Economic type approach to poverty in Brazil: hypotheses about its origins and consequences

Márcia Pereira Cunha
Ph.D. candidate in Sociology
University of São Paulo, Brazil
marcia.cunha@gmail.com

Introduction

The growing importance of knowledge and practices of the Economic Science in the discussion of public issues is a factor recognized by different authors and thus the object of research and analysis through multiple perspectives (LOPES, 1973; CALLON, 1998; DEZALAY & GARTH, 2006; ALMEIDA, 2008). Considering which aspects of reality lead to this perception, one could mention three that seem most important: the impact of international financial institutions on government decisions that affect the lives of individuals, the advancement of cost-benefit type logic and argument over decisions on policies of several areas that presumably could or should be governed by other logic and a certain tradition in the identification of quantitative methods (for the proposes of this article) with purely technical tools and knowledge; whose results are often translated as by "competent" and "immune" to values or interests, producing, in this perspective, truths about reality.

It is fair to qualify the criticism of this move, considering that its observation is concerned, in fact, to lines or specific styles within the Economic Science. As a subject of discussion, its name varies: neo-liberal, neo-classical, economic mainstream. The research of this paper, in caring more about the three aspects of reality just mentioned
- taken together - than with either internal to or strictly belonging to the field of discipline, uses a more general term: the object is called, in this view, an *economic type approach*. This name is justified by the fact that this is not an economic approach. It is not an approach by economists, neither characteristic of economics as a consolidate and plural field of knowledge. Economics concerns us here, less as disciplinary scope and more as a particular perspective that has its main reference in this discipline and thus borrows some instruments and assumptions and, thereby, legitimates itself as the most suitable for the treatment of difficulties imposed in the conduct of public affairs.

What is called economic type approach in this paper is defined by three elements that have come to characterize the prevailing debate: i) the analytic focus centered on the individual; ii) the establishment of the relationship between the individual and poverty by formal thinking and language with privilege of mathematical and statistical sources/tools and iii) guidance in the debate for coping with poverty by the logic of cost-benefit calculations. The focus on the individual is evident in discussions about the determinants of poverty. Individual characteristics and, by extension, their families and communities, are responsible, in this perspective, for the poverty situation in which the individual is situated in. The set of characteristics, in turn, may have more or less force in determining whether that individual is poor or not. The characteristics, the intensity of their determinations and the means to calculate them are the subject of great discussion and produce a lot of work on which there seems little or no consensus.

If it is true, as argued, that this approach has achieved visibility and prominence not seen before, it is necessary to identify the concepts that it has replaced or, in other
words which ones lost centrality because of this prominence. Insofar as ideas and notions about public issues and problems do not arise or circulate independently of historical and social context in which they are observed (SIKKINK, 1991), the elements that characterize the economic type approach also did not appear abruptly in public arena. Their emergence and consolidation were made possible by adapting and combining with other current ideas, an operation conducted by specific agents and relations. Besides the economic scenario naturally essential for understanding the production of this approach, two moments more intrinsically related to the social problems in Brazil are considered here as crucial: that of the development of a mobilization called Ação da Cidadania contra a Fome, a Miséria e pela Vida (Citizen Action against Hunger and Poverty and for Life, released in 1993) and that of the functioning of a government program, called Programa Comunidade Solidária (Solidarity Community Program), coordinator of the social actions of the government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994-1999, 1999-2003).

Finally, also in congruence with the hypothesis that the transformation of the debate was consolidated between the mid 1990s and early 2000s, it is necessary to return to the Brazilian context of discussions of social problems from the late 1980s. Significant for our analysis is that in returning to this context it does not seem very appropriate to say that the terms in which poverty was discussed will be re-examined because the very notion of poverty does not precisely represent that discussion. The dominance of the category seems to be, in itself, an effect of the process to be analyzed. Prior to the prominence achieved, the debate occurred more in terms of
social and economic inequalities and living conditions considered unjust. Social rights were the main frame of reference.

