviewers for suggestions that have led to further improvements in the final version.

<sup>1</sup>For the most part, I use the term “respect” in a broad sense, without distinguishing between respect and esteem, and interchangeably with “recognition.” I will have occasion to consider the respect/esteem distinction in Section VIII.

As a matter of subsistence, poverty is a simple and straightforward condition, however complex its causal story and controversial the assignment of responsibility for eradicating it.<sup>2</sup> It is a species of physical neediness and, as such, has nothing intrinsically and directly demeaning about it. What can make subsistence poverty demeaning is the character of those social relations that systematically cause and maintain it. In themselves subsistence needs are purely physical needs, and being unable to meet them adequately is a condition that is obviously fraught with bad or even life-threatening consequences for those who suffer from it. But material poverty need not cast any intrinsically negative social meaning on those who happen to be in this condition.

As a matter of status, on the other hand, poverty does carry an intrinsically negative meaning: the poor here are those who have the lowest social status, by virtue of, or as reflected in, their having the lowest income. Call it status poverty—not lack of status as such (for one can lack status, be poor *in* status, in many ways) but a special kind of lack of status that is characteristic of a society in which money is an all-important marker of social standing. Such poverty represents a shortfall with reference not to subsistence needs but to the need for respect. It is still income that is lacking, yet the needs for which income is lacking are not physical but social. In status poverty, what a very low income makes difficult or impossible is not subsistence but rather participation in a range of social activities that form the basis of respectable status.<sup>3</sup>

Now, subsistence poverty has a more or less fixed point of reference in human biology. Basic physical needs can go unsatisfied because of extreme scarcity or extremely inequitable distribution. But such needs are not themselves competitive or comparative and therefore are in principle capable of being satisfied for each and all. Status poverty is different. It is found in societies in which social status is closely linked to things that only money allows one to do, so that the lower one's economic position, the fewer such things one is able to do, and the greater one's social exclusion will be. In such societies the economically worst-off will make up the status poor, whatever their absolute level of income. Status poverty is thus a strictly relative condition that derives from a society's hierarchical distribution of recognition on the basis of material wealth as a necessary means of participation in status-conferring social activities. For this reason, status

<sup>2</sup>The question of the causes of poverty, of whatever variety, and of responsibility for relieving it is not my focus in this article. Insofar as I touch on the question, I do so in the simplified context of a domestic society. For insights into this question, especially in the global context, see Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup>André Gorz distinguishes between destitution and poverty, which correspond roughly to what I call subsistence poverty and status poverty. See his illuminating discussion in *Ecology as Politics*, trans. Patsy Vigderman and Jonathan Cloud (Montréal: Black Rose Press, 1980), pp. 28–9, 58. For the effects of poverty on participation in normal social activities, see Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), pp. 89–90.

poverty cannot be alleviated by improving material conditions alone, or by any other means that stop short of removing or at least weakening the link between status and income.<sup>4</sup>

## II. ASSIMILATION OF SUBSISTENCE POVERTY TO STATUS POVERTY

Given that subsistence poverty and status poverty are conceptually distinct, three scenarios are possible. First, although those who suffer from status poverty have the least resources overall relative to others, they may have enough resources to meet their basic subsistence needs. This scenario is typical of the poor in so-called developed societies, although subsistence poverty is far from unknown in such societies. Second, it is possible for those who suffer from subsistence poverty to be free from status poverty, as when they happen to be members of a society in which income is not a significant marker of status. This was largely true, for example, of Mao's China, as we shall see.

Finally, although strictly speaking status poverty is a function of a lack of material resources for participation rather than for subsistence, in practice it is almost inevitable that in a society that permits status poverty, those who lack material resources for subsistence will also lack material resources for those activities that form the basis of respectable status. Thus, people can suffer simultaneously from subsistence poverty and status poverty, a possibility that is commonly realized in societies that are both underdeveloped and marked by a hierarchical structure of recognition based substantially on a certain level of income as a necessary means of participation. This is the form that much of the poverty in the world takes today.<sup>5</sup>

It should not be surprising if the combination of status poverty and subsistence poverty causes the negative social meaning associated with the former to be attached to the latter as well. After all, the low level of income that makes subsistence difficult is also what prevents participation in normal social activities, and thus a low level of income per se will generally carry negative social meaning, irrespective of its effects on subsistence or status. There is nevertheless a sense in which this negative meaning belongs directly to status poverty rather than subsistence poverty.<sup>6</sup> We may think of the process involved as the inevitable superimposition of negative social meaning onto

<sup>4</sup>This is especially true of modern, industrial societies, with their distinctive ways of perpetuating status poverty through such mechanisms as "polarization" and "obsolescence." See Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 67–76.

<sup>5</sup>For poignant descriptions of poverty in present-day China that often involve hardship and low status at the same time, see *Kankan Tamen*, ed. Zhou Yongping, et al. (Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian Chubanshe, 2004); *Xiang Tong, Zai Chengshi De Shenchu*, ed. Xu Xiao and Liang Xiaoyan (Haikoushi: Hainan Chubanshe, 2006).

<sup>6</sup>It is indicative of this that low income earners, even in rich societies, are often tempted to sacrifice subsistence for participation. See Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), ch. 7.

subsistence poverty via status poverty, indeed the assimilation of subsistence poverty to status poverty.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, a simple case of subsistence poverty which is otherwise free of social meaning receives a stigma whose effect can only be described as adding insult to injury.<sup>8</sup> This is not in itself an indictment of status poverty, but it is impossible to protest against the social assimilation of subsistence poverty to status poverty without in some way taking issue with the very presence of status poverty that makes this possible. Since the added insult to those in the grip of subsistence poverty is unavoidable in a society that also permits status poverty, there is something morally problematic with any society that allows the existence of subsistence and status poverty at the same time. At the very least, until subsistence poverty is overcome through the creation of more wealth or a more equitable distribution of existing wealth, status poverty is a luxury that no reasonably just or decent society can accept with good conscience.<sup>9</sup>

### III. SUBSISTENCE POVERTY AND STATUS POVERTY IN CHINA

It may help move our discussion forward on a surer footing if I bring the distinction developed so far to bear on The People's Republic of China's record of fighting poverty. On the one hand, China is sometimes credited with having made great strides in the fight against poverty since the start of the Reform era in the late 1970s. On the other hand, it is no less often claimed that poverty has become a worse problem in China today than it was in Mao's time. Both claims contain an element of truth, in my view, and the distinction between subsistence and status poverty is especially useful for capturing what is true in each claim.

<sup>7</sup>Such superimposition of negative meaning onto subsistence poverty is aided by a powerful social mechanism. If poverty is explained by tracing its causes to factors other than the poor themselves, say to social injustice or even to bad luck, the superimposition is blocked. But a predominant explanation involves attribution of a special kind of responsibility to the poor themselves for their own condition. The poor are poor, according to this explanation, because they lack either the willingness (moral virtues) or the ability (instrumental virtues) to be otherwise. Where some such explanation is accepted, subsistence poverty takes on a negative meaning that is not intrinsic to it, and status poverty takes on an *extra* negative meaning that reinforces its intrinsically negative meaning. Distinct from whether one is responsible for one's condition of poverty in this sense, and even more important, is whether one has chosen this condition. The sting of the blame for poverty is the idea that the poor do not choose poverty but supposedly lack the moral or instrumental virtues to avoid it. This combination of being responsible for one's poverty and yet not properly choosing it helps make possible the negative social meaning that poverty often has.

