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Conceptualising “precarious prosperity” for comparative research*

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Abstract

Recent empirical research suggests the increase of population segment amongst the non-poor. It is located in vicinity of the structural position of the poor in industrial as well as developing societies; it is characterised by the mobility across the division line as well as the opportunities for agency. This position has not yet been theoretically conceptualised for comparative research. In this paper we subject various concepts in poverty research, their theoretical backgrounds and ideological and political implications to critical scrutiny in search of analytical elements to conceptualise these empirical findings. The reviewed concepts have strong political and ideological implications and present national scientific traditions. They presuppose homogeneous societies and/or transmit a dualistic view of society. Inequalities and dynamic processes are blended out. The more recent term “precarious prosperity” appears useful to analyse this structural position. Precarious prosperity is inherently a paradox: it simultaneously refers to a critical dynamic (precarious) and a more favourable material situation (prosperity). Precariousness depicts potential downward mobility linking research on this structural position more tightly to social inequality and mobility analyses.

1. Introduction—in search for an appropriate conceptualization of “precarious prosperity” for comparative purposes

Empirical studies in poverty research have recently pointed towards a structural position that has been largely overlooked so far: the dynamic position in vicinity of the position of poor and yet not part of the established, more prosperous positions in society. Hübinger (1996) identifies this position empirically and defines it “precarious prosperity”. In order to explore the realities of this structural position from a comparative perspective, an adequate theoretical conceptualization of precarious prosperity is required. In this article we subject various concepts in poverty research, their theoretical backgrounds and ideological and political implications to critical scrutiny seeking their usefulness to conceptualise this intermediate structural position for comparative research.

“Poverty” has been a key concept since the turn of the twentieth century (Booth 1902; Rowntree 1980 [1908]). Social scientists as well as social politicians debate on poverty and reflect the endeavour to better conceptualise consequences regarded as socially unacceptable. Hence poverty may be conceived of as “unacceptable hardship” (Gordon and Spicker 1999: 159) produced by unequal chances within society and for which society should provide remedy; by contrast, it may also be “blamed” upon those experiencing it. As Fassin (1996: 38; see also Bankoff 2001) elaborates, concepts presuppose certain perspectives, constructions and interpretations that in part determine appropriate strategies and political practices.

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, a large array of concepts emerged to conceptualise the effects of social and economic change. The idea of “new poverty” replaced the more holistic understanding of “old poverty”. A variety of new concepts such as the “underclass”, “culture of poverty”, “social exclusion”, “marginalization”, “vulnerability” or “precariousness” were applied to grasp “novel” elements of poverty (Bieback and Milz 1995; Castel 1995). Debates on social change claim that larger proportions of the population are at greater risk of (temporary) poverty and also subject to precarious living conditions, working conditions, or even social exclusion (Townsend 1979; Paugam 2000; Vogel 2005a, 2005b).

Theoretical concepts show considerable national and regional variations. In comparative research, such issues need to be addressed. Often similar social phenomena are conceptualised with concepts that vary according to respective socio-cultural and structural backgrounds, intellectual traditions and ideological and political implications. We limit our discussion to the European, US-American and Latin American contexts.

Scholarly communities in the North have focused on institutions, in particular on increasing precarious employment and its relationship to poverty (Paugam 1996

2005; Paugam et al. 1993). In other cases, a life-cycle perspective or a life-course approach is drawn upon, where institutions are considered to structure individual lives and opportunities (Albrecht et al. 1990; Mayer 2001; Dewilde 2003). A third perspective developed within globalization discourse: “discontinuity theorists” (Giddens 1990 ; Beck 2000) observe “substantive qualitative changes”, whereas “continuity theorists”¹ argue that social change has been continuous (Bairoch 1995).

