POVERTY MATTERS, BUT TO WHAT EXTENT?
PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY THROUGH THE LITERARY DISCOURSE IN COSTA RICA

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Comments are welcome and should be addressed to the author:

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

"Which other thing can be true in this vulnerable life but poverty?"
Francisco de Quevedo

Aim

Does it matter what we think about poverty? History and some economic studies suggest that it does, but not for everybody. Perceptions of poverty of the elite have proved through the years to be a very important determinant in anti-poverty policies. Today, that poverty in Costa Rica has deepened and that the traditional State's mechanisms to deal with the poor are questioned, the future of social policies is incertain: what to expect for the years to come? One way to answer this question is to assess Costa Rican elite's actual perceptions on poverty and I propose here an alternative way to do so: the cultural field. The phenomenon of the urban novel in that sense, a fruit of the 'literate' elite, has appeared with the raise of social problems in the country and has made of this subject its main theme. In Foucault's views, according to who is writing, for whom is the text written and what is the topic of it, the literary discourse represents and shapes a specific structure of power. Here, a new generation is writing and its words are not completely innocent: they obey to a particular role the elite has played by traditionally deciding the place of the poor in the social agenda. The urban novel will reflect and shape their perceptions on poverty. So, poverty? Does it matter? To what extent? Let's see.

Background

Costa Rica is one of the smallest Latin American countries, with 51 thousand kilometres and a population of 3 million people. Its social and cultural homogeneity, its political stability, democratic traditions and the fact that it had renounced to have an army are some of its principal characteristics. Furthermore, for many years now -since 1949- a social oriented state has been installed and an important interest about social issues characterised both the orientations of the government representatives and the society in general. Costa Rican society had, at least in theory, an important concern about social justice among citizens related not only to a political and civic perspective but also to economic terms (Garnier 1998, p.50).

In effect, the social indicators that have been registered since the 50's situate Costa Rica in a privileged position in the Latin-American context and in the developed countries, and approximate it to the values showed by the developed countries. As we
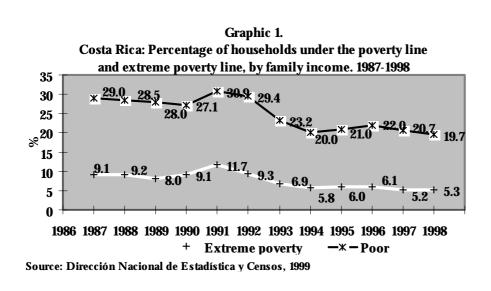
can see in Table 1, between 1950 and 1990 the GDP per capita augmented more than the double and the life expectancy augmented 20 years. Between 1940 the per capita GDP almost tripled and the life expectancy augmented 30 years. Also between 1950 and 1990, infant mortality was reduced in 84% and illiteracy in 67%. The same happened to malnutrition (-71% since 1960) and poverty dropped from 50% to less than 20% in 1990. The human development index of the UNDP shows that the country shifted from a situation of medium level of development to a high development level.

Table 1: Indicators of the Evolution of Social Development in Costa Rica 1940-1990						
Indicator	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
Real GDP per capita (US$ 1970)						
	286	347	474	656	876	809
Adult illiteracy (% of the population older than 15 yrs old)						
	27.0	21.0	16.0	13.0	10.0	7.0
Years of Education (for more than 25 yrs old)						
	n.a.	3.1	3.6	5.3	5.9	6.5
Life Expectancy (years)						
	46.9	55.6	62.5	65.4	72.6	75.6
Infant Mortality (1000 births)						
	137.0	95.0	80.0	67.0	21.0	15
Malnourished Children (% of children younger than 6 years old)						
	n.a.	n.a.	14.0	12.0	4.0	4
Human Development Index (%)						
	n.a.	n.a.	55.0	64.7	74.6	84.8
Poor Families by income (%)						
	n.a.	n.a.	50	29	19	19
n.a. : Non available						
Source: Garnier at al, 1998.						

Much of the justification of this pursuit of social development that started 30 years before was accentuated during the 70's. During those years, the values defended by the ideas and struggles of what were a this moment the new generations -inspired in the French "Mai 68" and since then, in other young movements around the World- called for new values named solidarity, social compromise, a multitudinary commitment to the future, etc. The idea that "we all" -the whole population- deserved an equal level of living and that certain kinds of needs had to be satisfied for everyone was accepted[1]. Here, a general concern about poverty as the most evident and urgent outcome of social injustice was spread and Government responses to it were tangible. (Muñoz 1995, Sorensen 1991, Taylor -Dormond 1991)

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[1] Muñoz mentions in this matter that Costa Rican youth of the 70's was very "activist and politized and assumed from early ages the challenge to work for a transformation of Costa Rican society". (Muñoz 1995, p.44).

Now we face a different story. A Costa Rican society that named itself *social oriented and in which poverty was immediately addressed by the set of services provided by the welfare state* (health, education, targeted poverty programs, credit...) has been questioned. In effect a new economic reality indicates that concern for others in a poor country -through the channel of an important Welfare State- is far too expensive. Furthermore, many believe that WS causes too many budgetary problems for a largely deficient allocation of resources. Costa Rica, in that sense, has not escaped to this world-wide trend that believes that the state should just limit itself to certain actions: as a controller and as a regulator, and leave some of the social concerns to private initiative (Williams 1989). In effect, stabilisation and SAP's core arguments -drop in welfare's quality and coverage problems that have provoked not only a failure in the reduction of poverty but also started to benefit the middle and upper classes instead of the disadvantaged groups (Zuvekas 1992)- have proven that social concerns for small and disadvantaged countries are far too expensive and thus, simply impossible.

Graphic 1.
Costa Rica: Percentage of households under the poverty line
and extreme poverty line, by family income. 1987-1998

Source: Dirección Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 1999

At the same time, even if the levels of poverty (understood as an income shortage to attain basic needs[2]) in the period 1987-1997 show a tendency, with some ups and downs and a difficult 1991[3], towards the reduction, the reality is not so simple (see Graphic 1). In effect, during the last years 1997-1998, the

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[2] Poverty Line method.

[3] In 1991, the GDP growth diminished, unemployment augmented and the average wage for the private sector diminished. All this behaviour is explained by the adjustment policy that the Government implemented in order to reach a "*lost macroeconomic equilibrium since the end of 1989*". (Céspedes and Jiménez 1995, p. 64)

tendency that provoked a rise in poverty in absolute and relative terms has been reverted. In 1997 and 1998, 20.7% and 19.7% -respectively- of the population had incomes below the poverty line, they did not have the necessary income to satisfy their basic needs. For 1997 and 1998 we can see that extreme poverty (income insufficient for alimentary needs) reaches its minimum level.

However, when the poor's profile is analysed, a different reality is revealed in which new characteristics of this poverty have risen:

First, the increasing of urban poverty during the last 20-30 years is evident though rural poverty continues to lead (see Table 2). As we can see in the following table built on CEPAL's data (1994), urban poverty has more than doubled, it has shifted from a 15% in 1970 to a 34% in 1990, the same happens with the situation of indigence: from a 5% in 1970, it has raised up to 11% in 1990.

Table 2: Percentage of poor households by zone and selected years in Costa Rica			
	1970	**1981**	**1990**
Poverty cases[1/]			
Total	24	22	35
Urban	15	16	35
Rural	30	28	36
Indigency cases[2/]	6	6	12
Total	5	5	11
Urban	7	8	15
Rural			

[1/] Income inferior to two basic alimentary baskets.
[2/] Income inferior to one basic alimentary basket.
SOURCE: CEPAL 1994, Data presented by Sojo 1998.

Second, when we concentrate in the latest years, we observe that the number of the extreme poor female household-heads continue to rise: in 1995 it was 28.2%, and in 1997 the number raised to 34.6% (Estado de la Nación 1998, p.55, Rodríguez 1998, p.5). This phenomenon is what is called "feminisation of poverty" and has been seen as a generalised tendency in Latin America.

Third, the number of children and young people per poor household is considerable. This is related with the phenomenon of the feminisation of poverty mentioned be-

fore and with the high fecundity rate of poor women[4]. As a consequence, the demographic dependency rate (number of people with less than 15 and more than 64 in relation with the rest of the population) as well as the economic dependency (inactive population in relation with the labour force) continue to augment (Estado de la Nación 1998, p.88).

Third, the raise of what is called "*núcleos duros de pobreza*" (poverty nodes) in the metropolitan urban area. It has been said that when poverty is assessed with the Unsatisfied Basic Needs Method (income higher than the alimentary minimum basket, but insufficient to cover non-alimentary needs), the measure of poverty is sensibly higher, reaching two of each five households (Estado de la Nación 1998, p.87). In this matter many think that the increasing impossibility for certain part of the population to insert themselves into the labour market and the raising importance on poverty assessed by the UBN, would point the existence of what is called "*núcleos duros de pobreza*" in Costa Rican society. This concept has been defined by the CEPAL as:

> "… groups that live in conditions that forbid them to access to the productive work and that difficult their communication and interaction with other groups, because they lack the necessary skills to actively participate in the modern cultural life and, because of that, they are excluded from a real citizenship" (CEPAL 1997, p.5).

In these groups we find the "*disruptores*" (young people of the urban area with discontinuous education level and lack of insertion in the labour market, among other features) and the "*abatidos*" (aged people in indigence conditions, female households heads with low wages, peasants with no access to credit, training and technology) and ethnic minorities non-inserted into the modern life. (Estado de la Nación 1998, p.91).

As a consequence of these new trends, we have now a kind of poverty that is on one hand characterised by an increasing "urbanism" and which affects in a large extent women, children and young people. In effect, when analysing from a qualitative perspective this phenomenon, it is said that urban poverty in Costa Rica has deeply *changed* during the last two decades. Some of the last researches (Sojo 1998, Güendel & González 1997, Ramírez *et al* 1991) point out that it is not the poverty the country used to have, composed by peasants and workers whose income was insufficient to satisfy their basic needs. Instead, Costa Rican society has seen how urban spaces occupied by persons in indigence conditions had multiplied especially in the Metropolitan

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[4] It has been determined that poor Costa Rican women have in average 4,17 children while those non-poor have 2,23 children (Céspedes & Jiménez, p.68)

area of San José[5]. This phenomenon obeys to land invasions by poor peasants who come from other places around the country, by impoverished medium sectors, migrants from Nicaragua, and relocations of other "slams" produced by State housing projects (Güendel & González 1998, p.14).

On the other hand, this transformation has implied a new poverty burden for different groups in the population. Notably, as it was already mentioned, Costa Rican urban poverty had changed into one that affects, in its crueller and more systematic version, young generations and women (Rodríguez 1998, p.5). This transformation has the very dangerous implication that these two vulnerable groups are more likely to reproduce poverty in the future and determine in that way a negative path[6] (Contreras & Roque 1998, Sojo 1997, Güendel & González 1997).

It is the combination of those elements what has made **evident and more preoccupying** the phenomenon of urban poverty for Costa Rican society. The former happens because the idea of a *new subculture of urban poverty* has been presented and it strongly defies Costa Rican beliefs about poverty in the past. For Güendel and González (1997) this new subculture of urban poverty is characterised by social disintegration, the absence of the old unifying net that was a crucial feature in urban "barrios" and a deepening of social pathologies especially for young generations. In effect children and young people have been caught into the mechanisms of violence, delinquency, gangs, family abandonment, drug addiction, prostitution and begging.

This reality is hard to miss. Tico[7] society has showed its awareness of the situation. Recent national surveys show that the abandoned children, young prostitution, drug and alcohol addiction as well as delinquency and gangs violence have been recurrently mentioned as some of the most critical problems of Costa Rican urban society (UNIMER, # XXI, January - February 1997).

Statement of research problem

As we have seen, Costa Rica's social circumstances have changed.

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[5] Places in San José as Rincón Grande de Pavas, Las Cloacas, Los Guido, Los Cuadros, la Carpio y Tejarcillos, among others. (Güendel & González 1997, p.13)

[6] Due to their greater exposure and vulnerability to social risk (hygienic conditions, under-nutrition...) it has been said they are more likely to reproduce poverty in the following generations (Trejos 1997). This is the cycle of poverty that synthesises the intergenerational dynamic, sometimes "psycho-sociological", in which poverty reproduces itself incessantly. (Contreras & Roque 1998, pp.16-17).

[7] As Costa Ricans affectionately call themselves.

The academic world has responded to this social transformation with an important amount of literature on poverty: its evolution, its characteristics. However, it lacks of studies that tell us something about the **meaning** of this poverty for Costa Rican society, about the different reactions that this situation has caused and, through this light, about their implications in the nature and the future of social programs.

In effect, to value the evidence of such poverty and the possibility of a mobilising effect against this phenomenon, an analysis of society's poverty perceptions is needed. One of the most appealing new trends in the analysis of poverty and the implementation of anti-poverty policies stresses on the importance of the **perceptions of poverty** within a society. As we know, the importance of the perceptions of those who are poor towards their own situation has been recognised[8] but also, a new field of poverty perceptions has been re-dimensioned. As a matter of fact, in valuing social responses towards poverty, the latest research points out the importance of the non-poor's -and specifically the elite's- perspective as a determinant of successful and viable anti-poverty policies in less-developed countries[9]. Here, poverty perceptions of those who are not poor but can influence the public opinion as well as the Government's behaviour[10] become fundamental since they outline general social priorities and signal the most appropriate instruments to deal with it. The technical part of anti-poverty policies is questioned as not being the unique one to be considered when evaluating its viability, importance is given to how the society relates and perceives this poverty. If certain important -powerful- groups in society do not feel concerned or touched by poverty, the possibility of strong political and economic opposition to anti-poverty policies' augments and, consequently, the option of successful social agendas diminishes (IDS Bulletin, Vol. 30, No 2, 1999).

This is why, to know how Costa Rican elite sees, responds and reacts to a new kind of urban poverty is crucial. If a society cannot identify the features of this phe-

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[8] In that respect the World Bank is supporting an important research field which interest is to find poor communities' position towards their own disadvantages and also towards the alternatives they see to overcome their own situation. In Costa Rica it supported the study of "Perceptions about Poverty in Poor Communities in Costa Rica" which is a sociological analysis of a wide set of interviews and that was published in 1997.

[9] In effect, the most recent study conduced by the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex in three different developing countries (Bangladesh, Brazil and South Africa) has proved so.

[10] As we will see in Chapter II, we understand by elite the persons who are able -because of their position in powerful organisations- to affect national political outcomes regularly and substantially. (Hossain & Moore 1999)

nomenon and does not feel concerned or touched by it, the political viability of some social programs enhanced by the Government is questioned. We could even go further and say that the way a society perceives its own poverty -its main characteristics, its principal actors- will determine the nature and scope of the social programs created to fight against it.

However, a question is posed: how to assess those poverty perceptions? How to evaluate whether Costa Rican social perceptions about poverty have responded to the recently transformed urban reality? In the absence of specified national broad surveys and the impossibility of designing one for this study, a new alternative had to be found. And it is precisely in finding an alternative way of assessing Costa Rican perceptions to urban poverty that a new fact has to be added.

As a member of the family of social phenomena -just as urban poverty is - a new kind of cultural production has been recently born. The emergence of a new type of written expression called the *urban novel* has been witnessed. As the name already indicates, this new literary trend portrays the life in the capital city and its thematic of urban social life deeply contrasts with the precedent Costa Rican written tradition (Rojas & Ovares 1995, Dobles 1998). New generations of writers defy old costumbrist traditional style (life in the country side, peasant *problématique*) and present a whole new view on the city and its dynamics, strongly focusing on its disintegration and on the raise of social problems.

In the light of the weakening of the traditional State's social services and a new nature of Costa Rican urban poverty and the need to identify the social perceptions to it, the present paper will try to assess some of the Costa Rican elite's perceptions through the urban novel discourse.

It especially focuses on social discourses (new urban novel from the young generation of Costa Rican writers) as a legitimate language to express elite's perceptions of poverty. It is based on the idea that novels, as a conscious act of the imagination, are not only a valid mirror of society but are also determined by the existing power relations. It is the latter characteristic that will permit us to value whereas elite's perceptions of poverty fall under two types of 'idioms' of poverty that have very different implications for social policies.

The study is guided by the following questions:

- What are the ways of viewing poverty and how are these views expressed in different areas or discourses such as literature? In that sense,
    - What are the perceived characteristics of this phenomenon?
    - Who are the actors and how do they interact?
    - What are the solutions that are presented?
- What are the implications of those perceptions on poverty in the social policies?
- Who is 'responsible' for it? Is poverty just a 'social problem' and not a 'social responsibility'? Is the concept of Social Justice still valid?

Justification

Why is this research important to the development field?

The opinions and perceptions of society about what has been conceived as a problem are crucial and they are hardly taken into account in social analysis. In fact, they are usually taken as invariable -some kind of "granted" perceptions within a population- or as a secondary determinant of social change. We have to mention here that elite's perceptions are fundamental for the nature, the design and the further implementation of social -anti-poverty- policies (Toye 1999): if they are ignored, the viability and following success of those policies can be questioned and seriously damaged. They are also an important social thermometer. Because they are far from being static, their dynamic nature becomes of transcendent importance when evaluating the evolution of values and social priorities and when asking ourselves about the pace and the direction of social change.

