

Social Exclusion

The European Approach to Social Disadvantage

Hilary Silver and S.M. Miller

In the United States poverty is marked by a single income number. But the authors argue that there is a more useful way of measuring such deprivation: social exclusion. In Europe, governments are increasingly trying to measure it and come up with policies to limit it.

THE UNITED STATES IS FALLING FURTHER BEHIND THE EUROPEAN UNION IN ITS conceptualization of poverty and its understanding of those living at the margins of society. The United States still imagines poverty strictly as a deficiency of income for basic necessities. In contrast, the European Union has continually revised its thinking about social deprivation, adopting a view of poverty relative to rising average living standards, and, more recently, a framework for thinking about nonmonetary aspects of deprivation. Europeans are now committed to include the “excluded,” the outsiders, the people left out of mainstream society and left behind in a globalizing economy. The

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United States can learn much from the European fight against social exclusion.

Ironically, an Englishman, B. Seebohm Rowntree, pioneered the American method of counting the poor by estimating an absolute monetary threshold based upon bare subsistence requirements. Our poverty line reflects a convenient rule of thumb that a government economist, Mollie Orshansky, devised in 1964. It has since become a policy and social science fixture. Based on the value of an "economy food plan" times three (since families spent a third of their after tax earnings on food), this narrow approach persists, even though today, food, including restaurant meals, occupies a mere 15 percent of American budgets. The poverty threshold, adjusted only for inflation, identifies people living in the direst material circumstances, not those living below what John Kenneth Galbraith termed "the grades and standards" of society. Although in 1995, the National Academy of Sciences recommended limited changes to the poverty line to reflect real consumption relative to all money and nonmonetary resources, minus work-related expenses, there has been no official redefinition yet (see Miller and Oyen 1996). American poverty researchers have conducted longitudinal studies tracking incomes over time, but the U.S. government has not considered dynamic measures of income poverty either.

In contrast, the European Union (EU) adopted as the official poverty line a *relative* poverty indicator of one-half of the national median disposable household income. It rises when Europeans grow richer. EU statistical reports provide data on 60 percent of median income, providing evidence of near poverty as well. Concern about rising income inequality, a problem much worse in the United States than in Europe, has also encouraged the development of income distribution measures, most notably with the Luxembourg Income Study. The European Household Panel Survey and the longitudinal EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions study now make it possible to develop dynamic indicators of poverty, tracking those who enter, leave, and stay mired in destitution. Thus, at the March 2001 Stockholm Summit, the European Commission's Synthesis Report on Social Inclusion proposed seven indicators of "social exclusion," three of which

captured forms of “financial poverty”: (1) the share of the population below 60 percent of national median equivalent income before and after social transfers; (2) the ratio of the share of the top 20 percent to the share of the bottom 20 percent of the income distribution; and (3) persistent poverty, or the share of the population below the 60 percent poverty line for three consecutive years (Atkinson et al. 2002).

But the real European innovation is the development of nonmonetary indicators of “social exclusion,” transcending economists’ focus on money. Mention of “social exclusion” in European public and social science discourse has increased much faster than references to “poverty” or “the underclass” (Abrahamson 1998; Lievens 2000 in Mayes 2001, 9 <<Au: clarify reference: (1) is Lievens 2000 cited in Mayes 2001 or is it a chapter? (2) Is Mayes 2001 actually Mayes et al. as in references?>>). Cognizant that deprivation is a multidimensional condition, Eurostat (the EU Statistical Office), national statistical agencies, and European social scientists have developed social and political benchmarks to track progress against exclusion. International agencies are now adopting this approach, too.

The Origins of “Social Exclusion”

Europeans conceive of social exclusion as distinct from income poverty. Poverty is a distributional outcome, whereas exclusion is a relational process of declining participation, solidarity, and access. For some, exclusion is a broader term encompassing poverty; for others, it is a cause or a consequence of poverty. The two may even be unrelated (Heady and Room 2002).