In the South such changes have been theorised quite differently. Here it is important to distinguish between national scholarly production from the South and the production of area studies or development specialists in European and North American institutions or international organizations for countries in the South. Among the former, Mkandawire (2004) put forward the lack of a state-driven development relying on social policy. Other authors argue within the framework of social inequalities, institutions and power differences, for Latin America in particular from a Marxist perspective (Portes and Hoffman 2003). Many authors from the North and international organisations, however, seem to privilege a civil society perspective (Chambers 1989; Dercon 2002), or concepts such as (social) vulnerability or risk management (Alwang et al. 2001; Holzmann et al. 2003) to analyse poverty and related phenomena within society.

The main focus of ongoing debates has been on poverty and socially disadvantaged groups. We review their concepts in order to identify elements that may be useful for a theoretical conceptualisation of the particular structural position Hübinger had termed “precarious prosperity” and for comparative research. He point out a dynamic structural position where crossing the threshold to poverty was more common than upward mobility to the more prosperous and rather secure positions of material well-being. However this term is yet void of theoretical conceptualization and its use for comparative research needs to be assessed.

As the review of existing concepts and our arguments will show, the notion “precarious” provides a dynamic perspective. In combination with “prosperity”, alluding to a favourable (stable) level of material well-being, “precarious prosperity” represents a paradox: it depicts a certain level of material well-being, and simultaneously suggests a very uncertain situation. In short, precarious prosperity appears apt to focus on intermediate structural positions and for comparative research.

2. Critical discussion of established concepts in poverty and social inequality research

The last few decades have produced a variety of “new” concepts that combine and further develop elements of early approaches to poverty in Europe. Crucial terms we consider are underclass, social exclusion, marginalidad, and precariousness/precarity.

2.1 The concept of social exclusion

René Lenoir first coined the term social exclusion in the French public debate in 1974. He did not refer to a homogeneous category of people but to those who had been “left out” of social security schemes or who had “dropped out” of society such as alcoholics, drug addicts, mentally disabled, delinquent youth, etc. These population groups were mainly defined through an institutional criterion: they were registered with public institutions such as social welfare institutions, prisons, children’s homes etc. Social exclusion got well established towards the end of the 1980s, referring mainly to the difficulties in French suburbs and to long-term unemployment (Fassin 1996: 43-44).

Levitas (2000) distinguishes between three political discourses in social exclusion debates: the RED (redistributive egalitarian discourse), the MUD (the moralistic underclass discourse) and the SID (the social integrationist discourse). The last one has two shadings: the liberal version in Britain and the conservative version in France. Both call for integration through work. In France, inclusion is understood in an encompassing way with perspectives of solidarity and social cohesion in the forefront. Whereas the RED discourse has affinities to more complex social inequalities (Daly and Saraceno 2002), the MUD and SID discourses appear more simple and draw a clear dividing line between the included and the excluded.

The concept has remained firmly rooted in the tradition of French republicanism on the one hand (see also SID discourse), on the other in US-American liberal Republicanism and communitarianism in another guise (echoed in the MUD discourse). The responsibility to combat and avoid social exclusion lies at the heart of society: the State in the French tradition, and the communities in the US-tradition. In France this has led to integration-programmes, whereas the solution for the US-tradition lies in charity work.

Today, social exclusion “is so evocative, ambiguous, multidimensional and expansive that it can be defined in many different ways” (Silver and Miller 2003: 60). They argue that “(v)irtually any social distinction of affiliation will exclude somebody ... Consider (...) just a few things the literature says people may be excluded from: a livelihood; secure, permanent employment; earnings; property, credit, or land; housing; minimal or prevailing consumption levels; education, skills, and cultural capital; the welfare state; citizenship and legal equality; democratic participation; public goods; the nation or the dominant race; family and sociability; humanity, respect, fulfilment and understanding”. Not only is the concept so encompassing and can describe almost any kind of deprivation, but it is also used differently depending on the intellectual tradition.