**Brazilian Constitution, social rights and economic change**

The context in which the promulgation of the Brazilian Constitution took place in 1988, although not perhaps the most important one in the change in terms of the poverty debate as is framed here, is, on the other hand, crucial as a setting where forces and positions involving that change were in movement. Quite generally it is possible to identify these positions as those who supported the form of the Constitution and the values and principles that gave it support and those who opposed it, criticizing the concepts or the interpretation of them in the text of the new charter. Those who demonstrated in favor of it assumed, as a principle, the assertion of State action and responsibility in regulating the social life. Those who demonstrated against it saw the adoption of this idea as the origin of deficiencies in the performance of the State: an excess of duties undertaken and hence the risk of undermining governance. Maybe it is not too much to remember that in those years, other countries had levels of adoption of liberal policies in advanced stages (ANDERSON, 1998; FIGUEIRAS, 2000).

The observation of the disputes between different groups in different areas more accurately describes this scenario (RAICHELIS, 1998; FERNANDES, 1989; SANTOS and LAMOUNIER, 1992), but there is no error in saying that, again in general, the text of the new Constitution reflected more the positions of those who claimed a more active public sector and, in particular, in promoting policies of social protection and promotion. Not by chance the Constitution was called “Citizen Constitution” when it
was enacted. The moment in which the work on drafting the new legislation took place certainly had an influence on this outcome. The country had just emerged from a period of little more than two decades of military dictatorship that - beyond the violence typical of these regimes - also caused a worsening of living conditions of impoverished populations of the society. The disorderly growth of cities, the deterioration of public services and income concentration have been the subject of many studies and analysis, as well as the movements that appeared at that time for claiming improvements (BRANT and SINGER, 1980; KOWARICK, 1994; SADER, 1988).

The mobilization of various groups put the set of demands in terms of guarantees of social rights of State responsibility, assuming the existence of different conditions and conflicting interests in society, whose control and judgment therefore was up to state, in its role to promote a just and egalitarian society.

The promises of the Constitution, however, did not materialize. In legal terms there have been many devices used for non-fulfillment of the guarantees provided by law (FAGNANI, 2005). In social terms, the demonstrations that have been seen in the previous period have changed and have had their magnitude decreased. Economically, Brazil has been suffering the social effects of the debt crisis and of the policies adopted as counterparts to loans from international institutions, such as rising inflation, unemployment and wage squeeze (FIGUEIRAS, 2000; GHAI, 1991). Successive stabilization plans were implemented without success. In institutional politics term,

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1 The worsening of living conditions is quite a consensus in the literature and many of the references mentioned in this paper has it as a starting point or explore it as an analysis object. It is worth to mention, considering the focus of this discussion, what was known in Brazil in the 1970s as the "controversy of the income distribution". It is attributed to a study by Albert Fishlow (1972), a North American researcher with research in and about Brazil (D'Araújo, Farias and Hippolito, 2004), the pioneer observation on the concentration of income during the military period. From it, other studies have been conducted and social inequalities have received attention through the debate on income distribution (Langone, 1973; Tolipan and Tinelli, 1978).
was elected the first president by direct vote in Brazil after two decades of military dictatorship, Fernando Collor de Mello. Two years later, in 1992, his term was interrupted by an impeachment process motivated by accusations of corruption. Vice President Itamar Franco, took office until the end of 1994.

In this short time two events took place with completely different origins and developments, but that proved to be complementary and important for the configuration of the debate on social problems. They are: the economic plan called *Real*, launched in July 1994, and the beginning of the movement *Ação da Cidadania contra a Fome, a Miséria e pela Vida*, in April 1993.

The *Real Plan* was an economic stabilization plan implemented by the Minister of Finance of President Itamar government, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The Plan's success has been experienced by Brazilian society through the control of inflation, a problem that had been penalized it for a long time. The political capital generated by this achievement has been often appointed as the main factor for the election of former minister Fernando Henrique the following year, 1995, for the presidency. However, the *Real Plan* was part of a wider political and social project that, in first place involved struggles for power and, second, proposed and required actions arising from the context (internal and external) of the time, related to the implementation of liberalizing policies. Thus, despite the control of inflation, there were also social costs similar to those observed in other countries that have adopted policies imposed by international financial institutions. The reasons and answers given by the (then already elected) President Fernando Henrique Cardoso to pressure and criticism to consequences of the *Real Plan* turned explicit the choices and notions that were
behind the larger project of running the country. They are particularly revealing in the formulations about the role of the state and the country's relationship with the international context and on the other hand, in the place given to those criticisms and pressures.