In that sense, the opportunity of assessing some of the new generation of elite's perceptions represented by the recent cultural production focuses on the importance of taking into account fresh ideas about a conception of society. Also, because the cultural field does not impose the constraints that conventional interviews do -about the elite being 'politically correct' or the necessity to be 'consistent'- it represents a very rich and authentic space to see their ideas on poverty. Ideas that affect -and apparently will remain to do it- social policies and, through them, the situation of the poor.

Methodology

The central concern of this research is the multidimensional relationship between poverty and the rest of society. Since it tries to assess Costa Rican elite's perceptions on poverty through the cultural field, the level of representation as well as the level of discourse take both a central place in the study. In effect, economic, sociological and cultural analysis methods and materials seem appropriate to understand the multidimensional and multidirectional relationship between those concepts.

In order to do so, the research will rely on text analysis of the urban novel and is going to be based on the theory of discourse analysis. Here, five strategical urban novels will be analysed. Strategical because they have been written by recognised professionals and are the most important novels in the literary elite's eyes (many cultural awards have been given to them, they are the best-sellers of Costa Rican literary production and constantly receive attention from the media, two of them have been adapted to the theatre and incorporated into the national educational programs. In other words, they are a recognised product of the elite and the most circulated contemporary Costa Rican novels in the recent years and, by this, the most likely to reach readers' ideas. These novels will be approached from the theoretical standpoint of the study of language, its structure, functions, and patterns in use.

The analysis will be centred on Foucault's notion of power about how writing and reading play an important role in legitimising and maintaining particular power relations in society. In special here where I am trying to assess poverty perceptions of those that are not in poverty and have the possibility to influence anti-poverty policies and therefore have a specific power relation towards the excluded groups they observe. The idea of revealing and legitimising certain perceptions of the elite on the poor are crucial, in especial on the role of the non-poor towards this phenomenon

This theoretical framework emphasises that an analysis of this five Costa Rican urban novels, if placed within a sociology of literature approach, deepens our understanding of the relationship that a part of the Costa Rican elite has to poverty. Here, the perception of poverty is crucial since it allows us to understand better its main characteristics, its components, its links with new elements from the social reality and, among all, the values it mobilises. This would permit us to see how those perceptions of poverty that are reflected in the novels will affect the future of anti-poverty policies: their nature and their political viability.

In order to understand how poverty is perceived in the literary discourse and the implications of those perceptions, I am going to present the ways by which, traditionally, poverty has been seen. In effect, perceptions have been identified with distinct idioms or discourses on poverty that have had very different implications for anti-poverty policies and thus for the poor. I will define those 'idioms' and the perceptions assessed in the novels will be seen as falling within these different discourses.

The actual approach is the result of a long and difficult methodological questioning. Since the raise of a kind of novel (urban novel) dealing with social decomposition and degradation was *per se* a denouncing mechanism of reality, the idea that the urban novels chosen here were going to present a strong critique to the actual Costa Rican circumstances initially guided my inquiry. In effect, the belief that the novels – about poverty and marginality and thus, already 'social sensitive'- were going to present a critical view of the actual conditions that based itself on the need for a recovered social consciousness -that, as we mentioned, has been fundamental in Costa Rica social path- crossed my mind.

For that matter, I firstly relied in Foucault's but also Bourdieu's ideas about how people relate to discourses. Bourdieu conceptualises writers as agents: "*those who participate in the production of discourses in society and respond differently to dominant social values*" and believes in two different kinds of discourse: an orthodox one that maintains the status quo in society as natural and inevitable, and a heterodox one that unmasks the "*supposedly natural of social actions by questioning them and articulating different social practices*". (Bourdieu quoted by Thakur 1997, p.5). In that sense, I initially thought, this second perspective was fundamental in order to study the Costa Rican urban novel while searching for alternative views on social problems that were raising from the critique of institutionalised and conventional values on poverty.

However, while I was searching for a critique of contemporary urban conditions linked to a heterodox discourse on poverty based on the need of social consciousness and the recovery of Costa Rican historical social justice, I found a complete different picture of what I was expecting. Instead of what their theme signalled, the final impression after reading the novellas was surprising. In *lieu* of raising an expected revolting response to the actual situation and a concerned attitude of what is happening in Costa Rica, the feeling that deprived conditions were more remote, parallel and foreign from

my privileged[11] reality invaded me. In that sense the novels, instead of presenting the problem as a denouncing mechanism of social pain that proposed a heterodox discourse on social justice, showed a very different situation, a tension between both views: a concerned one in some cases and a detached and independent one in the rest.

These findings made me completely reconsider the methodological approach that I had chosen to analyse the novels. Instead of trying to assess a distinct heterodox discourse on poverty, I finally relied on a mechanism that permitted to highlight the principal characteristics of the two idioms of poverty that were present in the texts focusing on what are likely to be their implications in social policies within a Costa Rica reality.

Scope and limitation

In order to confine the study within a manageable scope, I am using five urban novels as my basic research material. I know it is not all the urban novel production that would certainly be a more complete source of perceptions. However, as I already explained, I think that the chosen novels present a strategical importance in the representativeness as well as in the shaping of society's perceptions on poverty.

Related to the former, I do not pretend in any case to take these novels as the voice of all Costa Rican elite. I am aware of the heterogeneity of elite's beliefs and the differences in their perceptions. However I do believe –again- that it is precisely those novels that, in order to be recognised, had to coincide in some extent with the dominant views on poverty in this country and also, that they have the potential of shaping other's perceptions on poverty in the future. This shaping of other's perceptions through the novel is fundamental. As Chilean writer and literary expert Ariel Dorfman (1984) mentions, *"without readers, as the old good saying stresses, there is no literature"* and by being read is that literature not only exists but spreads its notions and has the potential of affecting other people's perceptions (Dorfman 1984, p. ix).

For research matters, I am focusing the study to social perceptions of new urban poverty and relating them with two main idioms on poverty based on the concept of social justice. I am aware that idioms on poverty are very difficult to classify and that they are particularly numerous, they also present contradictions and often mix the causes with the consequences of this situation. Furthermore, sometimes instead of be-

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[11] I must say.

ing opposites, they support each other. However, I believe that the choice of identifying two different idioms that base their difference on the concept of social justice (collective vs. individual approach to poverty) obeys to the particularities of the Costa Rican path in social issues and not other more general –and thus no so accurate- parameters.

Research structure

This paper is essentially designed to understand the way a part of the Costa Rican elite perceives poverty through the urban novel discourse and the implications of those perceptions in social policies. In order to do so it is structured in five more chapters.

The second chapter deals with how in theory elite perceptions are determinant in social policies design, implementation and political viability, and thus, in the situation of the poor. It defends the urban novel as a valid source of elite perceptions on poverty and proposes a Foucaultian approach of discourse analysis in order to study the novels.

The third chapter will focus on how historically, perceptions on poverty have been generally classified according to their implications in social policies and general social attitudes in Costa Rica. The identification of two major idioms on poverty: a 'Welfare State' idiom of poverty and a 'Conventional' one and their respective social policies' implications will help us to analyse the novels.

The fourth chapter will present our findings of the text-analysis that came from relating the perceptions into the already defined idioms. It will identify the general characteristics of poverty that are perceived in the novels, who are its principal actors and how they interrelate, what are the solutions that are presented to this deprived situation.

The fifth chapter deals with a final inquiry about poverty being a social responsibility. Who is responsible of this situation? Society in general, the poor themselves, both of them?. In order to do so this chapter will assess the evolution of the concept of social justice in the novels.

The sixth conclusive chapter evaluates the usefulness of urban novel discourse as an effective source of information about some of elite's perception on a new agenda towards poverty. It presents the findings of the analysis and relates them with their implications on the issue of poverty reduction in Costa Rica for the years to come.

2.   ABOUT PERCEPTIONS ON POVERTY AND THE URBAN NOVEL DISCOURSE. WHAT THE THEORY TELLS US.

> "When I use a word, "Humpty-Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean -neither more, nor less."
> "The question is", said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
> "The question is", said Humpty-Dumpty, "which is to be master, that's all."
>
> Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

Studying the way poverty is perceived and talked about within a society can help us to understand the ways it identifies, defines and characterises it. When assessing the evolution of the different concepts that are used to characterise this situation, we can also see the development of what some call social values and generally accepted social practices towards it. In effect, the way poverty is 'perceived and verbalised' represent together a certain kind of "problematisation" of the problem that is not 'innocent' at all and that defines the way society 'deals with it'.

Furthermore, by focusing on elite's views on poverty and the power relations that exist between the poor and the rest of the population, we can see the non-poor as active agents, taking action and expressing their interaction with this phenomenon, not just as a passive group who is just "observing" it from outside but as a conscious determinant of it.

In that sense, the urban novel as a literary product of the elite offers a very rich source of social representations that simple surveys or interviews do not have. Quoting Raymond Williams' following words "*If we compare art with its society, we find a series of real relationships showing its deep and central connections with the rest of general life*" (Williams quoted by Thakur 1997, p.3), we can defend the idea of using cultural production to reveal, exemplify or interpret social processes. The urban novel presents a common ground in which to base an understanding of the nature of the dominant beliefs on poverty and the power relationship that it implies.

Elite's perceptions on poverty and social policies

Perceptions on poverty do not only respond to a self-transforming society, they also determine and create its future. In especial, the way under which a specific population sees and deals with a social phenomenon as poverty, is fundamental in how poverty policies are later designed and implemented and reveal deep changes in social values and common priorities.

The **elite** [those able -because of their position in powerful organisations- to affect national political outcomes regularly and substantially. (Hossain & Moore 1999)] is known to be an essential actor in the determination of discourses on poverty that determine the entire perceptions on poverty of a society. Historical work on that matter stresses that elite's views on poverty have led the direction of legitimate poverty discourses through time (Hossain 1999, Ward 1999).

In that matter Hossain (1999) says that poverty was thought at different times to pose a threat to the elite through crime, epidemics and insurrection. And, the responses of the legitimated discourse on poverty ranged from repressive -*depôts de mendicité* in which vagrants and beggars were forced to work last century in Europe- to charity and municipal assistance for those who were seen as 'deserving' poor, to the final evolution of the welfare state (Hossain 1999, p.3).

Work on elite's perception of poverty and its implications on social policies in less-developed countries is recent. A group of pioneer case studies appeared in 1999 headed by Toye's beliefs on the importance of the elite's perception about social problems for the government's behaviour and for the relative success or failure of anti-poverty policies. It stresses the following:

> "(...) poverty reduction agenda has received high political priority (...) at particular moments and under well-defined conditions. Research shows that the attitudes of the elite were crucial. They took action on the poverty alleviation issue because they shared a consensus around three beliefs. They were that: a) the welfare of the elite and the welfare of the poor were interdependent, and the elite was not able to insulate itself from the living conditions of the poor; b) the poor did in fact have the means to affect the welfare of the elite, principally by three methods, namely crime, insurrection and epidemic disease; and c) some action by the State could be efficacious in reducing the threat to the welfare of the elite posed by the behaviour of the poor". (Toye & Jackson quoted by Toye 1999, p. 7).

Here, the idea that in reality anti-poverty polices are rarely an expression of "pure humanitarian impulse" is central. Also, the notion that even if poverty has proved to be a constant phenomenon in history it is its "problematisation" what had changed through time. It is said that all the policies against poverty depend on how poverty itself is defined by the political influential groups, or, if we can say, on how the problem of poverty is **perceived** and then **defined** by the social and political processes of a specific place and a specific moment. Furthermore, the political viability of some of the anti-poverty policies strongly depend on these perceptions and, consequently, on the way this general beliefs are incorporated into the policies.

In Costa Rica, the elite has been fundamental in the definition of its social orientation. In earlier times, even if they were not extremely wealthy, they were influential. Peeler (1993) calls them the "agrarian capitalist class" and were lead by the coffee producers. They dominated the political-economic scene until 1949 -after a Civil War was held and a new 'República' lead by a 'Gobierno Popular' was installed- and from then, they had to learn how to negotiate with other forces (Sorensen 1991, p.147). A fruit of this negotiation is the strong welfare provision that has characterised Costa Rican fight against poverty.

So, if elite's perception on poverty and "their needs" to the reduction of it is what determines the political viability of the programs, it is crucial to know how these perceptions are in Costa Rica and how they are determined. In this case I propose here not only a different alternative but also a more revealing -since it is not subject, as I said, of the need of 'politically correct' and 'consistent' language on poverty- the literary field.

The literary field as a legitimate source of perceptions

Why the literary field? Because the urban novel not only reveals the elite's perceptions of poverty but also shapes the power relationship that exists between non-poor and poor people.

This happens in first place because the literary field is, by definition the 'literates' world'. In Raymond Williams' views, to write and publish imply a certain privileged position within society: those who write belong to what I earlier called the 'elite' (Williams 1977).

In second place because as Bourdieu says, literary work cannot be separated from the social circumstances where it is produced. It responds to them. For him "*it is impossible to consider the cultural order as a system totally independent of the actors and the institutions that put it into practice and bring it into existence*" (Bourdieu 1988 -quoted by Thakur p.24). He stresses later the impossibility to avoid the " (...) *illusion of autonomy of the purely linguistic order (...) at the expense of the social conditions*" because literature "*is made not for linguistic analysis but to be spoken* -written- *and to be spoken* -written- *à propos.*" (Bourdieu 1992, p. 141-142)**.**

In third place because the written word is also a language of power. In order to assess this notion of power within a specific literary discourse I will use Foucault's insights.

Foucault's views on discourse and power

Foucault's work on the relation between discourse and power lies on the following ideas.

For him, discourse is linked to the production of statements[12]. The task of discourse analysis would thus be to find the particularities of a specific discourse understanding that statements are not isolated. In that matter Poster says that for Foucault *"discourses are composed of statements, statements are constituted by rules of formation and have types of relations with other statements"* (Poster quoted by Thakur 1997, p.14). Discourses would thus be a web of statements related with one another in a specific and unique form and this 'specific and unique' form is one of the elements that provide their particularity.

However, in Foucaultian views, to elucidate the content of discourses is not the only goal of the analysis. On the contrary, he believes that what is fundamental is to find out the conditions that permitted the person who produces it to enter certain kind of discourse, that *"is more a question of determining the conditions under which it may be employed, thus denying access to everyone else"* (Foucault 1972, p.224).

In effect, to 'enter certain kind of discourse' is what is difficult. This happens because discourse functions through an exclusive-inclusive system: some are allowed to say something about certain issues, but the others are not. So, here the relevance shifts from the content of the statements to three fundamental elements: *"what is leading the statements, who is allowed to say them and how they relate to other statements"* (Thakur 1997, p.15).

Discourses are related to others establishing relationships of resemblance, distance, proximity, difference and transformation and this way of relating one another permits a *"system of formation"*. Once a system of formation is constructed, discourses, by repeating themselves and mentioning *"such and such concept under such and such structure"* are able to create knowledge (Foucault 1972, p.74). And, by creating knowledge, a power relationship takes form. It is through this mechanism that Foucault links discourse, subjectivity and power. He understands power as *"the way in which relations of forces are deployed and given concrete expression"* (Foucault 1980, p.90). In that sense, discourse is a reflection of how those 'relations of force' are deployed and become power in themselves:

> "Those who have the right to participate in discourse formation exercise power in this manner by excluding the discourse of 'others' because it is seen as lying outside the rules of discourse formation" (Thakur 1997, p.16).

Some, because they are able to enter the process of discourse formation and create knowledge, can therefore establish a power relation. But also, for Foucault, this is not the only relationship between those notions. In his view, power is also based on discourses and their reproduction maintains and shapes power relationships:

> "(...) in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a discourse of truth, which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (Foucault 1980, p.93).

So the possibility of producing discourses obeys to the specific power relations that characterise the social structure. Discourses in that sense obey and respond to the already existent 'manifold relations of power' but they also, by the creation of truth, are able of reproducing and shaping them.

Literary discourse

From a Foucaultian point of view, since literature is constituted by series of statements and those statements are based on the principle of exclusion and inclusion and, in their relationship with other statements they create knowledge, literature has to be considered as a legitimate discourse. To see how literary discourse relates to social power, we would have to see what does this discourse includes as its object and how it speaks of it. In other words, this means to examine what is allowed to be said, who is allowed to say it and how what has been said is linked with other discursive practices. In Edward Said's words "*Who writes, for whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances? (....) are the questions whose answers provide us with the ingredients of making for a politics of interpretation*" (Said quoted by Thakur 1997, p.17).

In that sense is has been said that :

> "(…) because authors are part of the objects of interpretation (…) any interpretative methodology that deals with the narrative and ignores the narrator falls short to comprehend the meaning of a discourse (…). The relationship between the discourse and relations of domination affect the author's views. To that extent, the separation of narrative and narrator seems impossible; because of the political role assigned to authors and intellectuals, the interpretation of narratives is not without a political message" (Salih 1998, p7)

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[12] And not words for example.