“Social exclusion” has replaced concepts of “poverty” and social inequality (understood as “deficient integration”) in a series of debates. Reaching back to

Weber (and “closure theory” (Mackert 2004)), to Durkheim (2007 [1893]) and the concern for solidarity and inclusion, as well as to concepts of citizenship (Marshall 1992 [1949]), social exclusion means many things today and has been particularly influential politically.

Nonetheless, many questions arise regarding novelty and advantage of this popular (and political) concept when compared with older, well-established concepts of poverty research: social exclusion is sometimes defined as “multiple deprivation” corresponding to a definition of poverty already provided by Townsend (1979). Distinguishing social exclusion by its dynamic implications as opposed to poverty considered static, is not novel either given dynamic poverty analyses since the 1990s (Lister 2004).

Other authors argue that social exclusion emphasises the relational and structural aspects of social inequality by focussing on the mechanisms of exclusion (Alcock 2006). Social exclusion here goes beyond distributive and includes relational aspects of poverty. However, the discourses presented above provide opposite evidence, in particular the MUD and SID discourses. In addition, apart from British studies on deprivation in the Townsend tradition, both German (Kreckel 2004) and French studies (Paugam 1996 2005; Paugam et al. 1993) have included the relational aspects of poverty. Social exclusion understood this way has little new to offer.

Relational aspects again stand in the forefront when Sen (2000: 8) writes that “the helpfulness of the social exclusion approach does not lie ... in its conceptual newness, but in its practical influence in forcefully emphasizing—and focusing attention to—the role of relational features in deprivation”. The latter are included in poverty approaches such as Townsend’s (1979) only to a certain extent. Kabeer (2000) concludes that the concept is valuable for social policy analysis. It is useful to identify where meso-level institutions produce or re-produce social exclusion. Kabeer understands social exclusion as a deprivation in terms of recognition and social belonging, as well as in terms of economic hardships. It thus occurs on the axis between “who you are” (recognition) to “what you have” (distribution) (see also Fraser 1997). What the concept of social exclusion thus has over and beyond the concept of poverty—as made operational by Townsend—and the recent possibilities of longitudinal research, is its focus on actors at the micro-, meso- and macro-level (including the state). Therefore authors who mainly focus on victims of social exclusion need to be distinguished from those, who shift attention towards social processes and institutional mechanisms of social exclusion. The latter provide a more original contribution to the debate and include the dynamics of change (Alcock 2006: 114-127).

Mainstream use of the concept of social exclusion is criticised for various reasons: By emphasising “peripheral situations” it conceals and neglects that problems associated with it begin at the very centre of society (Fassin 1996); consequently the

functioning of the central institutions of society should be the focus of research and not the (excluded) individuals.

In addition, the usefulness of the concept in developing contexts is strongly questioned (Saith 2001), because social exclusion is conceptually closely linked to some notion of a welfare state that cares for its citizens in a minimal way. If the idea that social exclusion is part and parcel of the welfare state is discarded, a series of concepts current in developing countries—basic needs, capabilities, sustainable livelihoods, risk and vulnerability approaches—might be concepts addressing a similar phenomenon in “weak states” from another stance: the better material standing and immaterial recognition of the poor in general and relative to other local population groups. Social exclusion is then theorised with regards to citizenship rights, in particular in Latin America.

We conclude that despite its popularity, the concept of social exclusion with its implicit underpinnings of a welfare state is not easily transposed to the developing context. It is further rooted in the regional and political-ideological discourse and the contexts where it is used. Finally, a dual conception of society and a homogenous core are assumed. In sum, the concept remains theoretically ambiguous and not very useful for comparative research.

2.2 The US debate—culture of poverty and underclass

In the US-American context, two concepts related to poverty—the culture of poverty and the underclass—emerged in the 1960s (with roots dating back to the 1940s). They have recently been revived in the (Eastern) European context. Both concepts suggest cleavages between two groups: between the “mainstream” or “core” society and “the poor”. However the causes for this cleavage are different, as are the proposed remedies; in addition political discourse transformed the concepts according to their political perspectives.