Although the relationship with international financial institutions was questioned from the standpoint of the subordination of national interests to foreign interests, the official government discourse was that the policies would restore the competitiveness of Brazil in the international databases. In the way of the stylish rhetoric long known by Brazilians as a "country of the future," the idea was that it was time to modernize the country and put it - through those measures – on the path of development. The notions of “future” and “modernization” were also used as means to establish a qualitative difference between the current policies and other policies of the past, always called “old-fashioned” and “outdated”. The so-called modernization of the state appeared, in turn, through the also already well-known criticism of the inefficiency of the public services. This inefficiency, however, was presented in an at least ambiguous way by the government. On one hand, references to the State were openly negative: incompetent, slow, giant. Private initiative was presented as a representative of the opposite characteristics: responsible, agile, meritocratic. On the other hand, however, the same government that referred to the state disability as something about which it had no influence or responsibility, imposed the inflation control as a symbol of its own competence, excellence and modernity.

Regarding the opposition, it was characterized by the government discourse, in an almost disdainful way, as out of date and attached to forms of management that
did not fit the operation of the modern world. That government, it said about itself, was characterized by the contrast, conscious of the new challenges and endowed with the capacity to take decisions. The idea of “competence” was used as opposite to the idea of “politics”. From it, ideas like “exemption”, “technique” and “precision” was used as close to that of competence. On the other side were those of “corruption”, “interests”, “erraticism”, beside that of politics. So that, for example, containment of public spending - despite being a known component of the neoliberal policies adopted under the auspices of international financial institutions not only in Brazil but in other countries that resorted to their loans - was justified as a simple and obvious matter of efficient allocation of scarce resources; at most, a bitter but necessary medicine that would be recognized as correct at a later date. On the backdrop of inflation control, references to the economic universe were everywhere: it was from the field in which Brazil was placed in a position to compete on an equal footing with developed countries to the space of valued dialogue with international actors and institutions; the field of competence and technical excellence of the government and the sphere of life that materialized the celebrated achievements; the basis for justification of policy options that did not appear as such and of the wave that, out of this logic, there would be retrogression and losses, once more, synthesized in threatens of return of inflation.

The discourse of the social area had many affinities with ideas like those carried by the official discourse of the government. Its main producer and disseminator was the Comunidade Solidária Program, a government agency that, in defining itself, said not being part of the government, but a national partnership between it and civil society. The discursive production of the Cardoso government about social problems,
However, is better understood if seen in its relationship to *Ação da Cidadania*, the second event of the Itamar Franco mandate relevant to this discussion.

**The transition in social discourse and the presence of economic logic**

Taking the presidency on after the impeachment of Brazilian President Fernando Collor de Mello, President Itamar Franco, after sealing a sort of peace agreement with the then opposition forces to his predecessor, was faced with the need to take action to give him an original image and legitimacy which supported his short tenure. The *Real* Plan would certainly be one of those milestones, if the Finance Minister of President Itamar had not so forcefully attributed to himself the credit of the device. In the social area, which suffered severe setbacks also through allegations of corruption during the prior period, a thematic confluence raised the problem of hunger as a focus of action. The confluence of themes has to do with the discussion of the problem raised in different circles at the time: the *Frente Nacional de Prefeitos* (National Front of Mayors)\(^2\) the remnants of the *Movimento pela Ética na Política* (Movement for Ethics in Politics)\(^3\) and the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers Party). The result of this confluence was the adoption by President Itamar of the issue of hunger as a priority for his action in the social area.

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\(^2\) Organization that brings together mayors in office, founded in 1989. Nonpartisan, the National Front of Mayors says it has as its mission the coordination of the mayors to “put into practice the nonpartisan action of local managers in defense of the residents of the large and medium cities, metropolitan areas, and also the smallest” (www.fnp.org.br, accessed on 01.04.2011.)

\(^3\) The Movement for Ethics in Politics was formed from the mobilization of various social organizations in favor of the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello. Having accomplished that goal its members have continued mobilized and between the possibilities of action, the fight against hunger was elected as representative of the social difficulties faced by the country.
The *Ação da Cidadania* was launched as a social movement to fight hunger. On the government side the *Conselho de Segurança Alimentar, CONSEA*, (Food Security Council) was initiated, comprising government representatives and representatives of social movements and organizations working in the area. The *Ação da Cidadania* took massive action. It was responsible for the creation of committees to collect food to be distributed to the poorest. The release of a study conducted by the *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica e Aplicada, IPEA* (Institute of Applied Economic Research), which indicated the existence of 32 million Brazilians living below the poverty line, emphasized the seriousness of the problem. The local scope of *Ação da Cidadania* was made possible by establishing relationships with small social organizations and with geographically more restricted activity. In parallel, also by using means of mass communication, the main representative of the *Ação da Cidadania*, having become its symbol, was the former political exiled Herbert de Souza, nationally known as “Betinho”. He appeared in television vignettes, carried by the country's largest broadcaster, sending the message that every individual could contribute to the alleviation of hunger of other individuals through the donation of food.