<sup>8</sup>In the context of discussing Nietzsche, Arthur C. Danto, "Some remarks on *The Genealogy of Morals*," *Reading Nietzsche*, ed. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 13–28 at p. 21, introduces a useful distinction between "extensional suffering and intensional suffering, where the latter consists in an interpretation of the former." If subsistence poverty is a kind of extensional suffering, the negative meaning given to it can be a source of additional, intensional suffering. As Danto (*ibid.*) observes (in expounding Nietzsche), "while extensional suffering is bad enough, often it is many times compounded by our interpretations of it, which are often far worse than the disorder itself."

<sup>9</sup>This is continuous in spirit with Henry Shue's "priority principle" in *Basic Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 114–19.

Material scarcity was undoubtedly a very serious problem in Mao's time. Generally speaking, however, it was treated as a matter of subsistence poverty alone, with no significant implications for status. The fight against material scarcity thus conceived was in turn framed by the collective pursuit of the goal of communism. Though it was something to be overcome on the road to communism, subsistence poverty was nevertheless a spur to action aimed at bringing about collective prosperity and eventually communism, or so it was believed, and as such it was regarded as the source of the ascetic virtues required for the transition to communism. In this spirit, the entire population embraced the condition of material scarcity, which was a fact of Chinese society to begin with, and in so doing turned necessity into choice.

The important thing is not so much that people were by and large equally poor, but rather that in their condition of equal poverty they were motivated to wage a common struggle to overcome poverty and realize a better future.<sup>10</sup> Not only did the largely equal distribution of material resources block the rise of status poverty and prevent subsistence poverty from acquiring any negative meaning, the collective cause of communism actually gave positive social meaning to subsistence poverty.<sup>11</sup> In the context of this cause, subsistence poverty was not an obstacle to participation in social life and the formation of a valued self. Rather, subsistence poverty made possible participation in a special kind of social life and the formation of a special kind of self—an ascetic self that was based on collectivistic values informed by a communist *telos*. This communist ascetic self was the only kind of self that was socially valued and allowed to serve as a basis of respect. Far from being a barrier to participation in the normal activities constitutive of this self, lack of individual wealth and possession was valorized in political terms and treated as an enabling or even necessary condition for participation in such activities.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Insofar as some social groups were economically less well off than others, say "workers" and "peasants" in comparison with "intellectuals," the former were compensated, as it were, in the form of higher political standing and greater cultural representation. Against this background, the comparative economic disadvantage of "workers" and "peasants" took on a different social meaning under Deng Xiaoping and his successor Jiang Zemin, in that the countervailing factors characteristic of the Mao era had gradually disappeared. In this later period, those who were at the receiving end of political and cultural exclusion on top of economic disadvantage must have felt an especially damaging combination of deprivation and demoralization. This potentially explosive situation has been ameliorated to some degree in the past several years but it is increasingly clear that the apparently enhanced representation of the formerly dominant groups by the official media is more propagandist than cultural. For a theoretical account of social relations in terms of multiple dimensions of superiority and inferiority, see Pierre Bourdieu, "The social space and the genesis of groups," *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985), 723–44.

<sup>11</sup>The largely equal distribution was made possible by the state's control of almost all the means of production and its providing almost everyone with a livelihood, however minimal, including such levels of education and medical care as resources permitted.

<sup>12</sup>More extensive discussion can be found in my *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), ch. 4. By way of contrast, it is interesting to note that in Mao's China there was nothing like the kind of competing demands for subsistence and participation discussed in Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, ch. 7.

Now, some three decades into what is still called the Reform, the goal of communism has been given up, except in occasional rhetoric, and the ascetic self that used to make sense in the context of the collective pursuit of communism is no longer a social ideal. As a result, subsistence poverty has become empty of all positive significance—no longer redeemed by association with ascetic virtues, solidarity in a common cause, or the prospect of material and spiritual plenitude for everyone with the advent of communism.

This withdrawal of positive meaning from subsistence poverty is compounded by the simultaneous rise of status poverty and a new valorization of individual wealth. Formerly the necessary condition for a kind of valorized (ascetic) self, serious lack of wealth is now an obstacle to participation in the normal activities of education, employment, and consumption that are constitutive of the new kind of (hedonistic) self that is increasingly the social ideal in post-Mao China.<sup>13</sup> With the shift from one paradigm of normal self-constituting activities to another, social exclusion has come to be based on wealth rather than political standing, and so, however substantial the success in reducing subsistence poverty, that success is now part of a larger picture in which the new problem of status poverty looms larger and larger.<sup>14</sup> It is only in the context of the new phenomenon of status poverty that we can grasp the cause and significance of the sharp rise in inequality of income in post-Mao China. The poor are now those who are worst off in both subsistence and status, even though in most cases their absolute level of subsistence is higher than it was or would have been in Mao's time. Thus, the problem of poverty has been reduced in one dimension and enlarged in another.

There is no obvious way of comparing the overall situation of poverty in Mao's time and in ours and saying which is worse. What makes one hesitant to say that things are better now, however, is the pervasiveness of status poverty in a society which, given its general level of material prosperity, still can ill afford it. The result is the compounding of subsistence poverty with status poverty in the life of a new underclass. Even if this is not enough for concluding that things are worse, one can nevertheless say with reasonable confidence that since the start of the Reform, poverty has acquired a new dimension and a new meaning and has become a new source of social suffering.

#### IV. POVERTY AND ASCETICISM

What the experience of coping with material scarcity in Mao's China confirms and illustrates is that material scarcity can be treated as a matter of subsistence poverty alone and that subsistence poverty on its own need carry no negative

<sup>13</sup>For an account of the shift from asceticism in Mao's China to hedonism in post-Mao China, see my *Dialectic*, Introduction.

<sup>14</sup>For a detailed account of the new social exclusion, with special reference to the plight of laid-off female workers, see Shi Tong, *Zhongguo Shehui Zhuanxing Shiqi De Shehui Paiji* (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2004).

social meaning. This experience also suggests that there is a lot to be said for preventing subsistence poverty from being associated with negative social meaning, especially under conditions of severe material scarcity. What is even more revealing about this experience is how, under certain conditions, subsistence poverty can be interpreted so as to receive *positive* meaning. This is something I want to explore further now, by way of reflecting on the distinction between poverty and asceticism to which I have made a passing reference in my characterization of the fight against poverty in Mao's China.

A poor person and an ascetic are alike in having a minimum of material resources. But this similarity is only external. From the internal point of view, an ascetic, in what may be treated as the typical case, *chooses* to deprive himself of material resources that otherwise would be or might be available, and for this reason we cannot speak of material *deprivation* in the standard sense. Alternatively, an ascetic (as in Mao's China) may embrace a condition of limited material resources that happens to be his lot and thereby turn a life of poverty into an ascetic life. Thus, an ascetic is someone who either chooses to be poor or makes a virtue of the necessity of being poor. In both cases, though more so in the first than in the second, one can be said to *will* a life of material scarcity. To be more precise, what one wills is subsistence poverty, and because one wills it in order to better participate in those activities that make up one's chosen conception of the good life, no status poverty will result, at least in one's own eyes.

To be sure, the subsistence poverty in question must be of a kind and severity that can be thus embraced, for all the plasticity of voluntary human endurance, just as it may be granted that ascetic practices can at least in some cases be induced and sustained by highly questionable ideologies. But facts such as these do not undermine the conclusion that has emerged from our brief comparison of the unwilling poor and the ascetic: that subsistence poverty is something that can take on positive meaning by being self-imposed or at least willingly accepted.