Probably first used as a merely economic term by Gunnar Myrdal (1962) and building on his previous work in the 1940s, the concept “underclass” referred to the unemployed, unemployable and underemployed people confined the bottom of society by technological and economic change. This change produced a structural “underclass” that was disconnected from the nation and could not share in with its life, ambitions and achievements. In addition, Myrdal observed that this social position was being perpetuated by the parents’ lack of resources to provide their children with better opportunities. Myrdal (1962) demonstrates the emergence of a lower-class culture. By linking the causes of its emergence to technological and economic change, however, Myrdal’s concept was structural and not focused on cultural or behavioural explanation of behaviour. Later, the focus of the term underclass included spatial segregation: “underclass neighbourhoods”. Two new elements became associated to the concept and have since then dominated the debate: the

element of race and the element of deviant behaviour. Both elements depict the population groups as “undeserving poor” (Gans 1990).

Oscar Lewis’ work on the “culture of poverty” (1968) triggered a large academic and political debate. Culture of poverty refers to means of survival in situations of structural disconnectedness from mainstream society, institutions and social change. It is characterised by “its own structure and rationale, as a way of life that is passed down from generation to generation along family lines ... The culture of poverty in modern nations is not only a matter of economic deprivation, of disorganization or of the absence of something. It is also something positive and provides some rewards without which the poor could hardly carry on” (Lewis 1966: XLIII). Culture of poverty assumes that the poor have different norms and values than mainstream middle-class society. Unfortunately, Lewis’ work was largely picked up by conservative and essentialising arguments and later associated with the “Negro”-population. Many poverty researchers (Moynihan 1969; Glazer and Moynihan 1995) continued in this perspective, focussing exclusively on behavioural aspects, dismissing complexity, and omitting questions regarding access to basic social structures and services. This perspective blames the poor: change can only result from the poor themselves. It distinguishes between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor and underpins measures such as the US “War on Poverty”-strategy of the 1960s that basically implies “protecting” society from the “undeserving poor”. Despite much insistence on the fact that no empirical evidence existed for this perspective (Valentine 1968; and several authors in Moynihan 1969), the culture of poverty-approach appears to have fit well with the political liberal climate at the time. The concept has been recently revitalised regarding the misuse of social services and the intergenerational transmission of social service use, in particular of foreigners in European countries.

As a reaction to the culture of poverty approach, structural approaches such as the underclass emerged again. The most prominent researcher in this domain is William Julius Wilson (1987), who used the term somewhat ambiguously. He includes a behavioural element at the beginning, but constrains it later to the defining element of weak or lack of labour market attachment proposed by Myrdal (1962). This concept is class-oriented and discards the idea that a different set of values, diverging from the middle-class mainstream, predominates among the poor. Moreover, underclass behaviour is assumed to be the response to inadequate means—in comparison to those favoured by middle-class society—to obtain the same goals as mainstream society. Poverty in this perspective is again considered the consequence of social, economic, political and cultural barriers for certain population groups. Policy measures make sense and can potentially impact on the situation of the poor by eliminating barriers, changing institutions or promoting social change towards more social equality.

According to various articles (see Mincy et al. 1990), most definitions today consider the underclass as part of the poor population (i) in persistent poverty, (ii) deviating from the norm with regard to behaviour and/or attitudes or (iii) living in disadvantaged areas according to selected indicators (such as poverty rate, rate of welfare dependency or joblessness, etc.). All these aspects have theoretical and operational flaws. Most definitions include race and behaviour, providing good arguments for politically defining “undeserving poor” (Gans 1990; Marks 1991).