The *Comunidade Solidária* Program, in turn, was set up at the beginning of the first mandate of Fernando Henrique, immediately causing much discontent among social workers. With the establishment of the Program, other government agencies in

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4 The Institute of Applied Economic Research is a government institution, established in 1964 to advise the government (more specifically the Ministry of Planning, in its origin) in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of public policies.

5 Betinho appeared in television advertisement spreading this idea through a short story: a hummingbird, criticized for animals that ran through the forest to escape a fire, responded carrying water droplets into the fire: “I know that I can 'save the forest alone, but at least I’m doing my part'”. The same wording, each one does his part”, was central in the ideology built later by Comunidade Solidária to emphasize the idea that individual, specific actions, produce major changes when summed.
the area were removed without consultation or explanation. The structure of the Program absorbed the CONSEA structure and its formation was also widely criticized by civil society sectors that were disenfranchised. Quite similar to the general discourse of Cardoso, the Program announced that its introduction meant the beginning of a new era of performance in social area: modern, agile and capable. In initiating this discourse, there were two movements: one of getting close to internationalized discourses dedicated to social issues (along with an adoption of many of their elements) and another of accommodation of the new ideas that came through this import to the current ones. The level on which this accommodation has happened was that of the discourse so far developed by the Ação da Cidadania.

The theme of targeting polices as opposed to the universal ones proclaimed by the Constitution can be seen as the backdrop for the construction of the new approach to social problems. This is also the most visible link between the economic and social discourse. The targeting, though it has acquired the sense of affirmative action for socially vulnerable groups, also had strong connotations as related to the reduction of state expenditures in the social area. The discussion of targeting versus universalization (CARDOSO, 2004; KERSTENETZKY, 2005; YAZBEK, 2004), however, seems to have lost relevance over time. In the academic sphere, this debate seems to have given way to more formal studies about the characteristics of state intervention or the evaluative nature, analyzing the consequences of new policies, not always

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6 The Comunidade Solidária Program was formed by an Executive Secretariat responsible for coordination of programs implemented by government departments and by an Advisory Council composed of personalities from civil society and representatives of the ministries. Chaired by former first lady Ruth Cardoso, was the main focus of social activities undertaken by the government of Fernando Henrique. For information, see: http://www.planalto.gov.br/publi_04/COLECAO/COMUNI.HTM, accessed on April 18, 2011.
paying attention to changes that they represented in relation to scenarios of past policies. The justification for the need to target social policies is used largely on the aforementioned image of the failed state, incompetent to manage all spheres of social life. However if the state is unable to promote actions that ensure a better life for its citizens, who would be able to the task? The society itself, answered the discourse of Comunidade Solidária Program.

The emphasis on the so-called virtues of civil society was a fundamental passage in the accommodation of the new ideas to the set of notions that prevailed until then in the public debate about earlier social movements. The references to the society within the discourse of the Ação da Cidadania presented elements clearly affiliated with the tradition of social movements from past decades. They expressed notions such as that mobilization takes place in the negotiation between different interests within the same society and that it involves ideals of society that are mutually excluded and therefore requires the arbitration of a third referee, in the case the State. The sense of struggle and necessity of confrontation was not discarded, nor did the appeal to the individual dimension conflict with this idea. Distinct meaning, if not opposed, was attributed to social mobilization by the Comunidade Solidária Program. In its discourse, the acting forms of social movements were classified as reactive and running over other ideas or the state itself. The dialogue with the state, in turn, was sometimes presented as a stance of non co-operation, sometimes as accommodation, expressed in statements like "wait idly by the state." This kind of attitude, claimed the
discourse, was characteristic of the past. What the Program brought, then, was a new attitude, more proactive, using its own terms.\(^7\)

Modernity was presented also by defending the introduction of (called efficient) management tools of work undertaken in the social area. As if it was devoid of rationality (though one could argue the need to better structure it, something that was not denied or rejected by its practitioners), it was mentioned by the Program through the need for professionalism, for the use of management techniques, such as the establishment of strategic planning and evaluation methods. The idea that social problems were more a matter of skill and technique than of politics, choices, or recognition of differences was spread through this way. Institutions and notions that to some extent were related or affiliated with the tradition of action towards marginalized groups proliferated in this period. In Brazil, this is a very heterogeneous and complex field, traditionally permeated by private philanthropy, by state practices based on favor relations, and by social organizations and movements who sought and seek to establish the validity of language of social rights as milestones in the establishment of a just society.