The meaning of social exclusion also varies across countries. The term originated in France, where the “Anglo-Saxon” idea of “poverty” is thought to patronize or denigrate equal citizens. In French Republican thought, social exclusion refers to a “rupture of the social bond” or “solidarity.” The French social contract does not leave individuals to fend for themselves. Society owes its citizens the means to a livelihood, and citizens in turn have obligations to the larger society. European welfare states were supposed to do away with “charity” for “the

poor,” providing basic social assistance, and, hence, as a right of citizenship, eliminating absolute material deprivation. Although the United States flirted with the idea of a guaranteed annual income, notably under Nixon, even the Earned Income Tax Credit and Food Stamps have eligibility restrictions. Nor is there a right to housing, except under the New York State constitution.

Many sociological theories adumbrated the concept of exclusion, but French advocates for destitute groups, such as ATD-Fourth World, were among the first to employ the term in its contemporary sense. By the 1970s, references to “the excluded” became more frequent, especially to refer to the disabled. But after the Oil Shocks, unemployment began to mount, especially among youth, older workers, and immigrants. In the 1980s, as the problem groups “excluded” from economic growth multiplied, “exclusion” discourse helped cement a national movement of associations, ALERTE, urging France to launch a comprehensive war on exclusion.

In 1988, with the support of the Right and the Left, France enacted a minimum “insertion” income (RMI). The RMI entails signing an “insertion” contract specifying a trajectory for an assisted individual to follow to become a productive member of society, whether through work, volunteering, studying, family reunification, or the like. Social workers and nonprofits provide multifaceted, comprehensive, and personally tailored assistance, from health care to subsidized jobs, to help the excluded reenter social life in all its spheres. Thus, in France, social bonds are reknit in families and communities as well as in the workplace. In 1990, homeless activists won a legal right to housing, and in June 1998, a full-blown French “law of prevention and combat of social exclusions” guaranteed universal access to fundamental rights. It mandated coordinated interventions in at least ten spheres: employment, training, social enterprise, social minima, housing, health, education, social services, culture, and “citizenship” (e.g., helping the homeless to vote) (Silver 1998; Choffe in Mayes 2001 <<Au: see similar query above for this cite>>).

Most policies promoting social inclusion or cohesion (see Box 1) emphasize (1) multipronged interventions crossing traditional bureau-

Illustrative European Social Inclusion Policies

Minimum Income Policies

Solidarity or Redistributive Taxation

Employer Wage or Hiring Subsidies and Tax Incentives

Insertion by Economic Means and Social Enterprise

Active Labor Market Policies

Reform of Employment and Job Placement Services

Work Sharing

Local Development Policies

Antidiscrimination Law

Improved Access to Service

Representation and Participation in Partnerships and Policymaking

cratic domains and tailored to the multidimensional problems of excluded individuals and groups; (2) a long-term process of insertion and integration moving through transitional stages; and (3) participation of the excluded in their own inclusion into economic and social life. The latter is especially important since targeted and means-tested programs may unintentionally stigmatize their intended beneficiaries. Often, local nonprofit initiatives of disadvantaged residents become public-private partnerships supported by subsidies from municipal or national governments and the European Union Structural Funds.

From France, the “exclusion” approach dispersed throughout Europe. Central to this diffusion was Jacques Delors, president of the European Commission in the mid-1980s, who pressed for a “social dimension” to European integration. The European “Social Protocol” developed gradually from 1989 until 1997, when it became part of the Amsterdam Treaty. This delay was partly due to the principle of “subsidiarity” that assigned social protection responsibilities to the member states as well as to British refusal to ratify that section of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. During this period, the third EU “poverty program” was gradually transformed into a fight against social exclusion, supporting over two dozen local Model Actions and Twelve Innova-

tory Initiatives “to foster the economic and social integration of the least privileged groups.” This terminological shift was partly political. The euphemism appeased UK Conservatives and Christian Democrats in Germany who maintained that generous guaranteed minimum income had eradicated absolute poverty. If they rejected a relative poverty definition, they could not gainsay rising unemployment.