This is enough to set asceticism apart from simple poverty and to direct our attention to the crucial role of choice in the experience and meaning of poverty. Whereas disrespect is part of the social meaning of status poverty, and all too often even of subsistence poverty through superimposition, it need not be, and tends not to be, part of the social meaning of asceticism—thanks to the exercise of choice. And whereas disrespect is highly reflexive for the unwilling poor, it is not so for an ascetic even in the unlikely event that she is an object of disrespect—again thanks to the exercise of choice.<sup>15</sup> In asceticism, then, status poverty is either absent or non-reflexive, and subsistence poverty is made positive by choice and the resultant intactness of self-respect.

<sup>15</sup>On the reflexivity of respect and disrespect, see Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 272–73.



The upshot is that subsistence poverty, normally an undesirable condition, can under certain conditions be redeemed and made compatible with agency and self-respect; it is indeed required for an ascetic's kind of agency and self-respect. That this is possible—and this is my main reason for examining the ascetic's case<sup>16</sup>—suggests the need for a third, more complex notion of poverty. Some such notion is necessary if we are to make sense of the condition of the ascetic: even if we ourselves do not subscribe to an ascetic conception of the good life, we can at least appreciate what prevents material scarcity from being such a bad thing for someone who does. There is clearly a difference between an ascetic, who is materially poor by choice, and someone who is equally materially poor but unwillingly so. The difference, I suggest, is that the latter person, and only the latter person, is in a condition of what I shall call agency poverty, by which I mean a lack of material resources that causes a reduction or loss of agency and with it self-respect. In order to say more about this notion of poverty, I must first say something about my notion of agency, along the way also giving more systematic content to the notion of self-respect.

## V. AGENCY AND AGENCY POVERTY

By agency I refer to a distinctively human form of meaningful causality in which causal efficacy (or power, for short) is appropriated from, and in the interest of, a center of meaning (or subjectivity, for short, or self). To express this notion of agency in a formula, we can speak of agency as a matter of “power organized as subjectivity” or “subjectivity achieved through power.”<sup>17</sup>

As used here the term “power” is to be understood in a broad sense to cover all instances of human causal efficacy. Nietzsche's account is an obvious point of reference, but only provided that power is given a more abstract construal than some of Nietzsche's remarks appear to suggest. This is especially necessary in view of Nietzsche's claim that “life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation.”<sup>18</sup> For

<sup>16</sup>What is true of the ascetic can also be true of those who for ecological reasons prefer to live a life that is frugal to the point of poverty from an external point of view. For such people, “physical poverty is not humiliating when it proceeds from choosing to be satisfied with less and not from being relegated to the lower ranks of society” (Gorz, *Ecology*, 32).

<sup>17</sup>This notion of agency is a largely Nietzschean one, and Mark Warren gives an excellent exposition of it in *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988). The expression “power organized as subjectivity” is taken from Warren, p. 59. My own understanding of agency draws on Nietzsche and Warren but is meant to be judged on its own merits rather than in terms of accuracy of representation of either Nietzsche's or Warren's ideas. In the abbreviated account of agency given in the two paragraphs that follow, I find it difficult and awkward to avoid formulations I have used before in, say, “Evaluating agency: a fundamental question for social and political philosophy,” *Metaphilosophy*, 42 (2011), 261–81. I apologize to readers who are already familiar with my fuller account of agency from which the brief sketch here is drawn.

<sup>18</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), aphorism 259.



our purposes, this claim needs to be taken more abstractly so that power means human causal efficacy in general and, as such, may or may not literally take the form of injury, suppression, or exploitation. As a characterization of power as such rather than particular instantiations of power, Nietzsche's formulation "overpowering of what is alien" is accurate only if taken in this more abstract sense.

Power is indiscriminate and meaningless until it is organized as subjectivity—until, that is, it contributes to and issues from a self. We might indeed say that the distinctively human significance of power lies in the formation and maintenance of a self, along with its reflexive dimension in the shape of a sense of self. Thus understood, neither self nor power stands alone. A self is not anything like a metaphysical essence but a human capacity that comes to be realized only through concrete activities or, in the terms I am using, experiences of power. It is only through such experiences that a self is able, cumulatively and unceasingly, to emerge and persist: a subject who forms so-called intentions and causes things to happen in accord with such intentions, registers such intentions and the effects of carrying them out as emanating from and belonging to a self, attaches value to this self and its activities through acts of interpretation, and, of course, who does all these things as a subject among subjects.

When one thus enjoys a subjectivity that is securely grounded on experiences of power, one will have a positive appraisal of oneself and feel good about oneself. Self-respect is none other than this cognitive and affective state—an epiphenomenon that attends upon the unity of power and subjectivity and that of course typically relies to some degree on positive feedback from the right quarters. Like the term "subjectivity," "self-respect" connotes the evaluative reflexivity that is an integral part of being a human agent. In thus marking the unity of power and subjectivity, the nature of self-respect shows, on the one hand, that distinctively human power always means the power of a self, or else power would be an instance of causal efficacy or expenditure of energy that is devoid of all distinctively human significance and motivation, and, on the other, that a self cannot be formed or sustained independently of experiences of power, or else it would be a mere potential that signifies little in the abstract. It is this mutually constitutive relation between self and power, with power forming the very stuff of subjectivity and subjectivity giving shape and meaning to power, that I see as the defining characteristic of human agency. To put this point in Nietzschean terms, we might say that what Nietzsche calls the will to power is, in the human case, the will to selfhood through power.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Nietzsche's insight here is twofold: seeing selfhood as systematically dependent on power and, more radically, showing that even the self, not just our picture of the external world, is in an important sense a construction. Nietzsche writes, for example, that "the 'subject' is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), aphorism 481.

Given this account of agency, agency poverty can be understood in the following way.<sup>20</sup> In agency poverty, the material resources one lacks are those required for self-constituting activities, by some or any reasonable standard (a notion I shall later refine in terms of a normal level or range of agency). The significance of this material deprivation is that it leads to power deprivation, which in turn poses a threat to subjectivity, a threat whose adverse effects are registered in the epiphenomenon of lack of self-respect. Thus, what should deeply worry us about agency poverty is not material deprivation as such, though this is important up to a point, nor even power deprivation as such, though this is more directly important, but the fact that material deprivation can lead to power deprivation, which in turn can lead to subjectivity or agency deprivation. Agency poverty is nothing less than a condition in which those involved are prevented by material deprivation from engaging in self-constituting experiences of power and thus from maintaining themselves as subjects. Whenever material deprivation leads to agency deprivation, it undermines the respect for oneself that is part and parcel of a self. More than merely debilitating and humiliating, agency poverty is positively dehumanizing.

Agency poverty, thus understood, is not only bad but unconditionally bad. The same is not true of either subsistence poverty or status poverty. Subsistence poverty is bad, at least in the first instance, but it can be redeemed or made positive by an exercise of choice, as in asceticism. Every instance in which subsistence poverty appears to be unconditionally bad is one in which agency poverty is also present. This can be the case either because subsistence poverty is given a social meaning that undermines agency and self-respect, or because the scarcity of resources is so severe that subsistence poverty is no longer compatible with freedom from agency poverty. Otherwise, even when it is not redeemed or made positive as in asceticism, subsistence poverty at least need not be so bad as to be dehumanizing.