Summing up, the debates around “underclass” and “cultures of poverty”—despite different origins—are associated today with either conservative or liberal political backgrounds, mainly in the US. The concepts have been applied in other regions to the study of slums, “banlieues” or social outcasts (Lokshin and Popkin 1999; Domanski 2002). Both have strong moral underpinnings. Although some authors continue upholding the original idea (Myrdal’s concept), others continue to focus on factors such as race, behaviour or areas of residence. A further group “felt that the term has taken on so many connotations of undeservingness and blameworthiness that it has become hopelessly polluted in meaning, ideological overtone and implications, and should be dropped—with the issues involved studied via other concepts” (Gans 1990: 272). Despite the revival of the concepts, we share the worries expressed above. Apart from being ambiguous and not helpful in understanding change, they both have strong moral underpinnings and do not provide elements to conceptualise intermediate structural positions nor how to overcome the cleavages theorised. Furthermore, they tend to be used when focusing on distinct singular population groups or areas and thus are probably not apt for comparative purposes.

2.3 The Latin American debate—*marginalidad*

The Latin American debate, in particular in the 1960s and ‘70s, was dominated by dependency theory. The term *marginalidad* is strongly related to this theoretical field. Although the history of the concept *marginalidad* is not so straightforward, two origins are usually mentioned: on the one hand *marginalidad* is traced back to historical materialism, especially to Marxian notions of the industrial reserve army; on the other the cultural approach of the Chicago School put forth.

Prominent proponents of dependency theory as Quijano and Westwell (1983: 77) argue that “(T)he labor market is based on the existence of a relative surplus population. In this way, Marx established a specific area of research within the field of problems related to capital: that of the relations between the movement of capitalist accumulation and that of the structure of the working-class population and, in particular, that of the relative surplus population or ‘industrial reserve army’. This is precisely the area of research within which the debates around and investigations of ‘marginality’ take place.” Accordingly, marginality is the characteristic of that part of

the labour force that cannot be integrated into capitalist production and that is thus in excess (Quijano and Westwell 1983: 82). During the import substituting industrialization phase, however, the middle classes increased; also greater portions of workers were integrated into the formal labour market albeit with minimally paid jobs and low social protection. Finally, the informal sector turned out not to be a “socially excluded” sector but one with tight ties to the formal market.

The Chicago School proposed a more cultural approach to the topic, with particular reference to urban ecology. The main focus was on individuals and social groups who are “on the margins of society” with regard to their ways of living—outsiders or deviants of all sorts. This more cultural perspective (ruralization of urban areas) has also had repercussions in the marginality-concept of dependency theory (Fassin 1996: 54 ff.).

The specific spatial imagination associated with marginality—“centre-periphery”—can be traced to the particular development of Latin American countries. Massive rural exodus led to rapid urbanization; former, proletarianised subsistence farmers and landless peasants became the “reserve army”, the paupers. Nun (1999) refers to all those who never find their place in the labour market as “marginal masses”, visible at the periphery of Latin America’s major cities as squatter settlements. In contrast to urban centrality these areas are peripheral, due also to the lack of infrastructures, transport and basic services for a decent living. In Latin America, these settlements seem to represent a permanent feature of society. According to dependency theory, the main factors of development are externally determined—dependent development—and are thus structurally not comparable to the European or North American context. The development paths are not considered similar as the initial conditions differ fundamentally. The possibilities for social policies to reduce marginalization are difficult in dependent societies, as socio-economic change would require a change of the capitalist mode of production and of global market structures. In sum, the term *marginalidad* might be useful if we were in search of a spatial concept; even in its spatial dimension it does not appear suitable for comparative purposes, because poverty is not found in every periphery (for example poverty is sometimes concentrated in the inner cities). In addition, it does not provide elements to identify structural positions between the “periphery” and the “centre” in terms of material well-being and no indications are available of whether, how and why mobility might occur across these division lines.