The number of unemployed workers in the EU soared from 14 million in 1992 to 16.5 million in 1998, half of whom were out of work for over a year. These facts of economic life and the urging of countries like France forced the EU to recognize market integration had a “social dimension,” too. In 1997, once the New Labour government accepted the Social Protocol and created a “Social Exclusion Unit” in Prime Minister Blair’s office, the EU’s fight against social exclusion could begin in earnest. Drawing upon lessons from building monetary union and committed to “basic principles of solidarity which should remain the trademark of Europe,” the “Luxembourg Process” coordinated a European Employment Strategy of nineteen guidelines into four pillars (1) improving employability; (2) developing entrepreneurship; (3) encouraging business and worker adaptability; and (4) providing equal employment opportunity. The Employment Strategy was “soft law,” integrating EU, national, and local level efforts through peer pressure and without recourse to regulations with formal sanctions. Multilevel iterative monitoring promotes learning from national best practices and modifications of goals and procedures over time. Explicit long-term employment targets were later adopted. In December 2000 at Nice, the EU applied this “open coordination method” to the Social Agenda, separating the fight against poverty and exclusion from employment strategy more generally. Every two years, nation-states produce “National Action Plans” on social inclusion, laying out their progress toward agreed-upon goals on a variety of social indicators.

Since the 2000 Lisbon meeting, the European Council has pursued a comprehensive strategy to become the “most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy” over the next decade, combining “sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater

social cohesion.” To this end, the European Social Model explicitly aims to eradicate poverty, fight social exclusion, and enhance social cohesion. In October 2001, the Commission and the Council adopted the *Joint Inclusion Report*, based upon the first 2001 National Action Plans of Social Inclusion. The document, which strongly resembles the 1998 French law against social exclusion, specified four objectives:

1. facilitating participation in employment and access to resources and rights, goods and services for all citizens (e.g., social protection, housing, health care, education, justice, culture);

2. preventing the risks of exclusion by preserving family solidarity, preventing overindebtedness and homelessness, and promoting “inclusion”;

3. helping the most vulnerable, for example, the persistently poor, children, residents of areas marked by exclusion; and

4. mobilizing all relevant bodies by promoting participation and self-expression of the excluded and partnerships and mainstreaming their concerns,

In March 2001 at Stockholm, the Commission called for explicit targets, and in December 2001 at the Laeken Summit, a revised list of social indicators was adopted. Most of these pertained to income, labor market status, access to public services, health, and education. Work on social and political indicators continues.

What Is Social Exclusion?

When the EU adopted “social exclusion” terminology from the French, its meaning subtly changed. British experts in the Poverty Programme, for example, tried to reconcile the French emphasis on social and cultural exclusion to their longstanding emphasis on material deprivation and social rights of citizenship, seeing poverty as an impediment to full participation in society. Deprivation could arise from insufficient income or directly from insufficient access to basic needs that allow people to actualize their social responsibilities (Townsend 1979) <<Au: please supply reference>>. Conceptual work took a back seat to political compromise. Consider this definition of social exclusion

(Vleminckx and Berghman 2001, 46) as “a concoction (or blend) of multidimensional and mutually reinforcing processes of deprivation, associated with progressive dissociation from social milieu, resulting in the isolation of individuals and groups from the mainstream of opportunities society has to offer!”

Simply put, the EU recast exclusion as an inability to exercise “the social rights of citizens” to a basic standard of living and as barriers to “participation” in the major social and occupational opportunities of the society (Mayes 2001 <<Mayes et al.??>>, 1). Methodologists (Atkinson et al. 2002) use the term as “shorthand for a range of concerns considered to be important in setting the European social agenda” and in “the fields that people have in mind when they talk about social rights.” In contrast to poverty, which is exclusively economic, material, or resource-based, social exclusion offers a more holistic understanding of deprivation (de Haan 1999).