Likewise, status poverty, bad though it is, need not be unconditionally bad as long as it does not cause agency poverty. Status poverty and agency poverty have in common the fact that there is a shortfall in resources for participation in activities. But there the similarity ends. To begin with, status poverty is intrinsically relative whereas agency poverty need not be: it does not make sense to say that all members of a society suffer from status poverty or are equal in status poverty, whereas it is possible for all members of a society to suffer from agency poverty, say as a result of extreme material scarcity. Moreover, where both

<sup>20</sup>What I call agency poverty is different from Sen's concept of "capability deprivation" (*Development*, ch. 4). The main difference is that agency, as I use the term, is an internally differentiated concept that gives pride of place to subjectivity and self-constitution over power as such. It is not entirely clear whether capability as used by Sen involves both power and subjectivity or power alone; on the face of it, at least the emphasis seems to be on power. Even if capability is extensionally identical to agency as I use the term, and hence capability deprivation is extensionally identical to agency poverty, the intensional difference remains and is important, not least with regard to the explanatory focus of the two concepts.

status poverty and agency poverty involve lack of respect, agency poverty occurs only if the lack of respect is reflexive (this is why an ascetic is immune from agency poverty), whereas status poverty does not depend on such reflexivity. Thus, one can be in a position of status poverty without suffering from agency poverty, thanks to the blocking of reflexivity, just as one can be in a position of agency poverty without suffering from status poverty, as in a situation of evenly distributed extreme material scarcity. It is therefore possible for a society to have agency poverty without status poverty. Whether the converse is also possible is a question I will pick up later.

Thus, it is true of both subsistence poverty and status poverty that what appears unconditionally bad about either is actually the agency poverty that goes with it (when it does). In this sense agency poverty may be said to be the real sting of subsistence poverty and status poverty. It is therefore especially important to examine the relation in which subsistence poverty and status poverty stand to agency poverty.

## VI. AGENCY DESPITE SUBSISTENCE POVERTY: THE IMPERATIVE OF ALIGNMENT

One of the lessons that can be drawn from the fight against poverty in Mao's China, as we saw earlier, is that even quite severe material scarcity, short of the magnitude of a disaster, need not prevent a society from developing a range of social activities that constitute the basis of agency and self-respect. It is worth pursuing this line of thinking at a higher level of abstraction, that is, in terms of the general question of what can and should be done to make agency available to all members of society when conditions of subsistence poverty prevail.

On the face of it, a society that lacks material resources for meeting the subsistence needs of its members may be expected also to lack material resources for satisfying their need for agency. Agency requires a level of resources that is sufficient for a degree of power that is in turn sufficient for the formation and continuation of one or another form of subjectivity. Freedom from agency poverty thus conceived seems a taller order than freedom from mere subsistence poverty. The Chinese experience we have considered, however, shows that the opposite can be the case.

Clearly, what a society can do about subsistence poverty depends on the level of material resources available to it. It is entirely possible that even when a society really does as much as it can under the resource constraint, the results may still be insufficient by any reasonable standard of human subsistence. Yet no society can reasonably be required to do more.

If freedom from subsistence poverty is rather rigidly subject to the resource constraint, freedom from agency poverty is not. While subsistence is amenable to relatively clear definition and reasonably objective measurement, participation, power, and subjectivity allow for a considerable degree of social flexibility and

cross-societal variability. The important thing is that it is both possible and reasonable to think of the standard that defines agency poverty and informs efforts to prevent or remove it as something that is internal to the society in question. The standard should be internal because of what it measures: not material resources as such, and not powers in themselves, but material resources as constituents of powers and powers in turn as necessary conditions of subjectivity.

Working with this internal notion of agency poverty, we can approach a society's understanding of itself in terms of an organized collection of agents (no society can do without such an understanding, if only implicit), and, by clarifying and extrapolating from this self-understanding, arrive at a standard for the prevention or removal of agency poverty. Thus, the normal range of participation includes those activities that all normally functioning members of society are expected to be able to perform and that serve as the social bases of respect and self-respect. If people are expected to have a job or risk losing respect and self-respect, then having a job is within the normal range of participation. The same is true of being able to find a mate, to enjoy certain consumer goods, and so on, as long as the activities or accomplishments involved make up what it means to be a normally functioning member of society, whether or not these activities or accomplishments are considered worthwhile or necessary from an external point of view. Likewise, being able, and under normal circumstances being motivated, to participate in the political process is an integral part of agency in a society that conceives of itself as a democracy and of its members as equal citizens. The important thing is that we judge a society, in the first instance, by a standard that is implicit in its own understanding of what the society is or realistically aspires to be.<sup>21</sup>

Given this internal standard of agency and agency poverty, a society that suffers from a considerable degree of subsistence poverty despite its best efforts can still meet a sufficient standard of freedom from agency poverty. For the standard is determined in keeping with a society's own (implicit) understanding of agency and of the normal range of activities necessary for such agency, and thus it follows that the society can reasonably be presumed to have the ability to handle its regular level of material scarcity in such a way as to place every member within *its own* normal agency range.<sup>22</sup> Here, "ought" is supported by "can" according to a society's self-understanding and self-assessment. If a society fails to bring its standard of normal agency within the reach of every member, therefore, it will not be for lack of resources, the resource constraint notwithstanding.

<sup>21</sup>How this self-understanding comes about is in turn something to be judged by an internal standard, in the first instance. I say "in the first instance" in both cases in order to leave room for the possibility of legitimate criticism from an external point of view—for example, criticism in terms of adaptive preferences. How such criticism is exactly to be conceived is beyond my present concerns, however.

<sup>22</sup>With due allowance for some types of exceptions, such as the severely handicapped, the satisfaction of whose needs for agency presents a different kind of challenge.

Instead, every kind of material deprivation that systematically pulls a disadvantaged group of people below the normal agency range implicit in the society's self-image must be blamed on the society's failure to attach sufficient priority to this most fundamental of its moral responsibilities—the responsibility to establish and implement an alignment of its standard of human agency and its material conditions so as to bring within the society's normal agency range every member of society who makes a reasonable effort. Since this responsibility is internally generated, a society that fails to meet it exposes itself to the charge that it is not taking its own moral standards seriously. Behind this charge is an internal argument for—or internal critique in support of—the right to freedom from agency poverty even under conditions of subsistence poverty.

There is no guarantee, to be sure, that a society will not have a self-understanding that is very *undemanding* in its conception of agency and hence of what it can reasonably be expected to do about agency poverty. Given such a conception, the society in question will not have to do much by its own lights, or under the pressure of its own collective self-understanding. To this possible scenario the best answer is a democratic organization of society; indeed, the possibility of such a scenario and the need to avoid it constitute in themselves a distinctive argument for democracy. To the extent that a society is democratically organized, the state is under pressure to secure legitimacy by pitching its notion of normal human agency and of its corresponding responsibility toward its citizens at a reasonably high level. Think of this pressure in terms of a choice: the choice between, on the one hand, an *agency deficit* that is likely to occur if agency is pitched at a sufficiently high level for purposes of winning popular support, with the inevitable result of raising the probability of a failed promise, and, on the other, a *legitimacy deficit* the probability of which is increased in proportion as the standard of agency is lowered and the likelihood of agency deficit thereby reduced.

Not surprisingly, in a democratic society the choice tends to be made in favor of aiming for a relatively high standard of agency and tolerating the resulting risk of an agency deficit, if only because a government or political party that promises very little and is prepared to do very little, even in political rhetoric, lays itself open to competition and attack from those who will have an easy time showing that more can and should be done. It is true that the existence of any serious agency deficit by a society's own standard has the potential to internally undermine claims to legitimacy based on that standard. After all, legitimacy requires not only promising a reasonably high level of agency but also making good on that promise. Thus, pitching agency at a reasonably high level to satisfy the need for legitimacy is itself the source of a different kind of threat to legitimacy. But even this does not weaken the need to pitch agency at a reasonably high level in order to win popular support and secure the right to govern in the first place.