Literary studies cannot thus be separated from their context and their creators. It is certainly here that literary discourse gains a relational position between social values, traditional behaviour and the text itself. Consequently, literature cannot be dissociated from the other discourses -poverty discourses in our case- that characterise the context where it is being produced. In that sense, certain circumstances determine what is considered -or not- a social problem or, at least, generalised social concerns in certain time in history. As we see, discourse analysis is "ultimately social" and is this feature that allows us to speak about literature as a specific discourse.

The urban novel's discourse

The choice of this specific literary discourse lies on two facts. The first is that the writers belong to the Costa Rican elite. The second one is that the urban novel, in opposition with the old written tradition, deals with urban poverty.

Novels' writers, in Costa Rica, do not escape from what Williams said about the need of being privileged to write and publish. This country in this sense is *hélas*, no exception. In especial the urban novel writers' who all belong to the highly educated elite. In fact, the majority are young lecturers in the fields of philosophy and literature, or successful professionals like engineers or journalists (Dobles 1998, La Nacion). They are probably not the policy makers themselves but the mediated influence of their words –in the readers or through the media- on the rest of the elite has to be taken into account.

The 'urban novel' is a new type of written expression that emerged in Costa Rica during the last years. As the name already indicates, as explicit as it is, this new literary trend portrays the life in the capital city and presents a thematic of urban social life which deeply contrasts with the precedent Costa Rican written tradition (Dobles 1998, Rojas & Ovares 1995). On a new literary voice this new generation of writers who defy old *costumbrist* traditional style (Rojas & Ovares 1995). The former was characterised among other features by a peasant and countrysider *problématique*, by the portrait of the life and traditions of rural areas and the idea of Costa Rica as a small village. Nowadays, Costa Rican literature has shifted to an urban scenario: a whole new view of the city and its dynamics, and a strong focus on its disintegration and on the raise of social problems.

The transformation of the written expression is not an isolated fact. It is indeed the evidence of the deep interconnections between art and "the rest of general life" as

Raymond Williams would have said. In fact, the birth of the *urban novel* has been strongly related with the important change of social circumstances of the urban areas and, as a part of it, with the raising evidence of urban poverty.

In that sense, philologists Margarita Rojas and Flora Ovares point out that the generation of Costa Rican urban novels' writers -who were born after 1950 and started producing after 1980- is characterised to go from "*the utopia, to the disenchantment*" of society (Rojas & Ovares 1995, p.207) as a way of responding to the new "*degraded reality*" of the Costa Rican cities and, specially, San José (Rojas 1998a, p.2). In their book "100 Years of Costa Rican Literature" (1995) they identify this new literary voice as a way of reacting to an

> "increment in poverty in the suburban areas in the Central Valley and in some of the provinces. To the former, the deterioration of the public services offered by the State, like health and education, is added." (Rojas & Ovares 1995, p.208

So, using Foucault's basic ideas of literary discourse I would like to argue that urban novel discourse, will in first place respond to the actual social circumstances of Costa Rica and the actual changing situation of contemporary urban poverty.

In second place, that the literary field as a source of the elite's perceptions on poverty, would represent and shape some of the views of those who have traditionally determined the anti-poverty policies and by this, would thus reflect a power relationship. The relationship that has been established through the years between the elite and the poor.

In third place, and because of the former elements, that the perceptions on poverty assessed through literary discourse will give an idea in assessing how are the future anti-poverty policies like to be.

3. THE UNDERSTANDINGS OF POVERTY.
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

> It is plain poverty, no doubt, to need a thing and not to have the use of it"
>> Xenophon
> *"The people must comprehend that they are themselves the cause of their own poverty."*
>> Thomas Robert Mathus

The previous chapter examined the importance of elite's perceptions in anti-poverty policies. As we saw, the way the elite has identified through time poverty

situations and how they had related to it has marked the path of social policies both in developed countries as in less-developed ones.

In order to understand the consequences of those perceptions in anti-poverty agendas, we need in first place to identify the nature of these perceptions, its principal characteristics. In that sense, this chapter will deal with the ways in which traditionally poverty has been perceived and how those views had influenced social policies.

The idioms of poverty

The way poverty is perceived by the elite has always been determined by the complexity of this notion. They rely on a set of characteristics that are seen, a series of causes and consequences that are signalled and a range of solutions that are taken into account. All of these elements imply a certain relationship between the poor and the society as a whole.

Because of the complexity of this concept, perceptions are highly heterogeneous and often contradictory. In effect, the characteristics of poverty that are perceived show an arrangement of old views and more modern understandings of it. Causes and consequences of poverty are mixed and solutions have alternated or blatantly changed through time. Also, the motivations that justified any action against poverty were ranged from plain rational interests to solve poverty because of 'everybody's benefit' to more complex moral and religious beliefs.

Even if discourses interrelate and mutate through time making it very difficult to clearly identify between them, we will here -due to the special circumstances of Costa Rica that is going through a process of questioning of the general notions of poverty legitimated by the very important welfare state- concentrate on two different and opposite 'idioms'[13] on poverty. One will be called the Welfare State idiom on poverty and the other the Conservative idiom on poverty. Since we are trying to assess the actual perceptions of the elite through this transitional period it is against the content of these discourses on poverty that the urban novels will be analysed.

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[13] I will rely here on the term Hossain and Moore (1999) apply to classify social perceptions in their work but with a variant. Idioms would be the way poverty is 'talked about' but, in this case, I will focus on their implications in social-policy making.

The Welfare State idiom on poverty

The WS in Costa Rica

Costa Rican WS was born in 1949 after the first modern civic society's movements -particularly urban low-class organisations and women groups- urged profound changes in social structures in which a *social security system* (pensions, free medical care) was one of the most important popular claims.

This WS, conceived as the direct responsible of the primary well-being of its citizens (Kearns 1997, p.17), has been perceived since then as the cause of Costa Rica's exceptionality in the Latin American context. Tessa Cubitt notes for example that this country is an exception in the *"growing polarisation processes that have occurred in Latin America because of the implementation of a strong welfare state"* (Cubitt 1988, p.215).

Since then, poverty has depended on the State action and has been under its very important developmental role[14]. This feature has resulted in the creation of a WS idiom on poverty that relies on the following characteristics:

Poverty as an outcome of social injustice

The notion of social injustice comes in opposition with the John Rawls' term of social justice. He explains the former in his contribution to moral philosophy in 'A Theory of Social Justice' (1972). It is derived specifically from his conception of what he presents as the second principle -or the difference principle - of justice[15] which deals with social and economic inequalities:

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[14] The WS in economist Manuel Villasuso's views has many stages: From 1950 to 1962 during the 'developmentalist' stage, the government was concerned with building physical and social infrastructure: roads, airports, produce and distribute electrical power, potable water, telephone services. Public hospitals, clinics and schools were established all around the country. However, by the late 1960's and early 1970's it was apparent that many people remained poor and neglected. Attempting to extend the benefits of development to them, the government created the Program of Family Assignments and the Mixed Institute of Social Aid which is in charge of the anti-poverty policies, thus assuming the role of the 'paternalistic state'. The government continued to expand under the 'entrepreneurial state' beginning mid-70's: the private sector was unwilling or unable to invest in socially benefitial projects that require large capital, government officials decided that the state should do so. (Villasuso 1992, pp.409-422)

[15] It is based on a conception of justice defined as: "(…) all social values -liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self respect- are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, of all, of these values is to everyone's advantage". (Rawls 1972, p62) This concept implies to achieve equality among a heterogeneous society in economic terms. However, it has also been seen with other types of equality for example, gender equality. Social justice is a general notion of justice in which the equal rights among women and men is supposed to be included.

> "Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all." (Rawls 1972, p60)

He later explains that this principle applies to the distribution of income and wealth -which is unequal- and to the design of organisations that make use of these differences in authority and responsibility, or chains of command (Rawls 1972, p61) in order to redistribute them. This principle should thus be applied to arrange social and economic **inequalities** so that everyone benefits. In other words, inequalities in the distribution of scarce goods (power, money, and access to healthcare and education) are justified only if they serve to increase the advantage of the least favoured groups in society (Marshall 1998, p.334)[16]. In practice, a type of social justice that justifies a process of unequal distribution in order to attain social equality has been enhanced by the idea of the Welfare State[17]. Here, the common and now generalised idea that the richer pay taxes to subsidise the poor is a reflection of this idea.

The incorporation of this notion into the State arena has been seen through the years as a progressive attitude. In fact, the influence of this WS discourse, understood as the development of a form of social consciousness, has encouraged increasingly collective and broad-based forms of welfare provision. Welfare state was seen as the *"culmination of a progressive march form narrow and often repressive charity for the poor, to a collectivistic response to the demands of the working classes"* (Hossain 1999, p.3). In this sense this process has challenged traditional ideas of poverty that used to situate poor as lazy people, unwilling to work and as an inevitable situation which reproduced itself incessantly.

These general ideas of social justice and the State as the mechanism to pursue it, strongly permeated some of the educated Costa Rican elite during the first part of the century. They set the ground of what was going to be known in this country as **social democracy**[18]. In fact, in 1940 the Centre for the Study of National Problems was founded. It was formed by a small group of law students and attracted idealistic young

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[16] Amartya Sen on the other hand interprets what Rawls calls the primary goods that have to be redistributed as concerned rather to "means" than to "ends". For him *they deal with things that help to achieve what we want to achieve rather than either with achievement as such or even the freedom to achieve"*. (Sen 1990, p48). (e.g. to give income to buy food instead of food).

[17] State that is in charge of the provision of education, medical care, housing, social work, poverty programs, etc... with the purpose of attaining the generalised well being for all the population (Abel & Lewis 1993).

[18] A form of economic organization in which the state, within a capitalist society, takes over major sections of the economy (also known as *étatisme*). (Marshall 1998, p637)

middle and upper class professionals, students and white collar workers influenced by the European trends on social issues (Biesanz 1999, pp.29-30). They advocated government-led development and strongly opposed in that matter the orientation of the liberal democracy that Costa Rica had at that time and its doubts of electoral fraud. In 1945 the Centre merged with Acción Demócrata, a group of mostly young middle class men, to form the Social Democratic Party. It was headed by José (Pepe) Figueres Ferrer, a coffee and sisal grower, who lead in 1948 the short Civil War and became its hero and in, the years after, the 'Father of Costa Rican State'.

After the Civil War of 1948, the political structure changed and gave birth to what contemporary Costa Rican society calls 'social democracy'. (Cubitt 1988) Here, the definition of social justice relies on the -at that time- progressive beliefs of José Figueres and has strongly demarcated the role of its prominent Welfare State since 1949. For him:

> "The social reform of the XX century [in hands of the State] admits that contemporary science makes possible the production of sufficient goods and services for all the members of the community through the co-ordinated work of all. It thinks that the poor illiterate majorities that characterise underdeveloped countries should disappear and [in order to do so] it is willing to take measures of justice and, in general to enhance the transformation of our country that would become a society where all its integrands enjoy, at least in a reasonable minimum, material commodities and health and culture that our time allows". (Figueres 1956 quoted by Garnier 1991, pp20-21)

As a consequence of the importance of the State and its role in the development of Costa Rica, the discourse of social justice has always been linked with it. For former president Rodrigo Carazo, discourse of social justice justifies WS. Here he speaks of Costa Rica before the WS:

> "that bucolic Costa Rica without social benefits or adequate public services. (...) I knew the Costa Rica of social injustice: a country of people without shoes or teeth, without university, with scarcely half a dozen high schools. (...). It as a Costa Rica without a limit of working hours, in which children also worked as grown ups; [where] infant mortality was like in the rest of Latin America... and life expectancy was barely more than 40 years. I saw the sick ask for hospital attention as charity (...) Workers had no vacations, no dismissal notice, no severance pay (...) A Costa Rica without social guarantees." (Carazo quoted by Biesanz 1999 p.28)

As we can see, in Costa Rican views, social justice is a collectivist concern of solving poverty, through the mediation of the WS. The former is in charge to solve poverty through the provision of basic services -education, health, water, electricity- to the whole population. Poverty would thus be linked with the non-existence of social justice, that is to say, with the non-existence of the WS.

Poverty as deprivation

Another association linked with the WS idiom of poverty is poverty seen as deprivation. Usually, when Costa Ricans are asked to define poverty, the common sentence *"not having enough[19]"* comes first. In that sense, the 'not enough' is translated as a shortage, as deprivation in the sense Amartya Sen put it *"deprived person, leading a very reduced life"* (Sen 1990, p.45). And, when the following question of "enough of what?" is asked, Costa Ricans associate deprivation with the shortage of what has been called, 'basic needs'. In effect, a sociological and anthropological study about the 'Ticos' reveals that poverty is usually associated in Costa Rica with "money" followed by "a decent house", "some food" and "education for the children" (Biesanz 1999, p103-104).

Poverty linked with deprivation and unsatisfied basic needs has been legitimated by the WS in Costa Rica. In fact, the provision on universal principles of education, health, water and electricity has resulted in the general acceptance that the State does so in order to tackle poverty and consequently that poverty is the contrary of this situation: being deprived of those services.

However, even if this conception of poverty as deprivation and related with the satisfaction of basic needs seems a very progressive discourse and it tries to assess the complexities of deprived situations, I would like to argue that it has evolved adopting some of the new proposals on poverty but not those that would challenge certain power relations. In that sense we can mention the following argument.

As Juan Diego Trejos (1995) points out, poverty indicates a situation of **deprivation and impotence**. Deprivation because individuals do not have the income or the sufficient assets in order to satisfy their basic material needs and this is derived from their lack of education, skills, attitudes, tools, opportunities or actives sufficient to generate income and accumulate. Impotence, because they do not possess the organisation nor the access to political power to change the situation by themselves.

However, the general impression is that from this two fundamental components, the discourse on poverty has only been held on the level of material deprivation. Such a bias implies the adoption of a certain position and, if we want, arbitrary, about what deprivation means and also, in the fact of ignoring needs such as participation, the statu quo of this deprived position is assured.

Complexity of poverty and differentiated poor

In opposition with conventional positions towards poverty that tend to generalise certain characteristics of the poor population, the WS idiom of poverty has legitimised through its anti-poverty policies the need to understand the complex mechanisms through which poverty works in order to solve it. Here, in order to assess such complexity and differentiate among the poor, this posture has adopted the notion of poverty as 'a particular world' in which usual parameters that are used in order to evaluate social matters cannot be used.

The complexity of poverty lies on an understanding of this phenomenon as a world in itself, with heterogeneous poor among which is indispensable to differentiate in order to direct social policies.

In effect, conventional views see all poor people as having the same needs and presenting the same causes of their deprived position. Acknowledging the complexity of poverty implies a deeper understanding of their situation focusing on the particularities that each marginal position has and, because of this, it implies a differentiation of the poor.

Poverty and exclusion

Opposing the social justice position of an inclusive society, the idea of poverty as exclusion has been embraced by the WS idiom on poverty. In effect, the idea of complexity and differentiation of poor are both linked with a situation of **exclusion** that isolates poor people from the social surrounding in general and, consequently, from the values, norms, customs, goals and aspirations that are commonly defined within the range of the "acceptable". The distance between what is valid for the poor and for the society in general create obstacles to some behaviour that would open alternatives to the poor in order to overcome their situation. In fact, those values stimulated from the childhood are characterised by the survival, by what is immediate and the individualism. And among all, by the solution of the everyday life problems through the "marginal" side of the society, in other words through the margin of economic, social and political fundamentals.

This leads to another association of poverty, the mechanics of its reproduction.

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[19] "No alcanza" in Spanish.

Cycle of poverty

What is important here is that poverty has been associated with a multiplicative dynamic (what some call cycle of poverty) in history; it auto-reproduces itself within the family and the marginal communities through the socialisation process of children and young people. New generations assimilate a family of patterns and values that would allow them to survive in their own milieu. Is the way they adapt to their context and poor lifestyle but it makes difficult and even excludes their incorporation to society.

In that sense, the WS idiom has recognised this fundamental role of the greater exposure and vulnerability to social risk (hygienic conditions, under-nutrition...) of young generations and women, and that has lead the most important anti-poverty policies these groups. The belief that the only way to tackle poverty from its roots is to focus the efforts in young poor generations, in order to break this cycle of poverty, has been generalised by the state's attempts and general campaigns against poor children.

The WS idiom on poverty lies in Costa Rica on two main important elements that have influenced the way poverty is perceived by the entire population.

The first one is the conception of poverty as a social responsibility in which the principle of social justice leads the WS action. As a consequence of the former point that puts the State as the social instrument in charge of distributing the national income among the population, the WS has had to develop different notions that have shaped the way Costa Rican poverty, and in especial actual urban poverty, is perceived.

The second element comes through the understanding of poverty as a complex and interdisciplinary phenomenon that has to be understood by differentiating poor people. This feature has generalised the beliefs of poverty as a situation of deprivation where basic needs are not being satisfied and which satisfaction is usually related with its provision from the State. Also that the mechanics of its reproduction lie on very special conditions of poverty where young generations and women play a fundamental role.