Social exclusion is (1) multidimensional or socioeconomic, and encompasses collective as well as individual resources, (2) dynamic or processual, along a trajectory between full integration and multiple exclusions, (3) relational, in that exclusion entails social distance or isolation, rejection, humiliation, lack of social support networks, and denial of participation, (4) active, in that there is a clear agency doing the excluding, and (5) relative to context. Disrespect, discrimination, and degradation are as much at work as monetary poverty and physical need. In some versions, even the welfare state can exclude some citizens from protection or trap them in joblessness.

There may be consensus that exclusion is multidimensional, but that does not mean agreement on which dimensions are operative. EU social indicators are much better developed for material and labor market deprivation than for social, political, or cultural dimensions (Berger-Schmitt and Noll 2000). One approach is to ask people. The Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (Gordon et al. 2000) not only asked people about their resources and participation in social activities, but also about whether they could afford them and even if they wanted them.

There is also disagreement over whether multidimensionality re-

fers to “cumulative” disadvantage or to any one of a wide range of deprivations that need not be material or economic. Britain’s Social Exclusion Unit uses the term as “a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdowns” <<Au: source?>>. In this definition, the excluded approximate a marginal, deviant “underclass.” Multiple disadvantages obviously characterize fewer individuals and neighborhoods than those suffering from one of a number of disadvantages.

Similarly, many more people suffer disadvantage at some point in their lives than those who remain disadvantaged for long periods. French sociologists emphasize dynamics. Castel (1991) <<Au: please supply reference>> and Paugam (2000) <<Au: please supply reference>> trace a trajectory of “disaffiliation” and “disqualification” from a condition of economic and social integration through vulnerability or fragility to a breakdown of social ties. Both accounts emphasize social relations as well as labor market processes. While some say “social exclusion implies entrapment” and intergenerational transmission (Vleminckx and Berghman 2001, 136), persistent multiple disadvantage is infrequent (Burckart 2002 <<AU: please supply reference>>; Leisering and Leibfried 1999; Room 2002) <<AU: please supply reference>>. Exclusion exists along a continuum, rather than as an absolute condition of being an “outsider” or “pariah.”

Social exclusion is a relative, intrinsically social term also because it takes on different meanings, depending upon context or the point of reference for inclusion. When Americans speak of “exclusion,” racial connotations often spring to mind: there are “exclusionary” institutions, like clubs or zoning, or “exclusive” prestigious resources, like neighborhoods or prep schools. When Bill Clinton spoke of inner city problems in 1993, he remarked “It’s not an underclass anymore, it’s an outer class.” His Affirmative Action Report, calling to “mend it, don’t end it,” is full of calls for inclusion <<AU: full source for Clinton 1993?>>.

Other countries have different ideas about what belonging, mem-

bership, and full participation mean and about the benefits they bestow. Different histories, cultures, and demography shape national identities and criteria for citizenship and the salient types of inclusion (Silver 1996). While American race relations are central in defining the significance and common understanding of the term "integration" in the United States, Europeans feel uncomfortable with the word "race." Europe has few affirmative action policies, and avoids specific diversity targets. Equal opportunity policies apply mainly to women. Access to social rights traditionally comes through union representation. French colonial history in North Africa or Germany's historical anti-Semitic and guest-worker policies are more central to how immigrant minorities are "integrated" or "incorporated" in France or Germany. While Europeans usually call the opposite of exclusion "insertion" or "solidarity," the preferred framework for cultural diversity issues is one of "citizenship," "nationality," or "cohesion."

Speaking of cohesion can direct attention away from excluded groups and toward the responsibilities of the entire society. While the agents of exclusion can be impersonal institutions, dominant groups, and powerful individuals, the excluded must participate in their own inclusion. This means policies must provide them access, participation, and "voice" rather than making them passive recipients of material assistance. Many programs to combat exclusion build broad-based partnerships with representatives of excluded groups.