It is this need to aim for a reasonably high standard of agency, with the ever-present threat of agency deficit as a result, that prevents a society's self-understanding of agency from being so undemanding as to leave little room for internal critique. The unconstrained use of the space for internal critique presupposes a truly democratic organization of society with its attendant effectual freedoms. Indeed, this presupposition can be regarded as an *internal* argument for democracy.<sup>23</sup> One of the grave defects of a non-democratic society is precisely that its members cannot freely and effectively hold their government, and their society at large, to account for failing to operate with a reasonably high standard of normal agency and failing to eliminate agency poverty by such a standard.

In the world as we find it, it can reasonably be claimed that few states are truly democratic, although it would also be hard to deny that some states are significantly more democratic than others. Thus, the fight to remove agency poverty is at the same time a fight for democracy. This does not mean that the room for internal critique that democracy opens up is unlimited, but such room should be quite large. Nor does it mean that the size and locus of this space are fixed and the same for all societies, for such things are properly subject to democratic contestation and revision and therefore may be expected to vary from society to society and to change over time. What informs the combined fights for democracy and for freedom from agency poverty is the substantively flexible claim that any society can and should remove agency poverty according to a reasonably high standard that is part of its self-understanding as a democratically organized collection of agents, or else it must either be in a situation of extreme material scarcity or deserve to suffer a serious legitimacy deficit.

I make this claim on the assumption, of course, that the standard of agency that serves as the point of reference here is a society's own. This claim is meant to hold even under the insistence that the standard be reasonably high. What makes the standard *reasonably* high is that it allows *as much as possible* to be done to promote agency and respect under conditions of subsistence poverty. It is necessary to elaborate on the idea of a reasonably high standard and this brings me to the core of the internal argument for freedom from agency poverty despite subsistence poverty.

The most important feature of an internally generated standard is its flexibility, and what is most flexible about it is the relation between agency and material conditions. Agency poverty, as we have seen, consists in a particular relation between the level of material resources and the level of agency rather than in any

<sup>23</sup>A similar argument for democracy can be derived from Pogge's institutional (as opposed to interactional) understanding of human rights, in that members of a non-democratic society cannot be held responsible, with any reasonable degree of stringency, for harm arising from an unjust institutional order and for not taking strong action to reform that order. For the distinction between an institutional and an interactional understanding of human rights, see Pogge, *World Poverty*, pp. 64–67.

absolute level of material resources itself. Given that agency poverty is relational, the task of doing something about it must be relational, too: a matter of finding the right relation between the two elements involved. Thus, a society's task to remove agency poverty is a matter not of lessening the resource constraint (this would be covered by the task of removing subsistence poverty) but of aligning its understanding of agency with its resource constraint, such as it is, in such a way that it is possible for every member to have enough resources for the purposes of agency and respect by the society's own standard.

The flexibility of this task gives a society a special power and responsibility with respect to the prevention or removal of agency poverty within it. It follows that, barring conditions of extreme scarcity, if a society's resource constraint is such as not to allow each and every member access to sufficient resources for agency and respect, then, given its power and responsibility, the society is itself to blame for sticking to a norm of agency that is out of keeping with its material conditions. Accordingly, the moral burden is on the society either to modify its norm of agency, with its range of self-constituting activities, or to improve its material conditions so that these two elements can be properly aligned. A society must stand accused of fundamental injustice if it does not reform itself to bring about an alignment of agency and material conditions that gives each and every one of its members the wherewithal to participate in self-constituting activities and live the life of an agent worthy of respect and self-respect by the society's own standard.

It is worth emphasizing that a society's modification of its norm of agency to be in line with its unfavorable material conditions does not imply a lowering of the norm of agency. What is higher or lower is the level of material resources required for normal agency, not the level of agency itself. For example, in a very poor society it would be a bad idea to expect a normal agent, say in the process of acquiring and maintaining a job, to display a degree of cleanliness that only easy access to a washing machine and a shower facility makes possible. Depending on the exact material conditions, it could also be misguided to include among the necessary means of normal agency the possession of a computer and a mobile phone, access to the internet, the ability to afford to dress according to ever-changing codes of fashion and to go to the right places of entertainment or consumption, and so on, not to mention ownership of a sizable and comfortable apartment, a suitable kind of car, and the financial means to travel regularly for pleasure.

As a matter of fact, almost all of these things have become more or less necessary conditions for normal agency and respectability in China today, while none of them or of their equivalents (the possession of a television set or a telephone, and so on) was in Mao's China. As these examples show, when a poor society aligns its standard of normal agency with its unfavorable material circumstances, it is not thereby adopting a lower standard of agency. What it is doing instead is simply making sure that the standard of normal agency is not pegged to things that only some members of society would be able to afford. Of course, the level of material resources required for normal agency is lower, but



this need not mean that the standard of agency itself is lower, except on the (unsupported) assumption that there is a straightforwardly positive correlation between level of material resources and level of agency. My idea of alignment of agency and resources thus boils down to this: a society's standard of normal agency should be so conceived that it does not require the production and consumption of things of which there could not be enough for everyone, given the resource constraint.

This is not to suggest, of course, that satisfying the imperative of alignment will be easy, but it makes a world of difference that the difficulty does not issue in any inflexible way from the resource constraint. Bear in mind that we understand material scarcity here in terms of its effects on agency and understand agency in turn in an internal fashion, such that material scarcity is strictly relative to the self-constituting activities that happen to matter in the society in question. Given this understanding, relative material abundance is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for bringing about the alignment.

That relative material abundance is not a necessary condition for fulfilling the imperative of alignment makes it possible for a relatively materially poor society to be free from agency poverty. Thus, a society that is regarded as materially poor by some external standard can do very well, by its own standard and to its credit, if it secures for each of its members sufficient material resources for purposes of agency and respect. In such a society (think of the examples I have given of Mao's China) material possessions are unlikely to figure as one of the defining bases of participation and recognition; or, to the extent that they do, they are likely to be more or less equally distributed. In either case, resources that may look meager from an external point of view do not lead to agency poverty from an internal point of view, since they suffice for internal purposes of participation in normal self-constituting activities.

By the same token—and this shows that relative material abundance is not a sufficient condition for satisfying the imperative of alignment—a society that is materially rich by some external standard can do a bad job of preventing or removing agency poverty, by its own standards, if it attaches great importance to individual income as a means of social participation, systematically linking wealth to recognition, and at the same time permits a sharp inequality in wealth, with many people falling below the level that is socially deemed necessary to support a normal level of agency and respect. What is important is not material abundance as such, nor even a relatively equal share in material abundance, but rather the alignment of a society's standard of agency with the material resources at its disposal, an alignment that should allow everyone to live a life compatible with respect and self-respect.

The imperative of alignment is, as I have emphasized, a requirement of an internal kind that calls for the provision of sufficient resources to every member of society for the purposes of agency and respect as conceived by the society itself, subject to its own resource constraint. As such, the imperative is flexible, and the

only fixed point of reference is the avoidance of agency poverty, whatever the level of subsistence. There is one particular form, however, that the alignment may have to take in the case of extreme or nearly extreme subsistence poverty. When subsistence poverty reaches a critical level, the struggle against it can turn into a desperate fight for survival. In such a fight, the human need for agency and respect, though still at stake, is pushed into the background, so desperately absorbing is the struggle to maintain life itself. It is understandable if for those who happen to be in such dire straits and for those others who identify with them in their fight against poverty, the *only* stake in poverty appears to be subsistence and survival.