The Conventional idiom on poverty

A conventional discourse will be here, for research matters, the opposition of the WS idiom. It would lie on arguments that imply the separation of poor realities from the rest of the population in such a way that they eliminate the notion of a 'collective problem, collective responsibility' and that would deny the notion of social justice.

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This idiom is formed by modern ideas that focus on the importance of **individual** behaviour in poverty matters but also from very traditional views on poverty that were thought to be abolished with the development of the WS discourse on poverty. The conventional idiom on poverty will be all those arguments that present poverty as not being a social responsibility but more an individual attitude -both from poor people as well as non-poor people- towards this deprived situation. In other words, a position that gives reasons not to intervene in poverty situations, as Hossain puts it:

> "In more modern understandings, this conventional discourse assigns responsibility for poverty reduction to the more technical capable NGO's and to private charity and thus takes poverty out of the political and electoral agenda". (Hossain 1999, p.2)

And, in taking poverty from the political agenda, the possibility of collective action against it is dismissed and thus, the idea of social and collective responsibility becomes non-existent.

The crisis of the WS idiom

One of the reasons of the raise of the conventional idiom in Costa Rica is the crisis of the WS. This is not however an isolated fact. From some years until now, international trends in development issues were focusing their debates and recommendations on two main themes: stabilisation and adjustment. The force of this world-wide orientation that has as one of its primary characteristics the reduction of the State, affected Costa Rican development policies. (Garnier 1997).

In effect, these new ideas that saw the state as a maze of poorly co-ordinated agencies, complex regulations and monopoly of many essential activities as an obstacle to development and that, by this, questioned the practical way in which the WS had implemented the principle of social justice were embraced by some of the policy makers. The former, successful technicians that belonged to what some call the 'brain drain'[20] to mostly North American Universities and who, with an academic formation in these countries were occupying important governmental places, were in charge of the validation of the WB and IMF initiatives within a Costa Rican context and started the implementation of important stabilisation and adjustment programs.

On the other hand, the budgetary conditions of the government also pointed to this line: in Costa Rica the WS developed into a great structure that has revealed itself

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[20] See Biesanz 1999.

financially unsustainable for a poor country, challenging in that way the viability of the actual application of social justice values.

In effect, the Government has been trying, forced on one side by the weight of a tremendous and unsustainable internal fiscal deficit which in 1994 reached its alarming maximum: 6.5% of the GNP (Informe Estado de la Nación 1997, p110) and, on the other, by the international economic agencies -*à savoir* World Bank and IMF- with whom it has important agreements and goals to meet, to reduce the size of the State apparatus by cutting some of the very heavy welfare expenses. Since 1985, the first of several structural adjustment pacts (PAE's) with the WB as a lender, was introduced and since then the debate between a WS discourse and the conventional one has grown more heated.

Here the principles of universal public services and the idea of the state as the responsible of the 'collective action' against poverty are being questioned. To the WS discourse that based itself on social justice principles that lied on universal provisions and a more complex understanding of poverty, a new discourse that finds arguments not to intervene on universal grounds are given and the tendency to 'let the poverty be a problem of the poor' has been enhanced.

Role of the State

Related to the latter, conventional discourse on poverty relies on the idea that WS is not the best solution to solve poverty nowadays. As we mentioned, importance is given to individual help –charity-. The role of the State would thus be limited to enhance economic growth and assure an efficient functioning of the market, which –in the long run- would lead to a poverty reduction. (Hossain 1999 p3)

New politics of World Bank poverty policy show the former. For several decades, the WB has supported efforts in the direction of policy alleviation that lied on the need of three basic principles:

- Promote economic growth
- Improve human capital
- Establish effective safety nets

These conditions exclude the need for physical capital and the provision of assets –either by the creation of capital or its redistribution) to improve general well being. Ward (1999) thinks its position has changed little since 1978 and relies on the idea

that poor countries have just to benefit for the "global raise of economic activity" not just to increment their level on income but also to lift their poor inhabitants out of poverty.

Here, the State is no longer seen as the 'collective instrument' in order to deal with poverty. Social responsibility towards poverty materialised through the State is not tangible anymore.

One of the arguments that have enhanced and justified such perception nowadays and that belong to traditional perceptions of social differences is the conservative ideas of poverty and religion.

Poverty and religion

"God loves the poor, and that is why he made so many of them"

Anonymous

Even if the relationship between religion and poverty comes from the early times, their interconnection and the way the still characterise traditional discourses about poverty are still very important. In fact, moral ideas that justify or condemn certain attitudes from society towards poverty have been largely recognised in social studies (Gasper 1999, Hossain 1999). These attitudes imply certain understanding of poverty and a specific way of explaining it. In that way, religion as a source of 'truths' and a vehicle of legitimisation has played a very important role modelling the conservative discourses on poverty.

In the catholic tradition[21], the idea of poverty as God's will has existed for centuries (Ward 1999). Traditional beliefs in that sense point poor situations as a divine punishment that becomes the way of redeeming a sin, of "paying for something", and has to be accepted. There is a religious explanation which is provided and, in doing so, a certain attitude that has to be undertaken towards this deprived situation is signalled. In effect, poor people have to adopt a path of resignation and non-poor people have a duty of being charitable with the less favoured[22].

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[21] For analytical purposes, we focus on Catholicism because Costa Rica has a very strong catholic tradition.

[22] Alberto Wagner de Reyna in his book 'Poverty and Culture' mentions that "We could talk in this context about a Calvinistic vision of poverty (as a punishment for the sinner) or of poverty as an opportunity of the Christian virtue, concept that was used during last century both by Catholics as by Protestants". (Wagner de Reyna 1982, p.207)

They oppose the WS idiom on poverty which is based on the idea of tackling poverty through the provision of basic services because, in conventional views, poor situation comes from God's will and by such, has to be accepted. There would not be– for the poor as for the non-poor- any justification to try to solve it.

Poverty, a problem of the lazy

Another traditional argument that has explained poverty for a very long time in different societies is laziness. In fact, a generalised idea that those who are poor are so because they are unwilling to work has permeated many of the anti-poverty policies that have been implemented. Poverty as an opposition to work -which is a positive feature- have initiated policies that relied on programs of daily employment for deprived -where their 'wage' was the food of the day or a minimal -and often ridiculous- amount of money. (Ward 1999)

However, even if we would like to think that those perceptions have been buried with the understanding of poverty as a more complex phenomenon than that, we have to admit that those ideas still hold within some sectors of the population. In fact, as Ward points out, *"there is still (...) a widely held perception that poor people are poor simply because they are indolent and unwilling to work. (...) This perception categorised them as lazy."* (Ward 1999, p.23) This categorisation implied the view of poverty as a 'just recompense' for those who are unwilling to be productive. In that sense, the traditional belief that poverty is deserved, and because of that is an individual problem - of the poor of course-, still holds in many societies.

Poverty is a culture[23]

The notion of poverty as a different world that reproduces itself has already been presented within a WS discourse on poverty (the complex and particular reality of poverty). This theoretical understanding has influenced the idea of poverty seen as a world apart from the rest of society. However, poverty seen as a world in itself leads to a very different one: the notion of the culture of poverty (CP).

The culture of poverty relies on the idea that poor people have a series of values and norms, forms of communication and notions, aspirations and goals, that are the result of their family and community life and which are completely different from those

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[23] Sentence attributed to Michael Harrington author of "The Other America". (James 1981, p139)

who characterise the predominant culture. This different forms of behaving -which has been proved in certain cases necessary for the survival in some marginal situations (Contreras & Roque 1998)- are often perceived by the rest of society as social pathologies that have to be eliminated. This argument, applied to the family and social groups, not just to the individual, characterises their cultural milieu with fatalism, resignation and idleness, which is antithetical to achievement, hard work and self-reliance, and tends to be passed on between generations. Such views have however, been challenged by a set of empirical studies of the life of the poor (Marshall 1998, p518).

The CP instead of acknowledging the complexity of poverty and trying to reach a deeper understanding of it –like the WS notion of complexity does-, leads to a separation of poor realities and the 'normal ones'. Taken to its extreme, this discourse, instead on focusing on the necessity of understanding the complexity of poverty could signal an irreversible separation between both worlds.

Also since poor situations present a different set of rules with a whole different way of behaviour and those features are seen as negative, the association of a situation of marginalisation with reproved rules of behaviour -in a wrong/right sense of the word- enhances the conventional ideas of good and bad, good people and bad people. Poor through this light, would be bad.

Poverty and social pathologies

Related to this notion of wrong and bad, the idea of social pathologies appear. They are the problems with which poverty has been connected and that characterise the CP. In fact they are linked with the survival in poor communities and are associated with delinquency, drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution and violence.

This notion has been reinforced lately by the fact that a new culture of poverty has been presented to Costa Rican society through the media and official reports (La Nacion, Abril 1999) and reinforces the idea of poverty seen as a parallel world. WS discourse on poverty helped by the media (Biezans 1999) has defined the new situation as a general raise in social pathologies: prostitution, drug addiction, urban gangs, abandoned children, etc.

Poverty is unavoidable

Related with the former characteristic of conventional discourses on poverty, the perception of poverty as a parallel and distinct world which reproduces itself, a

certain idea of the cycle of poverty that carries out the implication of inevitability appears.

As we saw earlier, to the idea -technical as well as social- that poor parents that live within a CP 'inherit' poverty and all its implications to their children- a new one is added: the inevitability of poverty. There is no way to escape. Here, the concept of **inevitability** of poverty that is enhanced by the intergenerational reproduction of poverty is conceived. Michael Ward has recently pointed out that poverty:

> "(...) is the legacy of poor health and education combined with limited access to only the bare minimum of assets that places children born to poor parents at a serious and often lifelong disadvantage. Nowhere is this more evident than in low-income developing countries. Poor dependants carry through successive generations the burden of the status they inherit, engendering, sui generis, a certain historical **inevitability** about poverty." (Ward 1999, p.23)

The inevitable reproduction of poverty would justify the attitude not to intervene in poverty situations. Poverty is unavoidable –no matter what- and the intention of trying to tackle it would just have negative outcomes.

Poor just have to work

In relation to what we saw as poverty being the outcome of laziness, work has been seen as one of the solutions to poverty. Poor people just have to work (Ward 1999). In more modern views, since they are economically marginalised they would have to reintegrate themselves to the productive side of the economy. However, the ways in which this should be done are, within a conventional idiom on poverty approach, poor's responsibility.

In effect the conventional idiom doubts about the WS discourse trust on education as one of the most important strategies in order to reintegrate poor people into the labour market and by this solve their situation. Here, as Hossain (1999) says, education in contemporary views remain:

> "(…) the main contribution of public action [against poverty] but it will serve only as raising 'awareness of the poor, i.e., to induce them to adopt a more activist and instrumental kind of economic rationality in organising their lives"

A solution? Return to traditional practices

Conventional discourse that relies on poor action to solve their own problem also points out the recovery of traditional practices such as family links. In effect, the need of a safety net that is justified through family relationships and obligations is here

very important. It coincides with traditional views on the institution of family that characterises Costa Rican society:

> "Unified families of three generations formed the 'moral base of the society, according to a history text used in Costa Rican schools for many decades. (…) Family ties remain strong. (…) When middle and high income adults in a 1992 survey were asked, 'What is most important in life?' 87 percent replied 'Family' –more than mentioned Education or Religion" (Biesanz 1999, p.167)

It could be argued that this feature belongs to what some call 'quiet encroachment' (Asefbayat 1998) which coincides with more modern views to understand poor realities and their coping strategies. However, what we are focusing here is that this solution does not link poor people with the rest of society: it is a mechanism that remains within the poor sphere and not society as a whole.

Charity

The relationship between poor and non-poor within a conventional idiom is presented as being part of a moral design and cultural patterns. Here, charity cannot be seen as responsibility towards poverty but more as giving certain kind of support that it is not, in any case compulsory. It relies more on personal –individual- attitudes towards poverty that on a collective action. As Gasper puts it:

> "aid can be based (…) on charity, the beneficence of the rich, whereby recipients do not receive by right and donors do not give as a duty." (Gasper 1999, p.1)

Even if he also points out that the concept of charity has evolved through the years from meaning Christian love to now typically meaning something 'cooler, more condescending and discretionary', charity is still justified in Costa Rica in religious terms.

In this country, charity in its modern version as well and in its traditional Christian one interrelate. Both of them as Gasper (1999) mentions, are variations of self-interest: without gain of those who give there will be no interest of giving so, understood on these grounds, charity is more an action that rich do for themselves than for the deprived person.

Charity is also a private attitude not a collective one. It relies on individual willingness to be charitable to the poor and not to any articulated intent to solve this problem.

The conventional idiom on poverty focuses on the idea that poverty is a problem without solution that concerns those who are affected by it. In other words that is a

situation in which just private responses can deal with it: private responses from the poor –to work, to build family nets, to accept God's will- or from the non-poor, to be charitable. Also, those private actions are often directed to alleviate pain but not to solve or change deprived situations.

Because it is an individual problem, is not a social problem and, consequently, not a social responsibility. Arguments of non-action in that sense are given and the historical role of the State as the main actor in solving poverty are no longer valid.

Conclusion

The way WS and conventional idioms on poverty have been articulated in elite's perceptions has been fundamental. Both of them have influenced the anti-poverty agendas in different ways by defining the instruments to be used and the priorities to be addressed at different times and, by doing so, they have affected poor's situation.

Today, to see how those two idioms are articulated within the elite perceptions in Costa Rica is fundamental. This because we know that in this country a period of social unrest has come and a tension between those two discourses has been seen. Since we know the importance that both idioms have had on anti-poverty policies in the past, it is important to know how they have been embraced by the elite. The answer permit us to foresee –in some extent- in which way Costa Rican social policies are going to be directed to in the future and, consequently, the way poor people will be affected by them.

4.   POVERTY MATTERS.

   PERCEIVING POVERTY THROUGH THE URBAN NOVELS

> "The greatest of our evils and the worst of our crimes is poverty, and... our first duty, to which every other consideration should be sacrificed, is not to be poor"
>
> George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

In order to assess perceptions on poverty this study is based on cultural production, specifically on what has been called the youngest Costa Rican literary product: the urban novel. As presented in Chapter II, Foucault's understanding of the literary field as a social discourse, permits us to see the urban novel as reflecting, legitimising and shaping certain power relationships through the reproduction of specific views in society.

In this chapter I will assess perceptions on poverty expressed in the urban novel discourse by relating them to the WS and the conventional idioms of poverty presented in Chapter III. In that way I will try to understand not just how is this phenomenon defined but also, what are the consequences of these associations with the future of the Costa Rican social policies.

It is my purpose to show here that urban novels in Costa Rica present both types of perceptions on poverty: those that belong to the WS idiom as well as to the conventional one. A WS idiom mostly characteristics the **diagnosi**s of poverty that is being presented -its main characteristics, its reproduction mechanisms- however, not all the ways poor features are perceived coincide with this view. In effect, when we see the leading actors of poverty and their interrelationship, when we beyond the notion of poverty and analyse the **action** towards it, we face a different story. It is our belief that a conventional discourse takes form, defying the Costa Rican views of social justice and collective action that have, since 1949, determined anti-poverty policies.

The chosen urban novels

There are several writers who are the principal exponents of the phenomenon of this new urban novel. They are young, fearless, use familiar "tico" words and through humour and satyr attempt with Costa Rican stereotypes and its most grounded -but not necessarily real- values. They all present a new face of the urban San José.

From this recent production I will analyse five novels as a source of perceptions of Costa Rican urban poverty. They are 'Única Mirando al Mar' ('Unique Looking at the Sea', 1994) and 'Los Peor' ('The Worst', 1995) written by Fernando Contreras. Also, Rodolfo Arias' novellas 'El Emperador Tertuliano y la Legión de los Superlimpios' ('The Chatter Emperor and the Legion of the Broke, 1997') and 'Vamos para Panamá' ('Going to Panama', 1997) will be analysed here. Finally, Rodrigo Soto's 'Mitomanías' ('Mythomanias', 1980)[24].

The texts have been chosen following three indicators.

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[24] In order to facilitate the reading of the following analysis, we will use some abbreviations in citations:
ULS   Fernando Contreras, *Unique Looking at the Sea*.
TW   Fernando Contreras, *The Worst.*
M   Rodrigo Soto, *Mythomanias*.
GTP   Rodolfo Arias, *Going to Panama.*
CELB   Rodolfo Arias, *The Chatter Emperor and the Legion of the Broke.*
For publication details, see bibliography.

In first place from a constatation of the writer as belonging to the elite –in this case the writers are an engineer (Rodolfo Arias), a Journalist (Rodolfo Soto) and a philologue (Rodrigo Contreras).

In second place, they are the most 'famous' recent Costa Rican novels. Or, successful from a publisher point of view. In fact, from the general urban novel production, these are the most recognised by the literate elite (they have received national prices) and have on that ground received a very important attention from the media. As a consequence, their impact on libraries and on Costa Rica's public opinion has been important[25]. This second element is relevant since I am trying to assess actual perceptions of poverty and, the possibility to maintain or change these perceptions is also determined by the circulation of the ideas supported by the literary production.