Measuring Social Exclusion

The complexity and relativity of social exclusion, its sensitivity to context and time, and its variation across salient dimensions, processes, and domains of social relations, have made it extremely difficult to define and measure "scientifically." Yet, driven by EU policy mandates, efforts to operationalize the concept separately from poverty have outpaced theoretical work. Most measurement efforts draw upon available data and are British-inspired, reflecting the forty or so output indicators of Blair's Social Exclusion Unit (see *Opportunity for All* 1999) <<AU: please supply reference>>. However imperfect, these bench-

EU Social Benchmarks

Risk of financial poverty (60 percent of national median income with Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development equivalence scales, before and after social transfers)

Income inequality (top 20 percent to bottom 20 percent quintile share ratio)

Persistence of poverty (share of the population below the poverty line for three consecutive years)

No contact with work (proportion of households with no member in a job)

Low education (proportion of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds with lower secondary education and not in education or training)

Regional disparities in unemployment (coefficient of variation of regional unemployment, by International Labour Organization definitions)

Long-term unemployment (proportion of active labor force unemployed for one year or more)

Source: European Commission, *Structural Indicators*, COM (2000), 594; Atkinson et al. 2002; EU Social Protection Committee, Report no. 13509/01.

marks, more material than social, will offer “a toolbox of instruments” and a “common language for assessment” of National Action Plans to promote social inclusion.

All approaches attempt to capture exclusion’s multidimensionality, but, aside from low income and unemployment, they do not agree upon which dimensions are salient or causal. The most influential measurement report was by Tony Atkinson et al. (2002, 3) who proposed three levels of indicators of social exclusion. Level 1 has a small number of leading indicators (see box), while Level 2 elaborates these, and Level 3 refers to nationally specific indicators.

Although this official list stresses consumption and production, work is under way to measure social and political dimensions of exclusion. European researchers are examining less tangible aspects like nonparticipation in civic life, poor future prospects, inability to participate in customary family and community activities, social crisis points in depressed regions and large cities, poor health, education, literacy/numeracy, housing, and homelessness. Financial precariousness or indebtedness is also considered, as are measures of exclusion from public

Indicators of Social Exclusion

1. Financial difficulties in the household
2. Unaffordability of some basic needs
3. Unaffordability of consumer durables
4. Disadvantageous housing conditions
5. Poor health: life expectancy; self-perceived health status
6. Infrequent contacts with friends and relatives
7. Dissatisfaction with work or main activity

Source: Eurostat 2000.

and private services, from social relations and activities, and from social support (e.g., Room 1995; Gordon et al. 2000; Gordon and Townsend 2000; Howarth et al. 1998; Robinson and Oppenheim 1998). Insofar as social exclusion is a relational concept associated with social isolation or civic participation, it overlaps with indicators of “social capital” taking account of associational membership, social network involvement, democratic inclusion, and access to rights. However, social capital indicators also refer to trust and treat social relations more instrumentally, as economic resources, rather than necessary aspects of social life. In this respect, even exclusion from leisure and culture are assessed as essentials of social membership. Regional disparities unrelated to unemployment also exist, including exposure to crime and other environmental conditions (Stewart 2002). Nongovernment organizations and the “social partners” are participating in this statistical process, giving a voice to the excluded. However, there are no indicators for exclusion by ethnicity or immigration. For example, Eurostat’s fifteen nonmonetary indicators were grouped into seven dimensions of social exclusion, as well as their cumulation over time:

Implications

Americans have always resisted a relative definition of poverty. Poverty-line thinking has so dominated American social policy that “wel-

fare” has narrowed its meaning to means-tested income transfers to lone parents. Now that welfare “reform” has mobilized multiple social supports to enable these parents to enter the paid labor force, the rhetoric of “inclusion”—the demand for access to jobs, respect, and a place at the table—may not be as foreign as it sounds.

How many working Americans are “excluded” from health, unemployment, or disability insurance? How many are excluded from good jobs because of inadequate family support or child care or inferior public schools? How many are shut out of the housing market by unaffordable rents? Is segregation not about exclusion from white neighborhoods, schools, suburbs? Is the “glass ceiling” not a barrier to including women in the top echelon of jobs? Has the Americans with Disabilities Act really eliminated physical exclusion from all public facilities? Are not formally equal citizens denied a say, while politicians listen only to campaign contributors, and school officials listen only to English?