Permeating this discursive construction is what was identified in this discussion as a closeness of the national social debate to the social discourse of international institutions. It is likely to find the import of words, ideas and guidelines for action for the social area in previous periods. The hypothesis to be proven is that the force with which international guidelines have focused on the economic area has had equivalence with regard to social problems, and then perhaps differently from prior moments, this

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\(^7\) The incidence of the Comunidade Solidária over ideas about and ways of coping social problems is discussed elsewhere (Cunha, 2010) in which these elements are explored in more detail.
incidence has been such to the point of causing a breach with the terms of its recent past. The Comunidade Solidária Program, accordingly, introduced and/or reproduced in this context the notions of “volunteerism”, “non-state public space”, “corporate citizenship”, hitherto non-existent or carrying different meanings. The case of the idea of voluntary work was an example of attaching new meanings, to the extent that diffused and old practices were placed in the perspective of the Program ideas about what would be a transformative social action. Other ideas, such as “non-state public space” or “corporate citizenship”, were examples of import. They designated the existence of specific groups (such as businessmen or social organizations, now modernized and professionalized) that would have decisive role in solving the problems that the state had no capacity to solve.

In this process, small and old social organizations were faced with the imperative of, in order to stay alive, adhering to the discourse or engaging in actions of organizations (many originating from companies) born under the new ideas, otherwise it would be highly unlikely for them to access vital resources for their maintenance in light of their then alleged amateurism or old-fashioned kind of militancy. The possession and the ability to capitalize on now valued administrative tools and intentionally sophisticated technical vocabulary became important in the real and symbolic survival of traditional organizations.

Although the passage of time permits an observer to say today that "corporate citizens" or "volunteers" (appeared on the spur of the period) have lost the visibility that they already enjoyed, there is no doubt that, viewed as part of this scenario of change, the ideas that they helped produce are still valid. Calculating the Human
Development Index (HDI), for example, can be seen as another element of that process of introducing new ways to discuss and understand social problems. The fact that, different from the notions that lost visibility, the HDI have gained importance is also interesting. Introduced by the United Nations Program for Development in 1994 in Brazil, HDI has had growing importance over time, and today, although it may not have concrete significance when considered alone, it is current data and it is used as prove to alleged changes of social conditions in Brazil. Its power as argument comes from the fact that it is used as a photograph of the reality; as it shows a truth that is difficult to see. Irrespective of its validity, it is very typical of the kind of debate that has become predominant: it is a measure, it informs in an immediate way and condenses multiple dimensions into one. It is not the validity of the index or the suitability of its calculation or dimensions that are at issue here. However, it is worth to think about the causes and significance of its emergence and the appeal it exerts on the current context. Debates on social indicators arouse interest for the same reason. Despite the contention that they are merely means to more complex discussions and that they should not be taken as themselves, the socially and historically made identification between technical intricacies and capacity of neutral and competent understanding of reality contributes to the debate is reduced in several ways to such means. It is not rare to find professionals who have expertise in this type of production and who refer to discussions of social rights as an unstructured or confusing field of debate, as opposed to a specific and objective field of measurements and calculations of determinants of poverty⁸.

⁸ Preliminary data obtained in field work still in progress.
Besides this, the very communicating capacity of this type of information generates discussions about the production of certain data that divert attention from the phenomenon measured to their forms of measurement. The figure of 32 million Brazilians living below the poverty line although used within references from the tradition of social movements by the Ação da Cidadania, taught the power of image and synthesis of a numerical data, its communicating and motivating potential about an extreme problem. In that same case, although in a dimension not yet publicized, the data of 32 million has caused controversy among experts. There was a dispute over the methodology used by the researchers of Mapa da Fome (Hunger Map) inside the institution responsible for the document. With the discussion, doubts were raised about the political convenience tied to the choice of using a number or its half. This debate seemed to have been restricted to the circle of experts, but the later context of systematic praise of techniques and measures to the detriment of political forms has allowed the parameters established by the experts to become prevalent in the way of discussing social problems, or, preferably poverty. The depth and extent of work devoted to the calculation of the HDI, in this sense, despite the seriousness and commitment of professionals involved in the venture in Brazil, also are due to open space for this type of production. They are due to, therefore, something more than "the passion of the Brazilians by rankings", unpretentious hypothesis of a professional involved with this work, to explain the success achieved by the index in the country's social discussion.\(^9\)

