

## Recent debates on poverty and inequality

*A Special issue in memory of Leonor Vasconcelos Ferreira (1960-2008)*

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THE SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTION OF LEONOR VASCONCELOS FERREIRA

**CARLOS FARINHA RODRIGUES/  
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MONETARY POVERTY, MATERIAL DEPRIVATION AND CONSISTENT POVERTY  
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The best recognition that can be given to the work of a scholar who is no longer among us is to make good use of her/his contribution to science. This is done in two ways. On the one hand, by disseminating her/his work and by highlighting the added value in broadening our knowledge of reality. It is assumed that whoever does so has interpreted it according to the demanding criterion of assessing the value created. Another way to do this is to expand the lines of research that were interrupted upon their disappearance, or that at a later time reality showed they were on the right track, because the object of study and/or the research methods employed were appropriate. This special issue of the journal *Notas Económicas* fulfils this double role in relation to the work of Leonor Vasconcelos, who has left us so early in life, bringing together a collection of papers presented at the seminar held at the Faculty of Economics of Porto in 2010, in honour of her memory.

The best-known work by Leonor Vasconcelos focused on the reality of poverty in Portugal, a reality usually dealt with by various scientific disciplines, often in jointly following multidisciplinary approaches, in particular within Economics and Sociology. As an economist and teacher of Economics at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Porto, Leonor Vasconcelos used Economic Science to study this problem, which, although social, has strong economic dimensions in both the field of causal factors and their manifestations, and in the nature of the variables of social policy aimed at its eradication. The article *The scientific contribution of Leonor Vasconcelos Ferreira*, by Aurora Teixeira, Sandra Silva, and Pedro Teixeira, gives the reader an updated critical and complete view of her work on the study of poverty in Portugal. This article clearly points out and documents four aspects or dimensions of that study in which the work of the Leonor Vasconcelos stands out. One, perhaps the most central and transversal to the approaches addressed in the article is the one that measures poverty. Leonor Vasconcelos was concerned with concepts (quite varied and not always unanimous among the scientific community, and always of a normative nature), with methods (also quite varied and constantly developing), and with the sources of statistical information (again diverse and of a complementary, almost mandatory, use in empirical analyses). The abundant empirical analysis work accomplished and published by the author clearly shows the methodological care that should be taken in the study of this social phenomenon, and how its measurement, of vital importance, is a difficult and scientifically demanding task. Another aspect that the author was concerned with was the spatial analysis of the phenomenon of poverty. There are geographically different manifestations of the magnitude and type of the phenomenon, and also of its causes. One may grasp from this that perhaps the variables of political action may also have to be spatially differentiated, and that these variables may have different effects in different regions of the country. A third aspect, in addition to the regional dimension of the phenomenon, is its temporal dimension. While it is important to know the number of the poor in a specific region or country, and their socio-economic characteristics, it is also important to estimate for how long they will remain poor. It is different to be poor temporarily (with the means to be able to escape the situation, or being in a society that is able to provide the means for that purpose) or, instead, to be poor permanently. The nature of the policy measures aimed at eradicating poverty will necessarily be different in both situations. The fourth relevant dimension that was central to Leonor Vasconcelos's concerns with regard to the study of poverty is the manner in which social policy is applied. It is shaped differently throughout Europe, where we find different types, or regimes, of government interventions. Portugal belongs to a type of welfare state, Mediterranean or Southern European, with special characteristics which have to be examined and compared with other parts of Europe if we want to determine the possible range and effectiveness of the known instruments of social policy.

It is precisely in these fields of analysis in which the remaining articles included in this special issue can be found. In the article *Monetary Poverty, Material Deprivation and Consistent Poverty*



*in Portugal*, by Carlos Farinha Rodrigues and Isabel Andrade, the authors analyse the extent to which the two criteria for identifying the poor population coincide: the criterion of deprivation of living conditions (direct identification from living condition indicators) and the criterion of monetary poverty (indirect identification, based on a specific income threshold, of the poverty line below which a human being in Portugal does not have decent living conditions). These are two distinct forms (and the authors conclude that the results do not coincide) of measuring poverty, now made possible by the information sources available (the EU-SILC, EUROSTAT). The concept of «consistent poverty» is used by the authors to refer to the group of population that is poor, measuring it directly (according to the deprivation indicators) and indirectly (according to the monetary poverty line). One cannot help acknowledge the importance, also for social policy, of this difference, through the distinct nature of the policy instruments used in both situations.

The other articles deal with two different ways of addressing the fight against poverty. One is to help the poor population, with the ability to work, to participate in the economic activity, and for that, access the banking system to finance investment projects that will materialize their business ideas. The use of micro-credit is one of the forms already tried in less developed countries, with successful results in many parts of the world. The article *Micro-credit and Territory – Portugal as a case-study*, by Joana Afonso, Isabel Mota, and Sandra Silva, is an important contribution to gather insights into this reality in Portugal. The scope of analysis of this work is regional, aiming to identify the territorial idiosyncrasies in the use of micro-credit in Portugal. It is a case, then, of introducing the regional dimension in the analysis of successful, or unsuccessful, factors in an economically interesting way to combat a social problem: the promotion of economic entrepreneurship.

Another way of combating poverty is through subsidies, following modern paths of action, based on modes of activating the integration mechanisms provided for in the «Rendimento Social de Inserção» (income support allowance). In the article *Social Insertion Income: the contribution of the association «Qualificar para Incluir»*, by Maria Cidália Queiroz and Marielle Gros, the author analyses the implementation of this policy measure aimed at a number of poor people whose integration actions were implemented by a local association. This is an area of analysis in which the relational dimensions of poverty have an increasing importance compared to the distributive dimensions (of resources), and in which the relationship between the users of such a measure and the institutions, and in particular, the social service workers, are particularly relevant. This area of analysis does not, in general, fit into the sphere of economic analysis. In areas like this (and of undeniable relevance to the study of poverty and of the effectiveness of actions that are addressed to them), economic science must give way to other social sciences (such as Sociology) or to other less identifiable approaches in the spectrum of the social sciences in mono-disciplinary terms, as is the case of social work. This was (also) an aspect introduced by Leonor Vasconcelos.

This special issue of the journal *Notas Económicas*, edited by Aurora Teixeira, Sandra Silva, and Pedro Teixeira, is an excellent academic tribute to the scientific work of Leonor Vasconcelos. It is also a significant repository of relevant and current contributions to the study of poverty in Portugal.

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