In third place all of them had an important impact on Costa Rican readers. Their success in libraries and their fast incorporation in the national educational programs of secondary school, their several adaptations to theatre and following presentations on the national scenes, and, finally, newspapers' and television reviews made these novels national literary hits (La Nación, Áncora, October 1996).

I therefore think they are strategical within the urban novel production. Strategical because they are a recognised product of the elite and the most circulated novels in the recent years, elements that give these novels more probabilities to affect the general perceptions on social problems of the elite.

The chosen novels, a brief introduction

Unique Looking at the Sea, Fernando Contreras:

The action here happens in San José's garbage deposit and focuses on the everyday life of extremely poor people who live in the deposit. They do not only live in improvised slums on one side of the mountains of trash but they **live from them**[26]. This

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[25] The latest study about cultural production in Costa Rica shows that the majority of the themes published during 1996 are education (23%) and literature (14%). The same survey shows that literature is, from far, their largest sale in the libraries. (Estado de la Nación 1998, p239)

[26] This situation is not new in urban areas of poor countries. In Costa Rica however the "divers' reality" was not known until 1992 when a reallocation of San José's principal deposit –the one where the action takes place in the novella- was needed and revealed much more than a simple trash storage. In fact, the difficulties associated to the designation of a new deposit raised the urban garbage situation to an important -and thus broadcasted- national issue where an important amount of problems were discovered. Among them, the reality of the garbage "divers" was shown to the general public opinion for the first time. Before then the concept of "trash inhabitants" did not exist for Costa Rican society. (La Nación 1993)

is why they are called "divers" because their principal activity and main subsistence strategy is to dive into the freshly brought urban waste looking for "recyclable" objects. Those objects go from bottles, cans, plastic and paper that are still in an adequate condition to be sold to recycling companies or to use themselves, to food (vegetables, fruits...) that can still be eaten.

The story starts when an old man -who later calls himself Momoñombo Moñagallo- comes with the garbage, in one of the collecting trucks and begins to live with the divers' community. Life and survival there will thus be presented through the eyes of this man who tries to integrate himself into this new marginal life to which he did not belong in the past, and through the view of an old and respected female diver, Única -Unique-, who takes care of Momoñombo and her young adopted son, El Bacán. Other characters will appear through the novel but those three -and the deposit itself- are the principal ones.

The Worst, Fernando Contreras:

The Worst is the story of the Worst Family -Worst is indeed the last name of Consuelo (Consolation in English), Jerónimo and later Polifemo (Polyphoemus)- who lives in a brothel in San José. Consolation is the maid of the house, Jerónimo is her crazy but inoffensive brother and Polyphoemus is the child of María, one of the prostitutes.

Here, the story is about Polyphoemus' life. It starts when the young peasant María, pregnant and ill, is saved by Consolation from giving birth in the streets. She gives birth in the whorehouse to a child with a single eye, a cyclops who, by the influence of Jerónimo who immediately takes care of him, is named Polyphoemus. The dynamics of the marginality of urban prostitutes, violence and urban pathologies is here doubled by the marginality of Polyphoemus. The different reactions that raise and the diverse attitudes that are built around him and its monstrosity are the line of the story.

Going to Panama, Rodolfo Arias

This novel is about a typical San José low class family who travels, on holidays, to Panamá. Their life in San José, their work, their impoverishment from a position of low-middle class, their marriage problems, the intergenerational differences and the tico's culture in general are viewed and analysed through five different lenses, one per member of the family. The trip gives the father (Miguel), the mother (Maritza), the

adolescent children (Maru and Migue), and the youngest sister (Caro), the opportunity to analyse their lives and reflect on them, all of them through their own perspective.

Different events on their way to Panama will show reflections on how their life was some years ago, how it had changed and what are their expectations for the future.

The Chatter Emperor and the Legion of the Broke, Rodolfo Arias

Life in a Government Office in San José is portrayed in this novel. All the characters are bureaucrats who belong to low middle class of Costa Rican society. Their relationships, their different goals in life, the way their interrelate one another and their very different stories and backgrounds constitute the elements that bring some action into this novel where, apparently, nothing happens.

The story is a superposition of dialogues, TV advertisements, popular songs, memories, personal reflections, street sentences. It is written in popular and familiar language. Urban slang. None of the characters have real names, just nicknames that define their personalities, and not the other way around.

Costa Rican urban culture, its vices, its problems and its dreams are ironically and sharply presented here. Costa Rican attitude towards the future, religion, alcohol, corruption but also towards family values, religion and injustice is tried to be assessed here through the diversity that a San José's Government's office can present.

Mythomanias, Rodrigo Soto

The impoverishment of an urban family is presented here. The process of deprivation is seen through the boy of the family and the story is told years later, when the boy is already an adult.

The story narrates how, with the process of deprivation, other feelings -like humiliation, shame, no hope- come into the family's picture and how new scenarios witness their new face of vulnerability. The reason for such a process is never told. What is important is the way it happens and the feelings it mobilises in each of the members of the family and not the reason behind poverty itself.

The characters are anonymous. They are just called by the position they have within the family structure: father, mother, and grandfather.

How is poverty understood? The analysis of the urban novel discourse[27]

As we saw in Chapter III, poverty seen as a situation of deprivation and impotence is a general perception for Costa Rican society. The lack of food, housing, education, health are seen as some of the characteristics of poverty. The identification of those features, as we already saw, corresponds to the role of the welfare state in this country and would thus obey to the WS idiom on poverty.

Recent literary discourse gives to those elements a principal place. Let's see:

The "not having enough" notion

Housing

The relationship of deficient housing and disadvantaged situations is always present in the perceptions of poverty. In fact, with deficient health is one of the most mentioned features of this phenomenon. However, even if in practically in all the descriptions of poverty situations reference is made to the deplorable housing situation, the level of these disadvantage changes widely.

For example, the degradation of housing conditions goes from a house with unpainted walls and ageing furniture in Going to Panama, *" I know the house where we live is not a transitional refuge, as Miguel would like.... the reason is that this is our life, this is our destiny. Walls that we never paint, a broken toilet..."* (GTP p.37) and The Chatter Emperor and the Legion of the Broke, through a house where the family has to sleep in camp beds in Mythomanias, a brothel in The Worst where overcrowdedness and the loss of privacy are everyday subjects, to the extreme position of disadvantages in the life in the garbage slums in Unique Looking at the Sea.

In all of them, with different levels that correspond to the stage in the impoverishment process where the situation is taking place, the housing conditions are considered. A positive relationship between precariousness and poverty is always recognised.

We have to mention here that housing problems in Costa Rica's society has become a very important national matter and a well-known topic for the public opinion. From the 1980's an increasing discontentment about housing has raised. It is not only, as it is perceived, a problem for the extremely poor, the costs of building have considerably increased if we compare the possibilities of a low-middle class household to

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[27] All the quotes from the novels are going to be presented here are my own translations.

build a house fifteen years ago than the possibilities it has now (Sojo 1998, Céspedes & Jiménez 1995). This more difficult situation is being perceived here as well.

Food

As for the housing problem, unsatisfied alimentary needs are also an important issue in the perceived features of poverty. Reference is usually made to meals composed of *"rice and beans"* (TW p.15) the most traditional but basic and cheap Costa Rican meal. Again from the loss of variety to the nauseating conditions in which some of the characters are always immersed while eating, the difference is the stage of poverty which they are going through.

The loss of variety of the food is the first step in the process of impoverishment until the final stage of non-existence. As we will see later, the situation of food is generally viewed as women's responsibility, and part of their household duties.

Environment

Poor environment is closely associated with noise, pollution, and dirty places. The concept of environmental degradation is widely present in the novellas as a common feature of poor situations: in Unique looking at the Sea, the action takes place in a garbage deposit, the brothel of The Worst is in the centre of San José and is fumbling apart. Here the image of degradation of the environment as a reflection of life in general is also used in The Chatter Emperor and Mythomanias and directly refers to the increasing urban settlements. Here the city:

> "had renounced to its past, it had sunken its little parks with trees in the boredom of tar and the monotony of pavement. It had eaten with voracity the yellowish pages of its childish architecture, to give back just a grey grimace of overcrowdedness and the agitation of a forced modernity" (TW p.73).

Clear images of visual decomposition of the environment as a metaphor of general conditions in life give an idea of the evolution of the perceived social reality. For example, in Unique Looking at the Sea the idea of environmental degradation permits to see how Unique's situation in general has shifted from being a difficult but "airy" situation to a "dying" one: *at the beginning, at the very beginning I had a garden here (…) But afterwards the ground began to get dry, to die, to die…"* (ULS p.59).

Education

The lack of education has been traditionally perceived as the obstacle for poor people to overcome their disadvantage. National educational campaigns and the generalised agreement and element of pride that Costa Rica is one of the highest educated (in literacy parameters) of the poor countries have helped to generalise these beliefs.

Here, the poor characters are usually presented as low educated. However, even in the most extreme cases, in Unique Looking at the Sea, every adult character knows how to read (The Carmelite Bear, the spontaneous and improvised "priest" permanently reads a Bible). This reveals a characteristic of poor Costa Rican people: they are literate. Unique and El Bacán are an exception. Unique is not only literate but an *"academically formed and smart woman"*: a former primary teacher, she teaches El Bacán (her adopted son) how to read:

> "When he was four years old, Unique had taught him how to read and (...) when he was ten, El Bacán was already diving in her back in an exclusive search of something to read." (ULS pp.14-15).

This situation faces us with the stereotypes society has about poverty. They are not the typical characters of poor people: probably literate but certainly not educated and definitely, with more immediate needs than reading. This apparent contradictory feature now shows the "irrationality" of poverty. Poverty is no longer for non-educated people, it reaches everybody. This is the reflection of the perceived deepening of urban poverty in Costa Rica.

Costa Rican poor are perceived as literate but this situation is rapidly and strongly changing for new generations. Poor children and young people are presented in The Worst without any kind of education and any possibility of getting it in the future. Again, another element of deepening of this social phenomenon.

The perception on poverty that identifies poverty as a shortage is reinforced by the importance that the explanations on how this deprivation process are dealt with and are lived by the poor.

Poverty as a process of deprivation

Another important part of the traditional idea of poverty perceived as 'not having enough' in the process followed in order to attain this final condition. The process of deprivation, of impoverishment receives an important part in the texts.

In Unique Looking at the Sea for example the description of Momoñombo's impoverishment is carefully described:

> "He began first to go through shortages, then he exhausted his treasure box. Like a flood, the man saw how a wave was taking his life things to the second hand shops (…) then he sold the TV, then the radio, then the three of four golden bracelets that his mother left him…" (ULS p.25)

Deprivation goes little by little until the character has nothing left.

The family of Mythomanias endures a similar process. In Rodrigo Soto's text the father is in charge to communicate the new situation to the rest of the family. Here, material deprivation does not come alone. It is accompanied by a feeling of humiliation:

> "(...) then, with an infinite glance of sadness he [the father] told me: "we have two months to leave the building. It was everything he said to me - and without a word he left to his room, where, as Julián says, he cried for hours" (M p.13)

However, it is in Unique Looking at the Sea where the idea of poverty as the final deprivation goes beyond the material losses and the feeling of humiliation that is associated. Total deprivation takes here the form of the loss of children, the loss of the right to transcend through children which is in fact the loss of future itself.

The idea of final deprivation as been deprived of a future is here crucial. It also acquires a deeper dimension since it is based on the traditional Costa Rican legend[28] of la Llorona -the Crying Woman. The legend tells the story of a single mother who loses her newborn child in the nature and cries for him day and night. Here, a variant is introduced, while the mother is "diving" the baby is lost in the garbage, in fact the trash swallows him: *" (…) it was a matter of seconds. She put the child aside for one minute, turned to look for a plastic bag and, when she came back, the baby wasn't there"*. (ULS p.35)

Deprivation is usually associated with poverty situations and this idea has been legitimised in Costa Rica by the WS provision of some basic services. As a consequence, this notion has focused on the idea of deprivation as the outcome of the unsatisfaction of some material needs (food, housing, health) that have been usually provided by the State.

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[28] La Llorona is in fact one of the most important Latin American legend however, each country has its particular version. She is always crying but the reason of her crying and the moral behind changes.

Poverty and vulnerability

To the idea of poverty seen as the final deprivation of the right to the future is related to another very important perception: vulnerability. Vulnerability has been defined as a perpetual insecurity and this idea of uncertainty and the fear for the future is very well assessed by the following words between Unique and Momoñombo:

> "–Well and if they close it [the deposit]?,
> -If they close it, nothing… we go where they put it…,
> -And… if they don't let us in?…" (ULS p.46)

Questions about the possibility of a "tomorrow" are all over. In this case, the garbage deposit represents everything to them: shelter and food. A permanent **uncertainty** is installed.

This notion of a continuous wondering about the future is also given in Mythomanias. Here, a metaphor provides what vulnerability can provoke:

> "[the family, once they leave the old house, sleeps now in camp beds] we changed mansions -he said once and he sat on the camp bed that sounded like on the edge of breaking down." (M p.17)

Poverty is perceived here as a permanent break down. Everything can fall apart in any moment but nobody knows exactly when is that this moment will finally come. Everybody can "hear it" breaking down, they are all expecting it. It is here this vulnerability opposes the right to a 'tomorrow' and by such, the right to dream about a future.

Poverty and its reproduction: the cycle of poverty

In the urban novel discourses, the idea of the existence of an intergenerational cycle of poverty and destitution is enhanced. Notably while the relationship of mothers-prostitutes and their drug addict children is mentioned:

> "The women (...) were not in condition to avoid this kind of life for their already "lost" children; they just went on hoping the youngest ones didn't get the vice, or that for their daughters, they didn't start their same profession."
> (TW pp.83-84).

Prostitutes situation in marginal conditions already determine the future of their children. Destinies of the former are already traced, and poverty and marginality continue to reproduce themselves and in that sense, for children, their conditions are not chosen, unavoidable then.

Also, when a disadvantaged situation is tried to be solved, bad luck or the destiny are in charge of making it impossible to achieve. In effect in 'Mythomanias' one of the new workers in the factory tries to run away from his reality, his co-worker tells him:

> "(...) for all you said about those machines we were very surprised that in the second month you started working extra hours, but we understood that you were trying to have some money to leave as soon as possible, once for all. I pictured you during the nights in front of the winch, hating him, your complete body aching from the terrible racket of the machines to which, we knew, you were never going to get used to". (M p.24)

However, to be aware of this destiny and to try to escape from turns out to be impossible, unavoidable. The character dies one night caught between the machines, while he was working extra-hours to save some money, nobody was there to help him. It would seem is not possible to run away from misery.

In opposition to what we just saw -the acknowledgement of some poverty features as a consequence of WS discourses on poverty that try to tackle deprivation and vulnerability of poor people- an element of the urban novels that supports traditional discourses on poor realities is given: the identification of some characteristics of the principal characters that respond with the conventional roles of women, men and God.

Poverty, its leading actors and their roles

Conventional views on gender

Spanish family patterns that come from colonial times have defined what we actually see as gender roles in Costa Rica. Colonisation and exploration were entirely masculine activities while women stayed at home. From that inheritance, the idea of men seen as

> "naturally superior in anything political, economical and intellectual, women in morality and spirituality as well as home life. This contrast justifies male power and privilege as well as female weakness and self-sacrifice." (Biesanz 1999, p168)

This situation has changed in some extent. In formal ways (before the law) women have been benefited by progressive legislation and new labour and educational opportunities have been opened for them. However, in practical ways, Costa Rican society still shows some of the features mentioned earlier especially in low and non-educated class-families.

The role of women

In the urban novel, women in poverty situations are seen as crucial. They are in charge of ensuring the everyday survival not only for themselves and their family but in some cases for the whole community. Such is the role of Unique in the garbage deposit, of Consuelo Worst in the brothel, of Maritza in 'Going to Panama' and of the Oval Ball

in 'The Chatter Emperor and the Legion of the Broke'. As we see, in every novella there is a woman who plays this role.

However, as we will see later, poor women are conceived here through a very traditional gender lens which enhance the conventional discourses on gender roles: they are in charge of the household, their space of action is thus delimited by the household boundaries, their mind structure deals with what is immediate and not with the future, they are irrational, sensitive and are responsible for the maintenance and reproduction of family values. **They are fitted to endure, to accept and support while men are fitted to question and change.** Their role in cases of deprivation goes from two opposite poles: being a 'saint' by fulfilling all the former requisites or, if failed, becoming a 'whore'. And from the first situation to the second one, there is no intermediate points.

The relation of being a 'saint' and the role of women is perfectly exemplified by Jerónimo's conception of God as a woman and a mother:

> "... since the happy day he discovered God was a woman: a beautiful woman of exuberant breasts and sufficiently wide hips as to give birth to the whole world, but small, imperceptible... Like the cosmos in the palm of the void, and because of small, infinite like the blind womb of the emptiness where light could not reach, like the latest exploit of the impossible, its own limit follows her and nothing is smaller, just the universe itself always walking in opposite direction". (TW p.243)

He gives God characteristics -not just motherhood but understanding and closeness[29]- which are generally related -as we will see- with women roles.