\(^9\) Preliminary data obtained in field work still in progress. The production conditions of Mapa da Fome, as well as interpretations and perceptions of actors about elements and interests that make up the discussion around it are assembled and developed in the text of, still unfinished, the doctoral thesis. They are not present here because they are not essential to the argument, something distinct, of this article.
The negative meaning ascribed to forms of politicized social mobilization, notions concerning the abolition of the social antagonisms and the themes of social problems through explicit and extreme expressions - such as hunger, in the case of the Ação da Cidadania or the poorest, in the case the Comunidade Solidária Program - opened space for the centrality acquired in the debate by the problem of poverty in the sense of our argument: a less relational category than "inequality", less complex than "conditions of life", less procedural than "concentration of wealth" to name a few. In another but related line of argument, the inefficiency of state management of social problems, the claim that such problems needed just rational and managerial techniques for their resolution and the identification of these techniques with a new stage which put Brazil next to the more developed countries\textsuperscript{10}, which already have and are aware of this imperative, opened the way to the economic type approach to poverty.

**Economic type approach: characteristics and consequences**

It is worth repeating the caveat that the qualification "of economic type" is due primarily to the identification of elements that characterize the new framework for the discussion of social problems (and now it is possible to say, poverty) related to economic logic, and secondly, to the context in which the change occurred of a high incidence of economic knowledge and practices in other fields of social life, governed

\textsuperscript{10} Statement of the president, reported in the press, before the rise of the Brazilian position in the ranking of countries organized according to the Human Development Index of the UN is illustrative: "Brazil now belongs to the group of countries with high human development, 'which comprises the most industrialized and developed', said yesterday President Fernando Henrique Cardoso at the party four years of the Real"(Folha de Sao Paulo, Caderno Brasil, July 2, 1998).
by parameters other than economic ones. The elements characterized here as similar to the economic universe refer to the centrality given to the individual, the mathematized relationship established between the individual characteristics and situation of poverty and the dominance of the arguments of cost-benefit type as guidelines of the ways of coping with it. These three elements, in turn, are related to the economic and social context marked by the adoption of adjustment policies imposed by international financial institutions since 1990 in Brazil.

The academic production or, more broadly, the technical production from research institutes dedicated to advise government institutions, especially those that deal with poverty issues, has some characteristics that give it unity and identity in the sense of forming a field of dialogue among its works and spread of ideas regarding its study subjects. In these studies, poverty is, in a general way, the result of combinations among individual characteristics. Once identified the factors which could be more or less determinant of the potential of an individual being, becoming or remaining poor, mathematical equations lead to the identification of the most important ones. These factors, identified in a context of management of scarce resources, should be the priority targets of policies that aim to eliminate or reduce poverty. Another characteristic operation of this production is the derivation of the poverty of families, communities or even country of poverty defined from the individual. The social phenomenon of poverty from this perspective becomes the sum of individual poverty.

The article by Barros and Camargo may be mentioned as an example of this approach to the problem of poverty and thus it is possible to extract from it some variables typically involved in this approach: "the number of adult-equivalents in the family" and "number of adults with opportunities to get some income" or "income-generating capacity of the family" and "level of capacity utilization for income generation of the family" (Barros and Camargo, 1994: 83.84).
Discussed exclusively in quantitative and individualized terms, poverty loses any relation to the context in which it occurs. It becomes a phenomenon known and valued in itself and thus the possibilities of solving it are attached to the individual capacity to overcome it. Government intervention in this regard is limited to minimizing the effects of those factors that were identified as the most important in the continuity of poverty; this perspective perfectly combines the ideas of targeting and public intervention to ensure competitive conditions. When reduced to the expression of efficient management of resources or to calculations about how to take a certain number of people out of poverty with the least possible amount of resources, poverty loses its social content and its capacity to represent a problem that calls into question the social ties, the power struggles or political decisions that take place around it.