2.4 Summary of the critical review

The critical review of the sociological concepts social exclusion, underclass/culture of poverty and marginality shows that the three concepts have been applied in research of (urban) poverty (Fassin 1996: 62). With regard to their original idea, the three concepts focussed on distinct points highlighting particular aspects and problems;

however, today they have absorbed too many different aspects—spatial, cultural, economic, and political—and have lost their specificity. The idea of a relatively homogeneous social “core” and a clear cleavage in society are premises that cannot necessarily be agreed upon from an empirical perspective, from the perspective of social inequalities or from a comparative perspective. The dual conception of society and poverty research stressing the poor, marginalised, or excluded segments of the population veils insights into the impact of social inequalities, into the interconnectedness of social positions or the dynamics of upward and downward mobility (Vogel 2004: 174). The critical review leads us to conclude that the revised concepts do not furnish appropriate elements to theoretically conceptualise a structural position close to poverty but not in it and its dynamics for comparative research.

In the following section, we explore in how far the concept of precariousness might fill this conceptual gap.

3 The concept of precariousness and its relation to precarious prosperity

The concepts precariousness and vulnerability appear to be amongst the more recent ones to address the characteristics and impact of social change. Here, we only emphasise the concept precariousness.

Reviewing literature on the term precariousness reveals that it differs in content and discussion according to national scholarly discourses and their origins: the relationship to poverty in France, informal employment in Italy and Spain and labour market regulation in Italy, Spain and Germany; the British debate is based on the individual choice approach (Laparra et al. 2004: 33-34). Consequently, in Germany, Spain and Italy, the debate links into industrial relations research regarding the erosion of the standard work relationship; in France it is addressed in research on social cohesion, solidarity and social status, and in the UK in research on flexibility, efficiency and productivity (ibid).

Whether we assume situations of precariousness to have prevailed in lower social strata for a long time or not, scholarly and political discussions around precariousness are rather recent. The original Latin meaning of precariousness—i.e. “precors” (pray), “precarius” (precarious) (Barbier 2004)—however, did not really link into the concept that emerged for the first time in the 1970s. This concept was applied to families, who did not belong to the standard clients of social aid: “‘precariousness or absence of labour market skills’; ‘scarce as well as irregular financial resources’; ‘instable or unsatisfactory housing conditions’; ‘health problems’; ‘uncertainty about the future number of children’; ‘relative lack of social links’ and a ‘rather precarious balance in terms of the life of the couple’” (Barbier 2002: 10-11 2004: 5 2005: 354). Barbier (2004) depicts the evolution of the term “precariousness” as having evolved from (lower middle class and working) families passing through

access to and working conditions in the labour market to finally depicting processes characterizing the development of society as a whole.

In French speaking areas, the term “*précarité*” is popular and often found in political and academic papers. According to Barbier (2005), this is somewhat less so for English or German speaking countries. However, since Barbier’s text a debate around “*Prekariat*” appeared in Germany; and this neologism received the fifth rank in the “word of the year” in 2006. A study (Müller-Hilmer 2006) stating that 8% of the German population form part of the “left-behind *Prekariat*” led to lively debate in social-scientific as well as political circles (Bosch and Weinkopf 2007). Recent data indicate that in Germany approximately one fifth of the full-time employees with “normal” work contracts earn less than two thirds of a median wage, a threshold that Hübinger (1996) empirically identifies “precarious prosperity”.

In the 1980s, in France and elsewhere in Europe, the term precariousness was used to depict new types of employment. In the 1990s the term was broadened to include types of working contracts (Barbier 2002). Precariousness thus referred to working conditions in increasingly deregulated economies, such as short-term work contracts, unstable working relationships, lack of “control over work” (Rodgers and Rodgers 1989), brokerage, undocumented labour, etc., but also unemployment (Marti et al. 2002). The polemic notion of “working poor” highlights the fact that regular work does not necessarily suffice to cover current living expenses. This is particularly true for unqualified or lowly qualified jobs. Precarious working conditions, however, need not necessarily lead to precarious living conditions (Paugam 2000; Marti et al. 2002) nor characterise precarious prosperity. In France, the term *précarisation* has recently developed referring to a general tendency of society regarding insecurity (Barbier 2004). In Germany, most recent theoretical deliberations have broadened the concept to include not only the type of attachment to the labour market but also their intersection with living conditions and individual trajectories (Krämer 2008).