In effect, female leading characters are all related to this image of "Jerónimo's God".

As we said, Unique cooks and cares for everybody in the divers' community. She is The Mother for all, represents the family values, and the notions of charity, forgiveness and acceptance. She is in charge of the solution of the everyday needs, of subsistence: "-*Unique, is there something to eat?* [asks Momoñombo] *"There's always food, you just have to prepare it" she says, knowing that she will have to go to the garbage to see what she finds."*

Consolation Worst has the same role. She is in charge of the brothel and "from very early in the morning she gives orders to the two girls that help her. The rest of the day is distributed with a very high precision between the cleaning and cooking of this place that demands from her all her dedication and patience." (TW p14). She is the

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[29] God is close and listens. He uses to say "*Believe in God and She will help you*". (TW p.38)

heart of the house, the protector. The expressions, "she cared", "She was worried" are common and they appear frequently throughout the novel, confirming her woman's role of mother who does not need to be a real mother to accomplish it. As her name points out, she becomes the consolation of poverty, helping everybody and having the solution for everything.

In the novella the Chatter Emperor and the Legion of the Broke, in opposition with the other texts, many different female characters are presented: not only house-wives and prostitutes like in the other novels but also students, professionals and intel-lectuals. However, one of the most important and elaborated characters whose name – nickname- is the Oval Ball referring of course to her physical appearance, coincides with the female role that has been presented. She is married to an irresponsible husband and has to sell second hand clothes and take charge of other activities to ensure their everyday subsistence:

> "[In the market place] No way says the Oval Ball they're so expensive how much the carrots? 50 per kilo ma'am but that's absurd she complains again and like this, from quarrel to quarrel and reduction and reduction she gets to buy the veggies of the week with scarce 3 "tejas[30]"" (CELB p.101)

However, even if they are in charge of such an important activity they are also presented as **simpleminded** and **vain**: the Oval Ball is obsessed by her weight, Unique is crazy to find perfumes in the garbage, and Consolation, in opposition to her brother, Jerónimo who is smart and profound, *"takes care of the immediate without asking why, solving what happens around her almost by instinct and never asking for a reason"*. (TW p.56)

Furthermore, even when female roles and responsibilities are commonly known and benefit all, they are not socially recognised nor valued. Women are generally aban-doned and lonely. The non-recognition of their work has a price to be paid:

> "Something like that happened to my mother and everything because she worked so much she says nobody knows how hard it was to deal by herself with all her children. That time she was pretty nervous my mom and nobody believed her but we're lucky that in the hospital they paid attention to her" (CELB p.24).

And, when female characters do not fit into this image of sacrifice, they are pre-sented as prostitutes. María Worst is not the perfect mother to Polyphoemus, she is pre-sented as placing herself at the other extreme of the scale, as a prostitute: *"From there,*

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[30] 'Teja' is the familiar term for a 100 colones' bill. In 1997 the average exchange rate was approxi-mately ₡230/US$1 (₡100=0.44US$).

her initial sin was doubled because she rejected her child, it tripled because she hated him, it quadrupled because she abandoned him and it multiplied until the infinite when she started the only occupation that she found viable in her disgrace [prostitution]." (TW p.41)

The balance is simple to make, when women are saints, caring, comprehensive and solving everyday problems they save themselves of being considered "whores", bad mothers, and a disgrace. However, their reputation and their family's saved, they are still not valued not recognised and find themselves lonely.

<center>The role of men</center>

Men in poverty are presented with two important characteristics: the are irresponsible but they are born decision-makers and are always in thirst of knowledge. They are in charge of the long-term decisions of the household and while the women are in charge of the survival within poverty situations, male characters are in charge of **changing** them.

Men are first seen as irresponsible. They easily forget their obligations and run away from difficult situations (and their family) while women "stick to it and to its consequences":

> "I don't know why men are so tenacious for some things and so fragile for others.... Tenacity in the short term, this is it, they can endure the whole day (....) But they can't when is something that has to be maintained day after day, month after month, year after year..." (GTP pp.23-24)

In these cases, women have to solve the problems. Here Maritza, the wife in Going to Panama, complains about it: *"We are lucky I always have a job, without that I don't even want to know where we would be by now"* (GTP p.15) She goes further,

> "My friends ask me how I've done to live so many years with a guy like this. I don't know. Probably I just turned to be like him and I've also been convinced that, one day, by pure coincidence and good luck everything will be just fine and the house will be white and with lots of plants... But no, I keep on bringing Miguel back to Earth…" (GTP p.36).

Irresponsibility in men's behaviour is associated and somehow justified because they are perceived as dreamers. Women are always on the ground while men, dreamers, forget reality. It is their characteristic of dreamers that gives to men, and not to female characters, the possibility to imagine new situations and figure out an alternative. From here is that the male role of decision-makers comes.

The role of men as decision-makers and agency promoters is exemplified in Momoñombo Moñagallo's character. At the beginning he is helpless, relying on

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Unique and her support but later *"a little bit of the feeling of the man of the house began to show on his face"* (ULS p.52) and "feeling the man of the house" is directly linked with the decision making process, when he starts to propose solutions to their problem of the closure of the garbage deposit: *" If we form an alliance ourselves* [the divers]*? If we work together with the other groups* [and reintegrate to society]*?..."* (ULS p.52)[31].

Men propose solutions and their reliability in that sense is based on a characteristic that is also given to them throughout the novellas: their thirst for knowledge: El Bacán in ULS dives looking for books and papers to read, Jerónimo Worst studied for years in a seminar, the young son of the family on Going to Panama, Migue, *"travels with the encyclopaedia showing us* [the family] *new things all the time..."* (GTP p.96) while the girls bring food and dolls...

In general, views of gender in the urban novel belong to conventional frames of gender roles. Here, women just see the mediate world around them while men are able to understand more complex and abstract concepts and, in doing so, they are the only ones capable to imagine the improvement of their situation.

Conventional views of Religion. The role of God

As we saw, the relationship between God and poverty corresponds to a conventional discourse on poverty that at the end implies resignation.

Poverty as God's will is very well presented in the case of Maria Worst, Polyphoemus' mother when she tries to explain the position that giving birth to a cyclops has meant to her. Polyphoemus represents her position of marginality and disadvantage and for her, *"he's just the punishment I got for opening my legs so easily..."* (TW p.39). He is thus a **"deserved" punishment**. For people who are immerse in this reality, explaining it in this way becomes the only way to accept it and live with it.

The idea of poverty and its association with castigation is also linked with the catholic idea of **sin.** Being poor is being in Hell, it becomes a way of redeeming committed sins: *"Hell is here and, you see, there's no room for everybody"* (ULS p.30). If poverty is Hell it also reinforces the idea of its representation as a parallel world: Hell is another world, with again, other rules, not understandable for human beings.

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[31] It is important to mention here that this initiative of Momoñombo, as we will see later on, does not work and is later perceived by the rest of the divers as a lost of time and as a further 'disillusion'.

However, for some of them, when the original sin is not found, poverty turns out to be both, the sin **and** the punishment: *"our unique fault is to be born poor and now, we can't say that we're free if we are hungry."* (ULS p.121). They are originally poor –already a punishment- and, by being poor, they loose their freedom –a second payment.

The actors of poverty belong here to the conventional idioms of poverty. In effect, the role of women within poverty situations presents a very traditional view of gender roles in general of Costa Rican society. Also, the idea of God as explaining poverty and justifying a resigned attitude towards this disadvantaged situation corresponds to the conventional idiom of poverty.

Related with the idea of actors and their roles within a poverty context, the notion of strategies of survival are important. In effect, the urban novel discourse's mentions a set of coping strategies that have to be treated here:

Solving poverty

> "I don't try to justify myself but, one has to eat, isn't it? To live hhmm?"
> (M p.93)

"Return to lost values"

The idea of an alarming value crisis has grown in Costa Rica. In fact, it has been pointed in national political surveys as one of the most important contemporary worries (La Nación, Unimer, February 1999). In that sense, the texts mention this national preoccupation and identify it as the cause of many Costa Rican problems. It could be noticed that some of the values that are mentioned are directly related with catholic ones. Here, no difference is made between what is catholic morality and the Costa Rican values in general. The latter is explained by the long catholic tradition and cultural influence that this country has. The alternative to recover the lost values coincides here with the traditional moralistic catholic discourse that characterises Tico society.

In that sense the case of the Carmelite Bear's character in Unique Looking at the Sea is very clear. With humour, he is presented as the diver who finds a Carmelite habit in the garbage and just *"ordains himself priest"* (ULS p.19). This extremely easy "ordainment" is a way of pointing out the hypocrisy behind values and that is hidden, 'behind the habit' of a perfect Costa Rican society. Almost anybody can 'go preaching' without evaluating their own attitudes: *"For this yes, he* [the Carmelite Bear] *takes away his habit, he hides it and he just goes in his pants, like a normal guy. And he*

comes completely drunk... but you know what they say, we can't judge people". (ULS p.80) But again, negative outcomes of the value crisis are seen as impossible to change since it has been socially condemned to judge the others.

As we said before, the reasons of some of the situations that are negatively identified in Costa Rican society are seen in part as a "lack of religiosity". The strategy that is thus related to this idea in order to solve these problems is, of course, the return to religious beliefs and practices.

For Don Julián, the mechanic ex-alcoholic in Going to Panama: "This country is not going well. The World is not going well. There is no fear to God anymore, there is no respect for his plans Everything would be so easy if everybody just started to love him.." (GTP p.19). The strategy by which "everything would be so simple" or would be better is again, out of the human space. It is in "divine hands".

Hope

Another strategy to live in marginal situations is hope. Here a general degradation in society is seen however, behind this noisy falling apart, a grain of hope is perceived:

> "Underneath everything there was a palpitating world that demonstrated that it was still possible to bring back to life this big concrete apparatus: this parallel life that just didn't give up under the pavement, the vegetation that grew, clandestine, in the houses...." (TW p.78)

But hope, cannot be treated completely as a strategy since it is also hazardous, nobody can thus be in control of it:

> "And then the face of a simple transient was illuminated by a smile and simply slowed down his walk, everything without an apparent reason. There was no doubt that a crust of hope had suddenly surprised this person. And that was how he believed hope pollination happened. So, why do not try the reparation of things?" (TW p.79)

Hope is also personified by the image of children. Since they symbolise the future, in some of the cases they become in the strength and the reason to fight for something different, in especial for women. Such is the case for Maritza and Miguel (the parents in Going to Panama), for Unique and for the family of Polyphoemus Worst. However in both of the last cases, El Bacán and Polyphoemus, die. With them, hope is buried. Unique looses all interest in life and surrenders to everything. On his side, Jerónimo Worst dies of sadness on Polyphoemus' grave.

For Momoñombo Moñagallo hope cannot be lost like this. He says:

> "you don't do anything, Unique, don't do anything to get out of here! now I understand everything! everything was false! Your lies are the only thing that kept you alive. You lied to yourself for 20 years not to die of sadness, you brought everything here, familiar tradition, the good habits, the maternity, the eating schedule, everything, everything... just not to go crazy!. (...) everything was lies (ULS p.149).

But lies or not lies, hope dies.

Celebrate life

A strategy to face adversity is to recover small humane things that make everyone celebrate life in their own way: a smile, love, parties...

Unique's smile becomes the 'source of courage' for people around her:

> "She would say it a little bit blushed, with a sweet kind of smile… It was like in one second everything stopped, the tractors, the foetid smells dissipated, like the rain stopped… it was like an accomplice smile that in one second would inject an overdose of courage" (ULS p.50)

Another example in that sense is the fact that Momoñombo Moñagallo and Unique fall in love and get married. They prepare a marriage ceremony in the middle of the garbage and give a party for everybody, divers, neighbours, truck drivers, and Deposit's guards...

In its interesting here that, as a way of reverting a disadvantaged situation, the recovery of what defines us as human. The initial idea of poor people perceived with animal features in the middle of this parallel world is reinforced here by the necessity to recover the humane characteristics they have lost in order to give sense to their lives.

The same happens with the importance of parties and some other celebrations as Christmas and birthdays, which become, in poor communities, a ritual by celebrating life after all. (ULS p.71). In Unique Looking at the Sea some of the celebrations start being connected with Christian dates and celebrations, however, they become profane with time. A question should thus be asked here: is it because a marginal world do not allow normal religious practices. Is it again this parallel world that also needs another religion? or is it more the de-legitimisation of it?

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Poverty finds tricks[32]

To live in poverty represents a whole attitude towards life and its meaning. It not only requires some practical features in order to solve everyday needs but also certain guiding attitudes towards the meaning of existence and future.

Perceptions about marginal situation focus on the idea of **wit** that has to develop in disadvantaged situations in order to cope with it: *"The adversity, of fertile wit, had driven the divers to create the most outstanding raincoat..."* (ULS p.48) Adversity is thus seen as a fertile ground for innovation.

However, this concept is contrasted later with the **mechanical** way that poor people adopt after dealing with poverty on a everyday basis:

> "[Momoñombo] was scared... very scared. Especially when he (…) he found himself diving automatically, mechanically, like it should be done, this diving, like everybody dives there or almost everybody." (ULS p.111).

However if poverty leads to a mechanical reaction of survival, to an automatic way of running life, it also means that it becomes an unquestioned life. A life that falls beyond any thought and analysis. Not asking, not wondering about their deprived situation is presented here as a legitimate way of coping with it and, as a consequence, of not pretending to ameliorate the situation.

Solidarity?

One of the most important coping strategies that is perceived as the cornerstone of survival in poverty situations is solidarity.

Unique's character represents the essence of it. She would help the others before caring for herself and this is how she integrates Momoñombo into the Deposit's life: *"she looked after him almost the whole day, forgetting her diving activities"* (ULS p.16). Solidarity here is first conceived as a challenging action against necessity, because it competes with the diving labour, however, it will turn out to be the only way out of it. The idea that *"(…) little by little the people* [have to] *understand that is better to share, even if it's just a little something"* (ULS p.31) as a way of conviviality, of living in group, of diminishing violence is broadened and accepted.

However, to justify solidarity among a group who has been denied of it by society in general is a very contradictory issue:

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[32] Greek Proverb (James 1981).

> "Unique talked with an absolute conviction of all these politics of pacific co-existence, but she didn't ignore that her maternal image helped her a lot to survive in the middle of the garbage, where everybody was a piece without a place in the World" (ULS p.31)

In fact, those who propose solidarity are also viewed as "weird" and, in some of the cases they are completely de-legitimised. They propose such a strategy because they are different and because of this difference they should not be heard.

For example, women are generally presented as the ones in charge of building and maintaining solidarity links. Their action does not come from a rational way of organising themselves in order to cope with their deprivation. It comes "by nature", sometimes on contradictory grounds and it is due to their 'female determination':

> "The girls [the prostitutes] were confident and infident, friends and enemies. But they declared their solidarity in a cautious way, yes; while they hated each other, some times, they couldn't stand to see another one in a desperate situation, they simply had to help" (TW p.21)

The Jerónimo Worst character gives another case of de-legitimised solidarity. He is also the personification of a good soul, sweet and caring with everyone. But again, the only one who proposes solidarity in this difficult situation is also the one who is crazy and who should not be heard. Like if for the "normal" people to think about collective action was impossible.

Family links

Related to the notion of solidarity, the building of family links as a way of structuring help and support and exchanging goods is also important. The need of a safety net that is justified through family relationships and obligations is here very important.

For example, in Going to Panama, family links are so fundamental here that they justify the fact that they can be build outside the blood's boundaries:

> "We call him 'uncle' but he isn't a real uncle, he would be so if he was Dad's brother but he's only his cousin. What happens is that he comes home so often and they're always together with my Dad so we're used now to call him 'uncle'." (GTP p.22)

The need to build family links out of common problems and interests is also presented in The Worst. The urban gangs and the groups of street children replace they idea of family. They protect themselves and care for each other. However, their need is so profound that they accept easily other caring family figures as Jerónimo's*:*

> "One girl seriously proposed Jerónimo to be her grandfather '-I am the grandfather of all of you', said Jerónimo to the street children and from that day on, the children who wanted just took his last name, Worst."(TW p.186)

In Unique Looking to the Sea this feature is also presented but the attitude of building family links is also viewed as an exception, as a rarity. It is said that Unique is the one *"for whom it had been impossible in all these years to banish all urban traditions and continued building this familiar schemes in the community"* however, she is later qualified *as "not like the rest of the divers. The authentic divers were used to live day by day, to solve the immediate"* (ULS p.46). She is thus an exception in this world.