It is not a matter of questioning the importance of quantitative or statistical analysis. Authors who are dedicated to describing the origin of government intervention in the social area have often indicated the use of measurement methods and calculations to identify groups and operate actions to them.\textsuperscript{12} What is proposed here is to inquire as to their strength in defining the terms of the debate. It is necessary to acknowledge the appeal that this type of formulation carries. The quantifiable nature of the variables involved allows for a quick grasp of alleged changes in the context of poverty incidence, although the content of these changes does not enter into discussion. Moreover, the issue of state reform since the mid 1990s had already announced the idea that the government was about to become

\textsuperscript{12} Works by Rosanvallon (1997) and Castel (2001) are examples. Regarding Brazil, the works by Sposati (1988) and Schindler (1992) are examples.
more effective and efficient, especially in the social area, where the aggravation of social problems was one of the ways in which it was possible to attest the overstressed state's incompetence and inability to properly manage all fields of social life. The irrefutable reality of social problems has been discursively used in several ways during that period, one being to strengthen the also repeated diagnosis that in the social area, the government "spends too much and spends badly." In this context, the guarantee of social rights would come through efficiency that the public would gain from the reforms implemented.

The spread of a new approach to poverty emerged as a problem that deserves investigation from the hypothesis that the use of new terms and ideas require and thereby generate an also new way to understand the phenomenon. It sets new parameters within which actions to fight poverty are considered or judged. Understanding the process of consolidation of this approach is also part of the claim to raise questions or produce some clues about what can be consolidated as forms of discussion and policies to deal with the problem. There is, apparently, a question for sociology itself, in this sense. It seems important to think about the consequences of the prominence acquired by such kind of approach to the understanding of poverty as a sociological object. Would be poverty becoming an object about which only experts in management techniques or calculation would have something relevant to say?

It is not difficult to find researchers familiar with quantitative research techniques (the bias of this paper, economists) suggesting that researchers who give priority to qualitative techniques (also by this bias, sociologists) criticize their production due to some kind of resentment or pure and simple ignorance with respect
to calculation tools or with the universe of numbers (Kalleberg, 1995). At the risk of
trying to think about the issue in unfavorable ground because it is full of assumptions
or simply because it is not the best theoretical option, the first step into this discussion
has been taken towards an specific aspect of this approach: the aspect of
quantification. Quantification not only in the sense of counting population that,
moreover, is not new practice. Martin (2001) shows how statistical resources have
been used since before the nineteenth century as a tool for understanding and further
control of populations, not just the impoverished.

However, the history of the use of statistics in the construction of poverty or
social inequality as a sociological object perhaps deserves attention and could even
reveal the extent to which such use has transformed its meaning as it did with the
conceptions of life and death, significantly changed in the past, when they moved from
theological or magical phenomena to objects subjected to some control or prediction
(Martin, 2001; Porter, 1995). The work of Recio (2003), showing the French, North
American and Brazilian traditions in discussion of the "social issue" suggests that, at
least in the more institutionalized lines of debate on the subject, research and
conceptual production leaned on the processes and conflicts which generate unequal
living conditions, considering how labor relations, power, and sociability reflected the
political and economic dimensions of social life. As this production bore the marks of
the time in which it was produced, it is possible to say that the distinctive form in
which such problems have been treated more recently also suffers from this kind of
influence. The discussions about targeting policies and about the efficient
management of scarce resources; the definitions that measure, atomize and locate the
poverty; the determinations of the elements that result in greater or lesser number of poor and the quantity of resources required to take a certain quota of individuals out of poverty, result in a phenomenon whose quantifiable nature is predominant over those that do not undergo the same scrutiny.