Americans have always had a populist, democratic impulse that rejects special privileges. If social exclusion and inclusion became important ideas in American policy alongside traditional concerns with absolute poverty, the political landscape might begin to change. Currently, groups concerned about neighborhoods (crime, services, education), the labor market (low wages, insecure employment, long-term unemployment, contingent work, unemployment insurance), social programs and services (Medicaid, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families [TANF], food stamps, child care), school performance, immigration, cultural expression, and many other issues are fragmented and even competitive. A social exclusion/inclusion approach could serve as the rhetorical umbrella that brings the groups together.

The role of symbolic discourse in building political alliances should not be underestimated. Talking about “exclusion” connects people at all levels of the society through a common emotional experience found in social relations everywhere. No one can get through life without some rejection, humiliation, or unfair treatment. We have all been subjected to sanctions like gossip, or felt unwanted, left out, stigmatized, or “dissed.” Conversely, the goal of inclusion appeals to our egalitarian

tarian impulses and common humanity, promoting solidarity with the excluded. Emma Lazarus's poem still strikes a deep chord with Americans whose ancestors were welcomed into our nation of immigrants. Citizens demand equal opportunity, even if they tolerate unequal rewards. While the American emphasis on personal responsibility would seem to clash with the implication that insiders are the agents of exclusion, thinking dynamically as well as multidimensionally about disadvantage can also remind Americans that many of us have been down, but not out. Hard times can befall anyone. This thought too can help us empathize with the excluded.

Just as "social exclusion" highlights the complex multidimensionality, cumulative and dynamic character of social disadvantage, so must inclusionary policies transcend traditional bureaucratic domains. Discrete programs and single-focus policies that now administer to people in need are, to put it euphemistically, disjointed. Service providers have little contact with one another. Families with multiple problems must make the rounds among many bureaucracies operating in different ways, each with scant understanding of families' overall situation, and with a lack of attention to improving their overall situation. Americans need more comprehensive, "transversal," or what the British call "joined-up policies for joined-up problems" across social policy domains. Britain's Social Exclusion Unit or France's "interministerial" commissions coordinate national policy areas across ministries. Regional and local public-private partnerships collectively administer social assistance and service programs. One-stop service centers and casework that tailors packages of support and assistance to individual needs are back in vogue. In the United States, more progressive states now pursue similar strategies in their welfare-to-work policies, but integrating TANF with the Workforce Improvement Act and human services should be national policy. Since devolution, poverty in the United States should be thought of "relative" to state living standards. And if a few states adopt a policy of social inclusion, it may start things rolling at the federal level (Micklewright 2002).

The great divides of American society are not only economic but also based on racial-ethnic, gender, cultural, educational, and politi-

cal status lines. Discrimination and disrespect have material consequences, denying access to information, contacts, and resources, consigning minorities to low quality schools, dangerous neighborhoods, poorly paid jobs, and even joblessness. Americanizing the social exclusion perspective could put new wind in the sails of affirmative action. Calling for full inclusion would show that poverty, racism, and other forms of domination are integral to the functioning of American society, rather than accidental or unintended consequences easily addressed with an ameliorative program or financial adjustment here or there.

To be sure, there is a danger of ghettoization and stigmatization whenever we introduce new labels for social problems. Calling attention to spectacular forms of cumulative disadvantage may distract attention from widespread problems like rising inequality and family dissolution and undermine broader social programs. Indeed, some on the European Left worry that the “social exclusion” framework is replacing a “social class” perspective. Any discourse can serve a variety of political purposes, but ensuring widespread participation may overcome these downsides. Although people argue about the precise nature and measures of exclusion and cohesion, these ideas do provide a framework for discussing the new, complex forms of disadvantage. If appropriate, easily understood indicators could be found for these notions, benchmarking our progress as a society could go beyond the simple, intuitive, and familiar poverty line to track multiple forms of disadvantage.

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