The ideological background of the concept precariousness seems to have evolved from some type of social-democratic, institutional perspective as it presupposes certain material securities and protection as well as a certain degree of stability in labour relationships. The deregulation of economy is seen as a cause of precariousness. Industrial relations are important for negotiating for acceptable working conditions; the state is considered to be responsible for guaranteeing people a minimal acceptable standard of well-being, be this in combination with the labour market (for example flexicurity) or with some other type of safety net when access is not yet, not any more or not possible at all. In this vein, the risk of not being able to maintain a minimal socially acceptable standard of well-being—whether from a material point of view or from a security point of view—could be a first understanding of the term “precarious” in the compound word “precarious prosperity”.

Maybe the different political, institutional and structural contexts are the reason why little emphasis has been put on the concept precariousness in the Americas. In the analysis of developing countries in general, where welfare institutions and the state are generally weaker with regard to their support for the poor and protection of all, the favoured term appears to be that of “vulnerability”. This term refers to a certain risk of exposure to (natural hazards) that is not distributed evenly (Bankoff 2001; Bankoff et al. 2004).

In sum, the concept of precariousness seems to have emerged within social democratic contexts. The concept –in its original sense as uncertainty–is associated in many of its usages with minimally accepted standards of living (in combination with work, living conditions, poverty research or with regards to the welfare state’s task to provide safety nets); precariousness points towards insecurity in terms of material well-being and difficulties for longer term planning.

In combination with at least a socially accepted minimal standard of living indicated with the term prosperity, precariousness thus might be a useful concept to refer to a certain level of material well-being that enables a certain degree of agency beyond re-active (survival) strategies. The compound word further contains a temporal aspect of potential (downward) mobility and highlights a structural position within society.

The concept precarious prosperity links in well to Portes (1985) neomarxist theorization of social inequality, in particular to their class distinction in terms ownership of the means of production, control over the labour power of others and modes of remuneration. The “informal proletariat”–this definition for the Latin American context might be considered an equivalent to *Prekariat* in the German context–does not receive regular monetary wages. Wages can be at piece rate, and may include non-monetary compensations. They are not covered by social security. The relations with employers are not contractual, often only verbally agreed upon. In the European context, the structural equivalent would be short-term contracts, internship contracts, piece rate work as well as labour by people without a formal working permit, that correspond more directly to Portes “informal proletariat”.

Portes (1985) also define a second class, the “informal petty bourgeoisie”. This relates to employers of very small enterprises, employing generally no more than five workers. These small firms cannot afford any long term planning of their activities and hence of their income, but depend on the opportunities on the market. Profits are irregular and fluctuant. Furthermore, these small informal enterprises often make use of unremunerated family workers and others hired without contract. The informal petty bourgeoisie, according to Portes, seems to constitute a particular feature of the Latin American class structure and might not be found at all, or at least in far minor dimensions, in the European context. In 2003, Portes and Hoffman published a new article on the Latin American class structures, evaluating in particular the effects of

neoliberal adjustment and deregulation in the decade of the 1990s and beginning of 2000s. The results present that those positions in society characterised by forms of insecure income-generation—the informal petty bourgeoisie as well as informal proletariat—have grown considerably during the past ten years (Portes and Hoffman 2003).

An often-cited problem with the class approach is the lack of attention given to that part of the population that is not linked to the informal or formal labour market. The compound term precarious prosperity might overcome this shortcoming as it refers simply to uncertain material well-being at a level above a poverty threshold at a certain point in time. At the same time it includes the notion of precariousness as uncertainty, in particular, regarding the risk of downward mobility or entry into poverty. It therefore enables including a broader population segment than only those that can be classified by means of their attachment to the labour market.