It is interesting to see this debate from the perspective of the origins of sociology. If it is considered in its French origin, efforts to institutionalize it as science were not only closely interwoven with the use of statistical data (MUCCHIELLI, 2001; DESROSIER, 2000) but also depended on it, recalling the "social rate of suicides" of Durkheim. It must lead to ask, therefore, what allows us to refer to the weakening of social content in front of a quantifiable poverty. It would be a genuine problem or just a result of the history of the specialization of fields of knowledge? The answer leads to the ground over which questions are raised about poverty. Understood as social phenomenon, it assumes, however obvious it seems to be, the existence of a specific object: the society. Society appears in the economic type approach, in an almost perfect negation of classical sociological assumptions: as the sum of individual cases. Passeron (1995), dedicated to the relationship between Sociology and Statistics, helps us to think about such distinctions, by describing them and giving advice to avoid illusions whose risk is inherent in both disciplines: those of affirmation of self-sufficiency. Although he wrote his article in the early 1980s, the author's posture is up to date once he brings criticisms of a potential sectarianism forward and answer to them by comparing what he calls sociological reasoning and experimental or statistical reasoning.
To Passeron, both types of reasoning are distinguished from each other not in the descriptive sense that each contains about the same reality, but in the logic of the composition of their statements about it. Both are built on the observation of an empirical reality and neither can the statistical statement describe it only with its language of a mechanical nature, nor may the sociological statement challenge the statistical data through conceptual operations not confirmed by empirical observation. Expressed in few words, the sociological statement differs from the statistical statement by references to the context and conditions\textsuperscript{13} that generate the statistical information and are not evident in themselves. In the author's words "all reasoning that to make a statement about its object, should incorporate a discourse about the variation of their contexts and about the production of information that uses to the interpretation of the findings that it states" is a sociological reasoning (PASSERON, 1995: 125). He develops this idea by observing i) differences between concepts and indicators, ii) the operations made at statistical cross-data intersections and possibilities of interpretation of their results and iii) relationships made in dealing with statistical variables and historical contexts. However, the most important aspect for this paper in Passeron’s definition is the potentially generalizing nature of the sociological statement. The intrinsic generalizable ability of the sociological statement presupposes understanding of its objects as elements from a whole, i.e. the society, which transcends and includes them.

\textsuperscript{13} At the risk of saying something dispensable, it is worth noting that these references do not describe research procedures, more restricted, as the application of instruments, data collection period, spatial distribution of samples or similar. The context and the conditions here relate to notions, assumptions and historical knowledge of the realities to be investigated.
In confronting these propositions with issues raised by contemporary society, there are two different perspectives. The first can be represented by Nicolas Rose (2005) who, recognizing the centrality of the concept of social to the thought and action of the control and government of the people since the nineteenth century, starts with some specific examples relating to the crisis of the Welfare State (such as privatization and what he calls marketization of health services, education and insurance) to affirm the "emergence of a range of rationalities and techniques that seek to govern without governing society, to govern through regulated choices made by discrete and autonomous actors in the context of their particular commitments to families and communities" (Rose, 2008: 84). With this, the author refers to the emergence of new spatiality, or in his terms, new territories of governance, defined by notions of communities and groups. For him, policies, actions and speeches with focus in communities are indications that the collective and individual lives are no longer governed on behalf of society, but in this more limited space where relations between individuals take place. Since the political shifts have parallels with shifts occurring in the field of knowledge, Rose claims that the emergence of more localized spatial analysis, besides the various streams put together under the heading of postmodernism, “where the object ‘society’, in the sense that began to be accorded to it in the nineteenth century (the sum of the bonds and relations between individuals and events – economic, moral, political – within a more or less bounded territory governed by its own laws), has also begun to lose its self-evidence, and ‘sociology’, as the field of knowledge which ratified the existence of this territory, is undergoing something of a crisis of identity” (Rose, ditto). The affinity between the spatial location
pointed out by Rose and the use of statistics in the sense less of describing situations or collective phenomena and more of locating, atomizing, identifying their individual or collective appearance, to the detriment of their social natures can lead the discussion to the conclusion that this use confirms the thesis of death of the social: without or weakened the reference to social, the movement that leads the disciplines to hold up on more localized realities have in this use just an example, a particular case. Using the same issues, Smelser (1994) has a different point of view. His analysis suggests that the recently observed emergence of groups raises the question of new sources of solidarity rather than the decline of solidarity itself, which keeps the relevance and validity of the concept of social as a totality. The task for sociology, according to the author, is to identify relationships that are established, if one can use these terms, between the whole and its parts, and not to give up the notion of society from the need to understand these new groups and their dynamics.

Putting these perspectives on the field of issues involved in the economic type approach to poverty, it seems possible the identification between Roses’ thesis about death of the social and the emergence of this approach, as they have in common the failure to consider a concept of society as a sphere of interest to thinking and questioning phenomena within it. The path suggested by Smelser, on the other hand, seems still to be waiting for confirmation of its possibility.

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