

The Poor as “Others” – Poverty in Israel in the 21st Century

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The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze the process of constructing the poor as *others* in Israeli society and it follows the notion of *othering* recently developed by Ruth Lister. Although the poor appear in reports published by various governmental agencies, they are not a part of the life experience of the majority of the population who live in relative affluence and generally do not encounter the poor. The poor are perceived as *others*. It is therefore difficult to grasp poverty not in purely material terms but in the broader framework of social relations and within the context in which class, ethnic and gender power relationships are defined.

Our perceptions of poverty are deeply rooted in history and the images of the poor as *others* that have been shaped over the centuries. In modern capitalist societies the poor are considered as individuals who have failed in their personal behavior and can thus be blamed for their poverty. As such they do not deserve full membership status in our society. In most instances, the construction of the poor as *others* is part of the differentiation between *us* and *them*, while this dividing line is reinforced by social processes of categorization, stereotyping and stigmatization.

The perceptions of the poor as *others* in the sense that they are "not working" or are "not making themselves available for work", or "are living on welfare payments", or similar negative examples, largely reflect the strength of the social, economic and political gaps in Israeli society. They also echo the prevalence of prejudice and negative attitudes towards the poor. The poor thus often find themselves locked-in into the realm of false conceptions of the reality in which they live, and they lack the power to disprove the distinctive negative characteristics attributed to them.

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