Solutions on poverty are seen as a way of surviving or 'alleviating' the pain that poor situations imply but never as solving poverty. This because poverty is seen as inevitable and actions in that sense are just directed to survive in it. Also, any attempt here lies on personal initiative in order to cope with it. In general, they are individual actions and, when others are implied, they are also poor (solidarity perhaps, but among the non-poor). Also, initiative for collective action from the poor usually comes from those characters that should not be taken seriously (crazy or women). These perceptions coincide with conventional views on poverty where poverty is seen as unavoidable and as an exclusive problem of the poor and not a general concern.

Poverty as a different world

As we mentioned earlier, seeing poverty as a world in itself presents an ambiguity. The limit whereas it is just a way of assessing the complexity of this phenomenon (WS idiom) or when the notion of culture of poverty arises (conventional discourses on poverty), justifying the distance between this situation and the rest of society. In the urban novel both cases are seen. The notion of 'another world' –but related to ours- as an assessment of poor's complexity and of differentiated poor but also the use of the CP notion that as signalling an irreversible separation between both worlds.

Poverty is around the corner

The idea of a different world for poor people is specially clear in Fernando Contreras' novellas. In Unique Looking at the Sea for example, the division between the poor and the "rest of the world" is clear from the beginning:

> "The imperceptible yawn of the flies and the awakening wings of the buzzards, were not a novelty for the "divers". Between the rain and the steam of this sea of garbage, the last trucks, now empty, were leaving the place to restart a new collecting day. The divers had to rush, they had to extract from the depth of this ocean their prizes before the other ones came to join the search. They rushed to select the objects to sell in the different recycling places: cans, the bottles, the metals...." (ULS p.11)

However, the separation is not only given by the usual description of different circumstances and behavioural patterns of poor people in opposition to the "rest of society". In fact, the demarcation of poor and non-poor territories is given a more tangible character because, in this case, poor and non-poor are situated in different geographical spaces. Division here goes beyond livelihood and behaviour characteristics, which are sometimes more complex and difficult to interpret, and take the form of a geographical, and thus more **concrete**, separation of the poor/non-poor boundaries. The San José trash deposit is situated out of the town centre, "*at the south of a neighbourhood that, as an irony of destiny, is called Blue River"* (ULS p.20), a place that can be reached only by the garbage trucks and is not easily seen by all San José inhabitants gives us an idea of a **parallel** world of poverty that exists but is just situated "around the corner" of the centre of San Jose.

But distance in this sense from the phenomenon of poverty is also accompanied by the impossibility of crossing borders. In effect, the parallelism of the worlds and their profound and irreversible incompatibility is given when some of the inhabitants of one of these worlds try to enter the other one. For example, once the boundaries of the garbage deposit are crossed and the divers go to the city *"the linear pavements and the irremediably straight streets gave to the divers a feeling of infinity that unbalanced them"* (ULS p.98). The feeling of different realities and values that create opposite perceptions of the same things is accentuated later:

> "(...) for them, the street web didn't imply any principal order, sometimes they spent one hour just turning around the same block without realising it, even if they knew well the city (...). They crossed the streets and turned back with this hen's mania of stirring the ground with their feet: many times they walked 25 meters and they just turned back, crashing with other people" (ULS pp.98-99).

Impossibility of crossing borders, poor people outside of their common spaces feel lost, they move and behave differently. We could think they are created for a different reality, being unique almost by physical and thus clear determination:

> "They were distant and they didn't even notice that it was of them that the transients would say they were drunk, on drugs, or, in the best of the cases, crazy; but it wasn't about it, they just managed the space with a different set of co-ordinates, their sight was specialised and their ear withered." (ULS p.99)

Poverty exists but is a parallel world that is "not here" and where we cannot go and those who live there, cannot come to this one either.

Poor people, society's waste

Poverty as a different world is taken to its limits when people in the trash deposit are directly compared to **inanimate objects**, the trash itself. As we mentioned, from the beginning of the Unique Looking at the Sea, the action happens in a nauseating place, a world of garbage. What is interesting here is that the concept of waste broadens itself. Waste is not only the objects that come in the trucks from the city but also, the metaphor of city's trash reaches the poor people who live there. The idea of a parallel world is thus reinforced by the definition of a world that is the product of what the "city has left", objects and people. In other words, a world build with what is considered garbage or not useful anymore for the society in general.

This is the case for Unique and Momoñombo and how they both get into the divers' life. Unique is not "useful" anymore, she is a former primary teacher who is thrown out of her job because she doesn't have a title. Being an old and lonely single woman, she represents a person that society has used -while she was a young teacher nobody cared about her title- but now she is just a waste, she does not have another option than the garbage deposit. Momoñombo is a former security guard of the National Library who loses his job because he wants to prevent the destruction of some important catalogues. Economic circumstances made him poor (diminishing wages, no social guarantees) and now, old and tired, he has to throw himself in the garbage can, doing by himself what society already did. Here he explains to Unique:

> "I was there in the garbage because last Thursday, at the time the garbage truck passes by, I decided to throw myself in the garbage. I got up at dawn, put everything in order, I glanced for the last time the of family photographs, closed my house and ready! I went into the garbage" (ULS p.17).

The conception of poverty as the final product of a society who values its members depending on their productive capacity, as the conventional discourse on poverty stresses, transforming human beings into disposable objects, is a crude metaphor of modern utilitarian perceptions about life. Poor people are those who do not prove their usefulness towards the rest of society and as disposable objects they become social waste.

Poverty as a world of craziness

The idea of poverty as another world is also given by the perception of poor communities as places where the normal rational thinking does not apply anymore. Different rules which are not understood, diverse behaviours and values are related with

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"crazy" situations and increment the distance between the shares of the population that are considered "normal" and those who are not.

Poverty is *"a world of craziness"* thinks Momoñombo when he analyses his new situation in the garbage deposit and compares this new life driven by the rhythm of the arrival of trucks with new garbage and the nauseating smell of trash (ULS, p38). This perception here is very revealing since it belongs to a character who comes from a recent different situation, poor but non marginal, and who still has a "rational way" of perceiving what happens to him.

The separation of the worlds is also given by the situation of the city's brothel in The Worst. Here, the life of those who sell their bodies and of those who live with or from them divides what is considered "normal" from the "marginal" part of society. From the beginning, the life in a brothel presents a **crazy** world full of alcohol, sex, noise and lights in opposition with the world from the outside. The following description of the brothel as a parallel world gives us an idea of the different space where poverty and marginality are situated:

> "(...) and there he [Jerónimo] was, between the clients but foreign to the environment, foreign to the very loud volume of the music of the radio, foreign to the lights, foreign to the conversations, to the girls' dancing, to the shouting, to the fights..." (TW p.13).

However, the notion of craziness in disadvantaged situations is personified in Jerónimo's character. His craziness is perceived as an *"endless capacity to disconnect himself of the immediate,* [and it] *helped him to be out of trouble."* (TW p.26). It is first seen as a strategy that is followed in order to deal with marginal situations: Jerónimo disconnects himself from the marginal world he is living in order to survive. However, this ability of disconnection can also be questioned. In fact he did not chose to loose his mind, the ability to detach himself is not such after all since he does not choose when to use it, he is permanently "disconnected" or " unplugged" out of reality. In that sense what is first seen as a survival strategy is later viewed as an impossibility of responding and dealing with difficult situations.

The parallelism -which forbids the meeting- of the poor and non-poor's worlds is also given by the idea of poverty as a world of craziness. This perception, in which the poor are seen as crazy -or "disconnected"- in opposition to the others, disqualifies any rational approach of understanding and dealing with this alternate reality. In other words, society could not "negotiate" with those who are considered crazy.

Poverty as a world of violence

Violence in poverty situations is perceived as having different dimensions. In all of them however, violence is seen as **irrational** and a characteristic from this parallel world idea we already explored and where "normal people" do not live.

One of them is when it is perceived as the symptom of impotence to change a disadvantaged situation. For example, Polyphoemus' mother reaction to his difference is to hit the child *"she couldn't explain why she hit him, and, even if she seemed to hate him, she held him quite often and cried on his chest asking for forgiveness..."* (TW p.46)

Violence as a common way of delimiting territories among the poor communities is also presented fight*: "and she explained to him it was a normal territorial fight among the divers"* (ULS, p.25). Violence is an everyday feature here but a delimitation of territories through it has still imbedded some animal-like characteristics. The parallel world of poverty as a place where people behave as animals (where is a regression of humanity) is shown here. The idea of urban poverty as an outcome of progress and, at the same time an act of the regression of humanity is presented here through the focus of violence. However, a regression is shameless –but unavoidable for society in general- and this perception as shameless does not imply by itself an action against it.

Poverty matters

Poverty matters. It is being perceived and identified and the new deepened nature of urban poverty is definitely being assessed. However, the way this poverty is being seen reveals a tension. Both idioms, the Welfare State's and the conventional one are mixed in the novels.

Perceptions of poverty that fall within the WS idiom of poverty characterise the diagnosis of poverty: it is seen as a situation of deprivation in which food, education, housing and environmental healthy conditions are lacking. Poverty is seen as the outcome of a deprivation process through which each of these elements are affected. It is also related to a vulnerable situation where the insecurity about the future characterises the everyday life. All these elements coincide, as we saw, with the notions on which the WS idiom of poverty is based.

However, the characteristics of this deprived position interrelate with conventional discourse's features. For example the place of poor women as the responsible for the survival of the household but, in opposition to men's capacities, are not able to

imagine and implement strategies to overcome their disadvantaged situation. Family links and general attitudes dictated by traditional and institutionalised catholic values are perceived as coping strategies. However those strategies are for survival but never to 'overcome' poverty. Solidarity is mentioned but it is so as long as it happens within poverty's boundaries, not outside. The generalised notion of a culture of poverty is also embedded in the literary discourse and lies on the existence of social pathologies that reinforce the idea of poverty as a parallel and different world, which unavoidably reproduces itself.

5.   POVERTY MATTERS, BUT TO WHAT EXTENT?
ASSESSING THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

> " Behind the gates of the wealthy
> food lies rotting from waste.
> Outside it's the poor
> Who lie frozen to death".
> Du Fu, 8th century Chinese Poet

As we have seen in Chapter III, Costa Rican notion of social justice lies on the idea of redistributing wealth through the welfare state apparatus. Here, a WS discourse where poverty was seen as a social responsibility was implemented: Costa Rican society working to solve it through the tax system and an active role of the State choosing the target and the means to redistribute. Nowadays, obstacles to this path have been arising. Trust in the institution of the State has been questioned. Many of the reforms that have been mentioned below have also limited government effectiveness and long term planning, they have also created corruption and drained national resources into a huge and inefficient bureaucracy. As a consequence, government has lost not only much of his effectiveness but much of its legitimacy and the Costa Ricans faith on their political institutions has declined.

It is our belief that literary discourses respond to this changing idea of the role of the Government and the conception of social justice. While some of them still reveal some trust and give to the government the responsibility of solving disadvantaged groups' situation, others question it. In that sense the WS idiom of poverty that has validated the State as the ultimate constructor of social justice is been challenged and the revival of the discourse that isolates the phenomenon of poverty from the rest of society becomes evident.

State and Social justice

In the novels, the role of the State[33] is very complex. It reflects the situation Costa Rican society is facing in the present trying to redefine it. On one side, it is viewed as the cause of some of the marginal and poverty situations, of an institution that cannot be trusted anymore, on the other, it still represents an important actor in the solution of these social problems.

State's role against poverty and its responsibility towards society in general is given by the role of a public health services. Such is the case for Polyphoemus, once he becomes sick to death those services are accessible to him and the public hospital turns to be a supporting place. However, a new relation is proposed where poor are not helped so easily: a new exchange between the provider of the health service and those who are benefited with is imposed later. In fact, while Polyphoemus is there, Jerónimo has to help other children: *"He spent the days helping other children.... Bringing the food to one, or a little spoon, reading to them... He succeeded to stay by doing 'social services'...."* (TW p.236)

Another important right that is associated with poverty conditions and the figure of a Welfare State are the pensions: *"whores should have the right to a pension"* (TW p.225) as a way of protecting marginal parts of the population to fall into extremely deprived conditions.

In other words, the Government's role is still seen as crucial. Being part of the cause of inequality and deprivation and belonging to an institution of rights that is perceived by Costa Rican society, the Government has to be active against it. However, a new form of exchange is presented here. The idea of right -to deserve something just because one exists- is not valid anymore and has to be justified by an exchange, not a desert or universal service as it was traditionally conceived in Costa Rica but a way of 'buying it', just as Jerónimo did in the hospital.

Also, the role of the State is presented while in Unique Looking at the Sea, the neighbours of the deposit want to move it from there. The Community organises itself to do it. However this organisation is held against the divers, is presented as a negative feature towards the divers who are here the principal character . Furthermore, results of the organisation are evaluated on how far it reaches the Government. Here, *"the or-*

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[33] No distinction is made here about the difference between Government, state and public services. Costa Ricans in general use these concepts indistinctively.

ganisation of the community reached, at last, to dialogue with the Government. The president of the Republic had a meeting with them…" (ULS p.99) This feature reveals first a certain trust in the traditional mechanisms of implementation of anti-poverty measures. Protests, meetings, and other kinds of manifestations are mentioned as pressure elements to influence political decision-makers. However, we cannot forget those who are listened to are not the poor (the divers) but the neighbours of the deposit (the non-poor). Organisation is thus useful but it ultimately depends on the Government's acquaintance to listen and help. Here, organisation is useful but not for everybody and certainly not for the marginal.

We can say that because the divers community has also an attempt to organise itself. First of all, the idea came from outsiders, Momoñombo who just came into the Garbage Deposit is the one in charge of the movement against the relocation of the Deposit. He is the one who organises the community because "professional divers" are just concerned with the everyday activities of diving, they just ignore the situation. He says to Unique:

> "Yes I call it outrage! Tell me, how would I possibly call this of living in the garbage? And don't say that is because I'm not a professional diver and that all I do is because I am not used yet…" (ULS pp.105-106)

He proposes here the idea of reintegration into a society, which excluded them from the beginning. However, for this reintegration, the Government's help is needed:

> "Well, this is all about, woman, not to stay without doing anything, but to ask the government for help…. We go to the meeting and talk to the Minister…. We tell them we need help to find another thing to do, that we have rights like everybody else, that we are not here because we like bad smells or because all we can do is search in the garbage. I can offer my services as a guard… you as a teacher, those who don't know what to do, we can teach them…" (ULS p.53)

So, Government is needed and when it fails it is guilty of injustice. In Mythomanias for example we find: *"The day before yesterday, those from the health department came to tell me we had to kill her* [the seeing eye dog of a blind poor man]" (M p.93). Here, it represents the institutional party of society who takes from the poor their only way of survival –exemplified here by the seeing eye dog of a blind poor man.

But Government failure goes beyond the material side. It is accused of taking from the poor not only their means but also their hope*: "and they also did a lot of damage, they hurt people with this story of the eighty thousand houses for poor people I bet they don't even build half of them"* (CELB p.91). As a consequence, Government cannot be trusted anymore.

The lack of trust is enhanced by the idea of **corruption**, which is often associated to its working mechanisms. Here for example in the Chatter Emperor and the Legion of the Broke the characters, people who work for the Government, have a special reason to work there: in order to steal from it *"this one he really lives in peace with his conscience, compared with the others he's really honest"* (CELB p.27) and 'the others', like the ones in the upper levels like the Executive President whose resignation

> "in few months (...) will be unavoidable, he will be hit by the import of some tractors that were supposed to go the Ministry of Agriculture and that were finally found in a warehouse near the Uruca with its diesel tanks full of narco-dollars as usual the anti-drugs American bureau finished the party" (CELB p.79) and the "is completely true what Captain Austerín says about this political party, is a corrupt party where everybody hides the mistakes of the others". (CELB p.113).

A discourse that denies the State's ability to solve deprived problems and that defends a general discontent towards its actions faces here the general views of that give to it the responsibility and the social trust while dealing with this situation.

The tension of both idioms on poverty is here blatantly evident. On one side it still presents the State as an important actor on social issues, as the institution that has to solve deprived situations through the provision of health services and assuring some basic rights. In that sense, it is also is seen as the responsible of some of the deprived situations: its failure as the cause of some negative conditions for some of the population. However, it also delegitimises its actual reach and thus its effective ability to counteract what has been seen for years as social priorities in Costa Rica.

Social justice? It does not exist anymore

Is obsolete and extreme

As we have seen, the idea of Costa Rican a democratic regime which was built in 1948 and which also depended on the democratisation of wealth, was seen by its creator as a "*kind of co-operative; each of us conserves what is ours but we all contribute in order that nobody lacks of anything*". (Figueres quoted by Garnier 1991, p.20).

The situation where a part of society "lacks of something" (as we specified before food, housing , education..) has been traditionally seen as unjust and has become the main idea of the WS discourse on inequality. On the opposite side, a quest for equality has characterised in that sense traditional Costa Rican social inclinations.

Here however, from an initial conception of unfairness of deprived situations, the concept of social justice is often treated as an obsolete or even an extreme idea.