In the event that a society finds itself in this kind of crisis, it may well be that the only proper alignment of agency and material resources is complete de-alignment: the severing of any links that happen to exist between socially valued forms of agency on the one hand and levels of income on the other, so that agency can no longer be undermined by low levels of income. Once such links are severed through a revolution in the society's conception of agency, the twofold threat that extreme subsistence poverty poses in the case of the worst-off—to their agency and their sheer life—becomes simplified into a single threat to sheer life. This is no mean outcome, halving the pain of poverty, as it were, by effectively removing the insult and leaving only the injury. In this way agency and respect are preserved because they are no longer tied to income and material possession—and this for the simple yet all-important reason that under the circumstances such links would be incompatible with giving every member of society enough resources to live a life of normal agency and perhaps even with the preservation of every member of society.

Two important implications flow from the uncoupling of agency and income. First, given that agency and respect are no longer tied to material possessions, all values and institutions that rest upon this connection (not least private property rights), along with the inequalities they justify, cease to have any basis. Second, given that the only thing that remains at stake in the access to material resources is subsistence, all values and institutions that serve to regulate the distribution of resources for purposes beyond subsistence (private property rights again being a pre-eminent example) must be adjusted or abandoned in favor of the most effective preservation of human life. These implications will hold until the crisis of extreme subsistence poverty is sufficiently lifted that an alignment of agency and resources can be brought to bear on it without having to cut the connection between agency and resources altogether.

## VII. AGENCY DESPITE SUBSISTENCE POVERTY: THE CASE OF CHINA

To my earlier discussion of subsistence poverty and status poverty in China, it is worth adding a brief account of agency poverty. When Mao's China is said to have an impressive record of fighting poverty, it is usually subsistence poverty

that is under consideration. What I believe is more distinctive of that record, however, has to do with the prevention or removal of agency poverty. This was accomplished by cutting the link between income and all socially valued forms of agency, including self-respect as their epiphenomenon. Not only was individual wealth no longer treated as a necessary condition of any socially valued forms of agency, it was perceived as a source of bourgeois vices and, as such, an obstacle to the realization of the forms of agency envisioned by socialism. As part of this realignment of values, individual subsistence poverty came to be socially regarded both as a marker of membership in politically progressive classes and as a source of proletarian virtues. What remained undesirable about poverty—the miseries of hunger and cold and so on—had to do with the material dimension of human life alone. Poverty was a matter of subsistence rather than participation, agency, and respect.

In this way, the daunting problems of material scarcity which the Communist Party inherited were reconceived through the simplification of poverty into a problem of sheer subsistence on the one hand and through the revaluation of subsistence poverty on the other. This radical reconceptualization of poverty laid the foundation for instituting a scheme of largely equal distribution of material resources.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, this scheme was somewhat compromised by the haphazard application of the so-called socialist principle of reward based on contribution, and was severely compromised by the city/countryside divide and the relegation of the entire rural population to effectively second-class status with respect to a range of what we would now call rights and entitlements.<sup>25</sup> These compromises notwithstanding, the reconceptualization of poverty and the largely equal distribution of resources informed by it added up to a momentous, indeed foundational, success in the fight against material scarcity. A rather different, and narrower, kind of success came only later, this time in the already simplified struggle against subsistence poverty—a success that took the form of increased agricultural outputs and so on.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup>This equality did not amount, however, to the disappearance or even reduction of the hierarchical nature of Chinese society. What happened was not the removal of hierarchy as such but the removal of wealth as a basis of hierarchy and hence the removal of status poverty. It is arguable that the replacement of one basis of hierarchy (wealth) with another (political performance) was a rather limited achievement, if an achievement at all, in its own right. Nevertheless, there seems little doubt that this replacement helped prevent the already serious subsistence poverty prevalent in China at the time from being compounded by agency and status poverty, a scenario which would have been morally less acceptable.

<sup>25</sup>For an analysis of the city/countryside divide in terms of political economy, see John Knight, Li Shi, and Song Lina, “Zhongguo Chengxiang Chaju De Zhengzhi Jingjixue Fenxi,” pp. 176–97 in *Zhuangui Zhongguo: Shenshi Shehui Gongzheng He Pingdeng*, ed. Yao Yang (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 2004).

<sup>26</sup>The record of combating poverty in Mao’s China is far from one of unmitigated success. After all, a disaster in a class of its own happened in the domain of sheer subsistence as a result of the huge political mistake known as the Great Leap Forward. That this mistake was clearly avoidable both makes those responsible for it (especially Mao) less forgivable and preserves the otherwise positive lessons of the Chinese experience as a whole.

There is little doubt that the fight against subsistence poverty has been taken much further since Mao's time.<sup>27</sup> But then precisely because material conditions have improved it has become harder to conceive poverty as essentially a problem of subsistence. One of the most profound changes that has taken place in post-Mao China is the gradual but unmistakable re-coupling of agency and wealth as a means of social participation. Divested of all positive value in Mao's time, individual wealth has made a resounding comeback as a basis of agency and status since then—so much so that, as one (by no means unrepresentative) rural slogan has it, it is glorious to become rich and cowardly to remain poor.<sup>28</sup>

In this new ethos, an extremely large number of people whose condition of subsistence has improved compared with their own condition or their counterparts' in Mao's time find themselves having to cope with a problem that did not exist then: the problem of agency poverty. It should come as no surprise that agency poverty in the absence of acute subsistence poverty can feel a lot worse than a considerably higher degree of subsistence poverty that is not compounded by agency poverty. In this sense it may even be said that poverty is a worse problem in China today than in Mao's time—an assessment that is pointedly expressed in a popular saying that has the worse-off (not the absolutely worst-off) of today cursing even as they have at long last become able to afford a diet rich in meat (a luxury item in Mao's time).

What is responsible for this state of affairs is, of course, not that material conditions have improved, nor even that wealth is more unevenly distributed, but rather that more is now at stake in wealth. The growing inequality, with its devastating effects on the poor, is but a byproduct of the increased stakes in the competition for wealth as a means of social participation. The still influential Confucian idea that what is to be feared is not scarcity but unequal distribution acquires a poignant resonance in China today if interpreted in this light. Not that scarcity is not a bad thing, but, next to sheer survival, the worst threat poverty can pose to a human being is meager recognition as long as society sees fit to maintain a significant link between wealth and recognition. Such a threat has returned to the formerly socialist land of China with a vengeance.

<sup>27</sup>The extent of subsistence poverty that remains or has emerged since must not be underestimated, however. Perhaps the most threatening element of subsistence poverty in China today is the unaffordability of medical treatment (especially for serious conditions) for large numbers of people, who regularly have to choose between food and medical care. This situation is made worse by the increasing costs of education. All too often, the poor in China today have to strike an impossible, and degrading, balance among the needs for food, for health, and for (their children's) education. For an empirical account of increasing inequalities in health care and education, see Zhang Xiaobo, "Zhongguo Jiaoyu He Yiliao Weisheng Zhong De Bupingdeng Wenti," pp. 209–28 in *Zhuangui Zhongguo*, ed. Yao.

<sup>28</sup>See Cao Jinqing, *Huanghebian De Zhongguo* (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 2000), p. 263. The idea contained in this slogan is endorsed by Zhang Shuguang, "Jingjixue (Jia) Ruhe Jiang Gongping," pp. 635–59 in *Zhuangui Zhongguo*, ed. Yao, esp. p. 650. Zhang's position is quite in keeping with the general spirit of the Reform era.

### VIII. AGENCY DESPITE STATUS POVERTY

The last issue we must consider within my typology of poverty is the relation in which status poverty stands to agency poverty. Status poverty is obviously problematic, as we have seen, when conjoined with subsistence poverty, assimilating the latter to itself and adding insult to injury. Status poverty is also obviously problematic, as I have observed, if it causes agency poverty. The question that remains to be addressed is whether in a society free of subsistence poverty it is possible for status poverty to be compatible with freedom from agency poverty. Since status poverty clearly can translate into agency poverty—a situation in which it is difficult or impossible for those who have the lowest economic and social status to achieve a normal level of agency—the question can be formulated more precisely as asking whether, and in what ways, such translation can be prevented.