4. Conclusion: “precarious prosperity” as a concept for a particular structural societal position in between the poor and the rather prosperous non-poor for comparative research

In this paper we critically reviewed a variety of concepts with regards to their potential to provide theoretical elements to depict a particular structural position that has recently been empirically observed. These concepts referred to the socio-economically worst off group in societies, yet were those concepts applied to analyse the social problems of their times. They are experiencing a revival in recent years. However, the implicit assumptions, that are (i) the dual perspective of society regarding the structural positions with regard to well-being (mainstream–underclass/culture of poverty; marginal–centre; included–excluded; poverty–non-poverty) and (ii) the basic idea of a core or mainstream society do not carry the potential to indentify other such structural positions. The focus on the poor, disadvantaged, excluded or marginalised groups of the reviewed concepts divides society into two groups. This supposes a clear cleavage and defined belonging, as well as, more often than not, the assumption of rather static conditions of social inequality (Fassin 1996). With regard to the terms “social exclusion” (France), “underclass” (USA) and “marginalization” (Latin America), for example, the social space is constructed as “within/without,” “above/below,” or “centre/periphery”. Most of the reviewed concepts do not take into account the population’s possible agency to improve or maintain their living conditions and lead a meaningful life. We argue that both the idea of a core or mainstream society (in which to be come integrated) and the dual conception of society needs to be overcome in order to better understand structural positions close to poverty, and the mobility across these division lines.

The strong roots in scientific traditions emerging from poverty research depict certain models of society and focus on particular population categories or areas. We argued

that such scientific traditions render comparative research difficult (as the review of concepts demonstrates).

Given recent evidence of considerable mobility into and out of poverty (Farago et al. 2005, Becker et al. 2003), we further argued that concepts are required that grasp the dynamic situation within structural positions and across them.

Precariousness, in its original sense, also implies a dynamic and temporal aspect: uncertainty and contingency. It may be applied to living and working conditions. Apart from pointing to possible difficulties at present, the concept represents the anticipation of possible disadvantages in the future.

“Prosperity” defines a certain degree of financial and material well-being. “Precarious” in “precarious prosperity” thus refers to the uncertainty to maintain a given level of prosperity. The position “precarious prosperity” depicts the condition where material well-being allows for more than mere survival and includes a certain scope of agency understood as the ability to pursue those aims that make one's life meaningful and worthwhile. Uncertainty and contingency may be influenced by employment, family, social networks, community and social protection.

Precarious prosperity, as proposed here, might be useful to analytically distinguish structural positions that breaks the dichotomy between poverty and non-poverty, and differentiates the quality of structural positions. While precariousness may be a feature applicable to all social strata below the established, prosperous middle and upper classes, “precarious prosperity” does not depict the structural position of the “poor”, “marginal” or “socially excluded”, “underclass” populations. The population in precarious prosperity might belong to the lower middle classes that, for a variety of possible reasons, lives with a heightened risk of downward mobility into poverty.

Whilst the critically reviewed concepts emerging from poverty research did not furnish conceptual tools to analyse other structural positions in society, the compound word of “precarious prosperity” might be able to fill in this gap. By providing a concept including a dynamic element in the original sense of the word it depicts the quality of a structural position above poverty that is not defined by its attachment to the labour market (and thus does not exclude individuals that are not attached to the (formal or informal) labour market as the case in mainstream stratification research). Probably a large section of the lower middle classes are found in this location. More precise knowledge on opportunities and constraints of these less secure structural positions of non-poverty might be relevant for social policy with regards to reducing or avoiding downward mobility into poverty and to stabilising and improving their condition. The next step will be to operationally define the concept and transpose it to be applied in empirical research. We hope this paper may lay a possible conceptual basis facilitating future empirical research on this dynamic segment of society.

¹ The distinction between continuity and discontinuity theorists is made by Goldthorpe (2003).

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