Now, whether status poverty causes agency poverty (even in the absence of subsistence poverty) is a matter of the relation in which those who suffer from status poverty stand to the normal level of agency of the society in question. To be sure, status poverty in itself has nothing positive about it. It is not simply a function of comparative lack of material resources but is a relational condition of a worse kind, one in which those who occupy the lowest economic position stand in a relation of *social* inferiority to *all* other members of society. To the extent that status poverty implies comparison, the poor are worse off than not just some but all other members of their society. It is this *absolute* status of being at the *bottom* that can make the poor stand apart from the rest of society, where most people are worse off than only some people. Despite the unattractiveness of status poverty as such, its normative (and psychological) acceptability depends on whether status poverty leads to agency poverty. It is one thing if some members of society suffer from some degree of status poverty and yet have enough resources to attain the normal level of agency. It is something altogether different if their status poverty places them below the normal level of agency.

How can the first situation (as a minimum) be achieved and the second avoided? In a manner of speaking, the trick is to bring it about that the so-called middle class absorbs all members of society below it into its ranks, since it is safe to assume that members of the middle class already attain the normal level of agency. One consequence of this leveling-up is, of course, that the middle class will cease to occupy the middle position (and so cease to be the middle class, literally speaking), for there are no longer members of society below it, nor indeed any category of such members of society. In thus becoming part of the bottom of society, as it were, members of the hitherto middle class will find themselves in a new situation of status poverty. Since this happens as a result of the formerly worst-off rising to the level of the middle class instead of the latter sinking to theirs, however, neither the old nor the new members of the now

defunct middle class need suffer from agency poverty, although both will be in a condition of status poverty.

Thus, the reason for which it is conventionally considered desirable to have a sizable middle class should be just as compelling a reason for having no members of society living below the level of what would otherwise be the middle class. The underlying rationale is that what is essential about the middle class is not so much their being situated in the middle in terms of economic and social position as their being able to meet their society's standard of normal agency—at least the lower end of that standard, as it were. If this rationale is at all plausible, we may hypothesize that what keeps the middle class reasonably happy despite their economic and social inferiority to those in the upper reaches of their society will remain true even in the event that all those who have hitherto made up the bottom of society rise to their level so that the middle class retain their level of agency but cease to occupy a middle position. What is crucial, on this hypothesis, is not how many people occupy the so-called bottom of society but whether those who do have to suffer from agency poverty on top of status poverty.

This hypothesis, no doubt rather optimistic, supports the hope that agency poverty can be avoided without removing status poverty altogether—on the assumption that the removal of status poverty is a much more difficult and normatively contentious task. The biggest obstacle to the realization of this hope is what appears to be an ineradicable feature of human society: the need for social hierarchy as caused by human beings' desire to feel superior to (at least some) others in order to feel good about themselves. It is not impossible that such a desire informs the self-understanding of the middle class to some degree, and if so, one defining feature of members of this class is their *middle* position—their superiority to the underclass called the poor.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, the middle class, on this understanding, defines itself in relation to the class that is socially and economically situated below it (as well as, of course, in relation to the class above it), and not on the basis of some standard that could in principle be simultaneously reached by all members of society. Implicit here is an acknowledgment that at least to some extent social hierarchy and the desire for superiority are unavoidable.<sup>30</sup> If this is true, and it seems naïve to rule out this possibility, then the challenge is to eradicate agency poverty not only despite status poverty but also despite the troubling desire for superiority that may underpin it.

Perhaps the most promising response to this challenge consists in the bifurcation—especially characteristic of modern, liberal democratic societies—of

<sup>29</sup>Raymond Williams says of the modern British class system that “this fundamental class system, with the force of the rising middle class right behind it, requires a ‘lower’ class if it is to retain any social meaning.” See his *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), p. 320.

<sup>30</sup>See Walzer, *Spheres*, p. 274. As Walzer puts it, “men and women value themselves—just as they are valued—in comparison with others.”

recognition into respect and esteem.<sup>31</sup> Corresponding to this bifurcation is the division of human activity into two broad domains (call them domains of agency), the public domain of citizenship and the private domain of work, family life, and consumption. What this division makes possible is a certain equality of respect in the first domain while a certain inequality of esteem is permitted in the second domain subject to considerations of fairness and efficiency. In other words, instead of being a single measure of either equality or inequality, recognition is split into two, whereby respect becomes a function of citizenship and is distributed equally, and esteem becomes a function of personal qualities and accomplishments and is distributed according to merit and, in practice, unequally.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, even those who fare worst in the second domain and as a result have the lowest esteem can still enjoy equal citizenship with others, inasmuch as “democratic citizenship is a status radically disconnected from every kind of hierarchy,” as reflected in “a kind of self-respect that isn’t dependent on any particular social position.”<sup>33</sup> With this bifurcation, what we have been calling status poverty is confined entirely to the second domain.

Is this bifurcation sufficient to raise every member of a society to a normal level of agency and thereby eliminate agency poverty despite the continuing presence of status poverty (in the second domain)? It all depends on whether the first domain is sufficiently important and the second sufficiently unimportant that equality in the first can outweigh inequality in the second.

It is generally assumed in liberal political philosophy that the first domain of agency is more fundamental than the second. It can be granted, even before examining this assumption, that the bifurcation of recognition into equal respect and unequal esteem is already a great improvement over an unequal distribution of an undivided good of recognition. It can also be granted that the bifurcation is real to a significant degree, rather than merely ideological. Still, a great deal of its force rests on the assumption that the first domain of agency matters more fundamentally than the second. For the achievement of equal respect is consequential only to the degree that the domain in which it happens is important.

It is here that the significance of this achievement can be exaggerated. It is not a coincidence that the bifurcation of recognition into equal respect and unequal esteem has been accompanied by a shift in importance, noted by Benjamin Constant, from the so-called freedoms of the ancients to those of the moderns.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup>For the distinction between respect and esteem, see Walzer, *Spheres*, ch. 11.

<sup>32</sup>See Axel Honneth, “Redistribution as recognition: a response to Nancy Fraser,” in Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 110–97 at esp. pp. 140–1.

<sup>33</sup>Walzer, *Spheres*, p. 277.

<sup>34</sup>See Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), in particular the piece entitled “The liberty of the ancients compared with that of the moderns,” pp. 309–28.



Put in the terms we are using, Constant is in effect saying that the second domain of agency is more fundamental than the first for members of modern societies. This is because it is in the second domain that members of modern societies can find the most extensive scope for self-constituting activities—activities that are required for the normal level of agency. If Constant is largely right about this, and I think he clearly is, then it must be admitted that the achievement of equality, however indispensable, has occurred in a domain that cannot be said to be more fundamental than the domain in which inequality remains.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the bifurcation of recognition into respect and esteem and the establishment of equal respect are not enough to ensure that every member of society attains the normal level of agency. A large part of being a normal agent in any modern society involves enjoying a minimal degree of esteem based on self-constituting activities in the private domain, together with the equality of respect guaranteed in the public domain. What this minimal degree of esteem actually consists in is not something about which much can be said, since it is relative to what happens to be the normal level of agency operative in any given society, and this level is in turn a matter internal to that society. Nevertheless, it is possible to indicate in a general way what it takes to make this minimal degree of esteem available, whatever a society's normal level of agency.

It is important for ensuring a minimal degree of esteem that the distribution of esteem proceeds in a way that is regarded as fair. One particularly influential construal of this condition is in terms of some notion of equality of opportunity such that those who receive less esteem are not unfairly disadvantaged in the competition for more. What counts as fairness in the distribution of esteem is open to contestation, but one thing is clear: no matter what conception of fairness is adopted, the distribution of esteem, unlike of respect, is an inherently competitive and differentiating practice, one that ranks people higher and lower according to some standard of merit or achievement. Even if this practice is based on the least objectionable conception of merit or achievement that can be agreed upon, some will still rank lower than others and some will rank the lowest of all.

The best thing about such a distribution is that those who fare less well or least well have little to complain about regarding the system itself. But this is also the worst feature of the distribution, in that the only thing they can fairly complain about is some aspect of themselves, depending on what it is to which they attribute their lower or lowest level of achievement and hence esteem. In this way, resentment of society may be blocked, but only at the expense of self-esteem: the already low self-esteem that results from low achievement and low esteem is compounded by the attribution of low achievement and low esteem to some fault of one's own. Indeed, the fairer one takes the system to be, the more one is forced to blame oneself and hence the greater one's loss of self-esteem. In status poverty,

<sup>35</sup>See my "Political agency in liberal democracy," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 14 (2006), 144–62.

what hurts is not only the relative lack of material resources but, far more importantly, the meaning of such lack as a *deserved* lack of esteem and self-esteem. Even at its fairest in its own terms, the inherently unequal distribution of esteem is capable of producing what have been aptly called the “hidden injuries of class.”<sup>36</sup>

Given that the distribution of esteem has no internal mechanism for preventing too low a level of esteem by the normal standard of agency, any solution to this problem will have to be introduced from the outside. One such solution, in theory, is to make esteem and self-esteem carry significantly less weight in the constitution of normal agents than they do now. This would mean giving equal citizenship a far greater scope and importance in the lives of members of modern societies than it now has, at the expense of the so-called freedoms of the moderns through the exercise of which, more than anything else, members of modern societies constitute themselves as subjects leading meaningful lives. If such a prospect faces overwhelming odds against it that lie in the very nature of modern societies, another possibility is to enlarge the range of esteem-supporting rights and entitlements that are independent of actual achievement even though they may not generally be treated as part and parcel of equal citizenship.<sup>37</sup>

As long as the freedoms of the moderns retain their central importance and thus differential esteem, as distinct from equal respect, continues to play a central role in the constitution of normal agents, however, there is a limit to how much any modification from the outside can achieve. Quite clearly, beyond a certain level wealth has meaning for human beings only in their capacity as agents. This level is easily reachable for every member of any relatively affluent society, provided that wealth is not distributed too unevenly.

The question is why, beyond this level, anyone would still have a strong preference for a higher over a lower income and join the race for wealth. The only plausible answer I can think of is that in any society in which such a race draws in large numbers of people, wealth has *not* been relegated to a domain of secondary importance. It is only to the extent that the bifurcation of recognition fails to make equal citizenship (as an expression of equal respect) the pre-eminent basis of a normal level of agency that wealth (as a marker of unequal esteem) can matter enough to motivate a keen competition for it throughout a society. In such a society, the principal if not sole stake in the competition for money, beyond the modest level of resources needed for subsistence, is the esteem that is accorded to

<sup>36</sup>See Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Knopf, 1973). As they point out, “a system of unequal classes is actually reinforced by the ideas of equality and charity formulated in the past. The idea of potential equality of power has been given a form peculiarly fitted to a competitive society where *inequality* of power is the rule and expectation. If all men start on some basis of equal potential ability, then the inequalities they experience in their lives are *not* arbitrary, they are the logical consequence of different personal drives to use those powers—in other words, social differences can now appear as questions of character, of moral resolve, will, and competence” (p. 256). See also Honneth’s discussion of the achievement principle in “Redistribution,” esp. p. 148.

<sup>37</sup>See Honneth, “Redistribution,” pp. 149, 188.

certain forms of agency for which income serves as a proxy.<sup>38</sup> This fact in turn gives distributive justice its precise meaning in those modern societies that are more or less free from subsistence poverty: what distributive justice regulates in such societies is, at bottom, the distribution of things that form the social basis of (unequal) esteem, which in turn contributes significantly to the constitution of (unequal) agency.

Thus, neither of the two options considered so far can do the trick: it does not seem possible to devise a system for the fair distribution of esteem that can by itself prevent an excessively low level of esteem for some members of society; nor is it possible to reduce the importance of esteem for the constitution of normal agents to a sufficient degree to counteract the inequality of esteem. So a third option, simple and traditional-looking as it is, has an indispensable role to play. That is to find a way of ensuring, in addition to equality of respect, that the distribution of esteem—that is, the distribution of things that form the social basis of esteem—is sufficiently equal that no one has less than is required for becoming or remaining a normal agent and hence that no one will suffer from agency poverty as a result of status poverty.

The equality that ultimately matters is neither of respect alone nor of esteem alone but something comprehensive.<sup>39</sup> If it is inadvisable to cut the link between wealth and agency altogether in an affluent society, it is clearly necessary to weaken this link through a *relatively* equal distribution of wealth—on the assumption that wealth matters for agency and recognition and therefore is worth equalizing. Otherwise, in a society in which wealth is neither largely uncoupled from agency nor relatively equally distributed, there is scant guarantee that status poverty will not turn into agency poverty despite affluence and the bifurcation of recognition.

## IX. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the worst evil of poverty is its detrimental effect on agency, the most essential feature of human beings as human beings. In the absence of agency poverty, status poverty need not be a cause for moral alarm even though some of us prefer a society which recognizes “a diversity, rather than a hierarchy of

<sup>38</sup>Gorz is right on the mark when he says that “differences in consumption are often no more than the *means* through which the hierarchical nature of society is expressed” (*Ecology*, 31). This is true of differences in income in general, and the hierarchy in question is ultimately that of esteem as a social basis of self-constitution.

<sup>39</sup>David Miller’s idea of a fundamental equality of status, developed as an interpretation of Michael Walzer’s notion of complex equality, is suggestive as an attempt to bring about this comprehensive equality. Miller’s main argument, a reformulation of Walzer’s, is that equal citizenship complemented by distributive pluralism can yield equality of status. Whether this argument will work depends, in my view, on the effectiveness of distributive pluralism in bringing every member of a society to its normal level of agency and recognition, not in preventing systematic outranking as such. See Miller, “Complex equality,” pp. 197–225 in *Pluralism, Justice, and Equality*, ed. David Miller and Michael Walzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

talents.”<sup>40</sup> And in the absence of agency poverty (and of status poverty as a potential cause of agency poverty), subsistence poverty is a lesser and, just as importantly, a more easily resolvable evil. Much of the poverty in the world today that may pass for simple material scarcity is in fact the worst possible combination—of subsistence poverty, status poverty, and agency poverty.

True, the subsistence poverty that figures in this combination is sometimes of such severity and magnitude that in comparison status poverty and even agency poverty pale temporarily into insignificance. Many of the world’s poor are so devastated and numbed by the sheer injury of subsistence poverty that they can hardly recognize the insult of status and agency poverty. That this is all too often the case, and that relieving the plight of these people commands the highest moral priority, does not reduce the gravity of the insult but only shows how desperately poor many of our fellow human beings are, and how far there is to go before the injury of subsistence poverty is sufficiently ameliorated to reveal the hidden insult of agency poverty.

<sup>40</sup>Sennett and Cobb, *Hidden Injuries*, p. 261. See also Gorz, *Ecology*, pp. 34, 41.

Copyright of Journal of Political Philosophy is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.