In fact, poverty is initially seen as the outcome of "something in society that does not work well". Here, Doña Elmira (the administrator of the brothel in The Worst) speaks:

> "the same thing over and over... Nobody cares about what happens to the people, of course, some of them get rich and the others who have to work with this shit are fucked: rich people open their legs and it's always the poor who are fucked..." (TW p.182)

In order to change this situation, they need to demand some justice. However, the idea of social justice is viewed as an obsolete and extremist concept. Here when the action of the Union of the Bureaucrats lead by the Chatter Emperor asks for better remuneration, the action is qualified as being based on "*exotic, old and extremist ideas*" (CELB p.18).

Obsolesce and extremism of social justice's concept is also given by the fact that any intent to "to ask for justice" or equal opportunities for all -understood here as better work conditions- is associated with left-wing extremist ideas and compared with the failed experiences of Costa Rican revolutionary neighbours:

> "(...) we Tico's don't want any fucking revolution and messes like the one the sandinists did in Nicaragua those guys have to be finished the only way is with a good government a strong government a president that has his pants on and don't loose time with peace plans (...) this is at least how I think but of course I don't say it loud because everybody here is a chicken shit and they take their words back when they have to stand for something." (CELB p.90)

However, when social justice is not presented as an old and extremist an idea that does not fit with Costa Rican society anymore, it is given character of exceptionality. Social justice is not so, it is more an individual attitude that some people have towards those who are in disadvantaged positions. It would thus be **charity**.

Such is the case of the doctors in Unique Looking at the Sea. They see reality - in this case reality is Polyphoemus- and try to explain it and help. However, being an individual behaviour, the real and personal interest behind such generous attitude is never clear. For example, it is often mentioned their "scientific" purposes behind their help. Sentences like "they were curious", "they kept a file" appear and they always superpose the doctors nice and supposedly disinterested intentions.

Social Justice is just seen as an old, extremist idea or as an individual and an exceptional behaviour which its real reasons are not so clear. In all of those cases, social justice as it has been traditionally defined in discourses that legitimise Welfare State institutions, is not seen anymore. It appears that the new tendencies that focus on individual behaviour rather than collective action have permeated new social discourses

in Costa Rica. And, individual behaviour towards a social problem cannot be considered as social justice since the concept of social justice derives from a conception of society acting as a whole.

Social justice? Just social indifference

Another element that supports this idea of the non-existence of social justice in contemporary societies is given by the fact that it exists a general an understandable indifference and ignorance of the deprived situation.

Such is the case with Jerónimo's character. He becomes an *"anonymous piece of the urban everyday bustle, nobody ever cared if he was here one day and not the other"* (TW p.32). Indifference towards the situation of street children is also shown, while *"their soul keeps on being destroyed in front of the indifference of everybody."* (TW p.84)

Indifference is explained in many ways and in a society where indifference is the answer to perceived injustice, social justice cannot exist. The new features of modern communication give one of the explanations of this indifference.

In Costa Rica, the idea of a small country where is very easy to know everybody's background, where the possibility to meet the president walking in the streets and where the supposed participatory political system has worked for the benefits for the majority for a long time, communication between the different parts of society has never been a problem. However, with the country's growth, these traditional characteristics are not possible anymore. They are presented as new features of young and dynamic societies where everything goes fast and to perceive 'details' is not possible anymore.

This feature is portrayed in Jerónimo's character. He writes messages, hang them on his neck and walks through the streets of San José. But the messages -philosophical reflections of society- are *"messages for nobody"* (TW p.31). Nobody reads them -they walk fast to go to work- and Jerónimo, crazy as he is- is the only one who wastes time trying to communicate without having learnt the new social rules.

Another example of non-communication is the fact that in The Chatter Emperor and the Legion of the Broke, the text is always cut between the stories -somebody telling the story of the other just the omniscient narrator- with sentences of well known popular advertisements, idioms or street jargon : *"pssst pssst psst, oh babe, look at me!"* or many like *"Please, some coins for my children...", "Please sir, could you give*

me some change", or the hawking of the informal commerce people from the city's streets (CELB p.57). The superposition of different discourses that happen at the same time but not necessarily interrelate enhances the idea of parallel worlds rather than interconnected realities. Marginality and "normal life" happen at the same time but they do not relate one another and there is also no reason to do so.

In Going to Panama we also have the same feature. The story comes from different voices that superpose themselves: a whole family perceiving the same story. The views, one after another without clear connection and without clear separation of discourses. It presents just an amount of ideas rather than a real dialogue between the characters. At the end, nobody listens to anybody, they just speak at the same time and find the ways to live with it.

Social justice: do the poor belong to society?

One can be subject of social justice only if one belongs to society. To the WS discourse based on social democratic ideas in Costa Rica where equality and the inclusiveness were part of the pillars of contemporary society, a conventional one is presented.

Here, to the WS discourse of an inclusive society, a fragmented one is presented. Poverty is seen as a marginal situation which, because of its different and complex characteristics, belongs to a "parallel" world, a world that exists next to the normal one where "everybody else" lives and which interrelationships are far from being clear. There are however two different dimensions of the world that is been perceived. One situates this other world within society's boundaries, and has already been mentioned as the perception of the WS notion of culture of poverty, and the other places the poor out of them. As we saw, separating the poor world from the other one can reinforce comprehensive discourses on the culture of poverty -and the necessity to understand this different reality- however, a world of poverty and deprivation that falls completely out of society's reach and thus, out of the reach of any concept of social justice.

Discourses that place poverty and marginalization out of this supposed inclusive society challenge WS discourses on social justice.

Poverty, a parallel world out of society
Poverty as being out of society

Until here, the idea of poor people living in a parallel and distinct world was presented. However, as the novels continue, the notion of poverty as a fragmented situation from what is considered normal is taken to the extreme. The former happens when the parallel world where poor people live is placed **out of society's boundaries**, putting them out of any social reach and, why not, society's responsibility.

The way through which this exclusion is concretised is through anonymity. In effect, Consolation and Jerónimo Worst are not considered part of Costa Rican society until: *"two weeks afterwards the Worst family went out with the document that defined them -at last- as Costa Rican"* (TW p.191). However, is the example of Momoñombo that is by far the most appropriate and elucidating. When he throws himself in the garbage (metaphor of becoming poor and marginal), he does not take his identifications with him. In doing so, he looses his name and all the formal instances that give him -or allow him- a place in society. Becoming poor was in his understanding "going out of society". Being forced to become anonymous is for him a different way of dying: instead of committing suicide, he commits *"identicide"* [34] (ULS p.24) and , consequently, he is immediately placed out of society's boundaries.

This enormous shift from belonging to society to a non-belonging situation is closely related with the fear that the human need to feel identified with something provokes: *"He also feared to pass by certain common places in San José and find themselves foreign; to feel that he didn't identify himself with anything anymore."* (ULS p.75)

Anonymity as a characteristic of poor people has three different interpretations. In first place the idea that anybody could be poor, independently of his name and original social position. This would be the inclusive interpretation. In second place, it could lead to the idea that there are no differences between them, no faces , no names, and no particularities. They are thus a homogenous group and this notion simplifies the picture for those who see the phenomenon from outside. However, the third position -and the most dangerous one from a social justice perspective- would be the perception of poor people who -again, no faces, no names- are not "people" anymore. Poor would simply become "non-people" and the distance from poor realities tat was already seen contin-

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[34] Translated from "identicidio", word that does not exist in Spanish.

ues to grow. Society does not feel concerned with something it sees out of its boundaries and responsibilities.

Poverty as a level of monstrosity

The character of Polyphoemus in the novella Unique Looking at the Sea presents an idea of poverty as monstrosity that undoubtedly enhances idea of poverty as a "situation out of society".

As we already mentioned, Polyphoemus is a Cyclops. He is the illegitimate son of a peasant girl who, by accident, happened to give birth in the brothel's door. He is immediately viewed as a monster (an out-of-this-world creature) by everybody, a little boy with a single eye, and provokes repulsion around him. Jerónimo is the only person who initially treats him normally. For him Polyphoemus is a *"sign of our times"* (TW p.35) because it represents something hidden for the rest of the mortals *"(...) those monsters appear to represent something that you don't understand (...)"* (TW p.44). Poverty, is thus a social monster, but what does poverty represent?

In the story, Polyphoemus is the result of his young mother's contact with some chemical fertilising products which finally provoke the foetus mutation. This is not the only case and reflects a real situation that occurred in Costa Rican rural areas when out-of- or defective date agricultural products originated diseases and some human mutations (La Nación 1988). Polyphoemus is not an isolated case, other strange births with the same reason are also mentioned and represent the danger of modern technology:

> "is because the mother was always in contact with all those products they use for tomatoes and lettuces. Even on TV you can see cases like this one in Alajuela... Do you remember, by the way, this little girl who was born like a mermaid, with her legs stick one another". (TW p.39).

Poverty, like Polyphoemus' monstrosity, changes its faces through time. Its reasons also "mutate" and always find new ways of representing themselves.

However, like monstrosity, poverty has to **be hidden.** The idea that this position of vulnerability has to be taken out from others' sight and kept as a secret is also important here. Poverty, like Polyphoemus, is society's spell. Poor people should not talk about it and thus remain without explanations of their situation. In this case, secret around this monster, a product of modern times, represents a collective act of survival, but also, of reproducing their disadvantaged position. A monster who is not "introduced" to society, as Polyphoemus is, being carefully kept inside the brothel's walls, does not formally exist. This is the denial of the problem, however, when the monster

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escapes his vigilance and escapes, he provokes *"terror and pity"* (TW pp.38-39), which are both reactions that society has towards poverty. From a period of secrecy as a form of denial, from the poor themselves and the society in general, the situation becomes impossible to hide anymore. The problem becomes unavoidable however, the reactions it mobilises forbid any kind of closeness from those who do not live in poverty. In effect both, terror and pity, imply distance.

Poverty matters, but to what extent?

As we saw in Chapter IV, poverty matters, it is being seen and identified as a problem. However here, in trying to assess the social reactions towards it and the role of the rest of society through the concept of social justice within a Costa Rican tradition, perceptions on poverty present again a tension between the two idioms.

In effect, on one hand the responsibility of poverty still relies of the action of the state –that represents a collective action against it- and in this sense it belongs to the WS views of poverty. However we can also see here some elements that fall within the conservative idiom of poverty that put this situation out of social responsibility. This happens firstly because even if it acknowledges Government responsibility, it later deligitimises its real capacity to solve this social problem. From a second level, the WS discourse is challenged directly by the ideas of social justice which are related to old and obsolete beliefs to the product of craziness and unconsciousness. In a final step, the perception of poor realities as falling out of society's boundaries and thus, of any kind of -if it existed- social responsibility, is embraced.

In that sense, perceptions on social justice challenge the future of this notion in Costa Rica. Poverty matters as long as collective action is not needed. It matters as long poor realities are kept within poor boundaries and they organise themselves in order to alleviate their own burden. What has been a major characteristic of this country –a collectivistic action against deprivation- appears to be influenced by the global path towards a more individualistic and deeply socially fragmented society (Hinkelammert 1995).

6. CONCLUSIONS

> "The millions who are poor […] tend to become increasingly invisible. Is a great mass of people, yet it takes an effort of the intellect and will even to see them […] Poverty is often off the beaten track."
>
> Michael Harrington. The Other America.

About the nature of the study

A broad academic and institutional tradition exists in Costa Rica about quantitative studies of the evolution of poverty. Those initiatives have contributed to the design and implementation of social policies and to the quantitative development of the measurement of this phenomenon in the country.

However, little has been done to assess Costa Rican society's reaction to it. As a difference in those kinds of works, this study, relying on a sociology of literature approach tries to assess the elite's perceptions on poverty expressed in the urban novel discourse.

In order to achieve it this alternative approach relied on the principles that:

- The influence of the perceptions on poverty of the elite is crucial for the design and implementation of anti-poverty measures and policies. They not only shape the principal characteristics of those policies but also determine their political viability.

- These perceptions can be assessed through recent cultural production. New urban novels, a product of the elite, conceived as a social discourse are a valid source of perceptions which reveal, exemplify and interpret social processes.

- In Foucault's views, they legitimise, maintain and shape power relations in society. Here, the power relation we are interested in would be the one existing between the observers –young elite writers- towards the excluded groups they see –the poor. Literary discourse becomes also a source of perceptions in which alternative views on social problems can be assessed.

Principal findings

Urban poverty did not change in numbers but in nature and has lead to a new and unavoidable subculture of urban poverty. This phenomenon is related with the raise of a new cultural expression: the urban novel which, by its specific thematic, reveals that urban poverty –because of its evidence- is a concern for the elite. In other words, poverty matters.

However a social concern has not meant in Costa Rica a mobilisation against poverty. In that sense, perceptions within the novels' discourse show that poverty char-

acteristics are certainly recognised by society and coincide with the Welfare State's views towards this deprived situation. However, when the concept of social justice and thus a collective action towards poverty is studied –poverty matters but to what extent?–, a new perspective that implies a distance between society in general and poor people is given.

Poverty matters. In effect, some of the **characteristics** of poor situations coincide with the WS idiom on poverty where the former is perceived as a situation of deprivation and vulnerability. Perceptions of the phenomenon relate personal life of the poor with the different shortages of income and the unsatisfied basic needs:

- In terms of the WS views of unsatisfied basic needs, the theme of housing occupies a first level. The problematic situations in this matter are associated with the total lack of housing -extreme conditions of deprivation- the life in slums or the lack of basic services such as water or electricity, or to pay high rents or to have their own house in bad state.

- It exists a relationship with the thematic of the environment that is related with the notion of contamination. The pollution of the water and the air, the urban problems such as the destruction of the city and the noise and the problem of the garbage.

- In general, poverty is linked with a low level of education. However, this relationship is questioned because some poor are literate and educated and this feature would reflect the general perception of the deepening of poverty, which increasingly affects a larger part of the population.

- Health problems are also part of the reproduction of poverty. They are originated and reinforced by unhealthy environmental conditions, bad alimentation and difficulties to the access of health services. In that sense, public health services are perceived as very important but the possibility of a future access is questioned unless a new system of exchange where the service is not 'universal' anymore is implemented and poor people have to 'pay' the service in some way.

- The role of women is strongly differentiated from the males'. Perceptions reveal the phenomenon of the feminisation of poverty that happens in reality. The analysis shows that women are presented as those in charge of the everyday subsistence that involves domestic labours, direct or indirect contributions in the production and in charge of maintaining and reproducing solidarity and family nets. However, even if seen as the responsible of the immediate survival, they are seen incapable of plan-

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ning a change of their deprived situation. The men, irresponsible in their normal burdens, are the ones in charge of designing strategies to overcome poverty. In that sense, the perception of gender roles derives from a traditional gender focus structure.

- Poverty is seen as having and enhancing safety nets. They are often related to the family space understood on a broad sense. However, solidarity exists only within the poor's space: as a strategy towards poverty is valid and needed only within poverty's boundaries, not out of them. Furthermore, it is never seen as a rational strategy –rationally, solidarity is not an issue- but more as an irrational human attitude.

- Poverty is perceived as a situation which is not wanted but is, somehow, unavoidable. Poor's future is seen as determined by their problematic present situation. The notion of the cycle of poverty (poor family→poor children→poor family) is generally perceived and presented as an element of "predetermination" of deprivation. This perception is enhanced by the traditional notion of poverty as 'God's punishment' and thus, as a deserved situation.

- Poverty is also related to the phenomenon of social pathologies: Urban gangs, street children, drug addiction, prostitution, violence are perceived characteristics of the culture of poverty and are seen as one of the most important elements of the reproduction of poverty.

- Solutions to poverty are seen from two different sides. On one hand it is seen as based on solidarity nets, family links and some general attitudes (hope, celebration of life) towards poverty that poor people have or do not have, build or do not build by themselves. In other words by elements that depend on themselves without the intervention of the rest of society as a whole.

- On the other hand, solutions to poverty are seen as dependent of Government action: public hospital, Government intervention to enhance a reintegration of poor people into society. Reintegration is seen as the opening of opportunities into the labour market through education in general. However, the option of public help becomes illegitimate by the incompetence of Government (presented through the loss of values such as political corruption) and the consequent loss of the faith on democratic values.

Some of the characteristics of poverty that are perceived coincide with the views that the WS in Costa Rica has adopted. However, in general within the novels

discourse, the idea that when society tries to relate the poverty they observe with its own responsibility and the **concept of social justice**, a conventional discourse arises. **Yes, poverty matters, but to what extent?**

In first place, the State is the only actor –out of the poor sphere- who is seen as responsible of poor' s situation. However, its role is deeply questioned by the strong doubts on its practical ability to work in general and to solve the poor's problems in special. These doubts are also reinforced by the general lack of confidence on the democratic mechanisms of Costa Rican society.

In second place, the notion of social justice is seen as old and obsolete in theory and as rationally been replaced by an 'understandable' distance (indifference?) from the rest of society. Indifference or this incapacity to see other's reality is explained by the modern rhythm of life.

In third place, the WS notion of equality is here challenged by a conventional discourse in which this difference between poor and non-poor is so strong that it pushes deprived people out of the limits of society itself. From an idea of poverty as a parallel world that enhanced the WS through the concept of complexity of poverty, a conventional discourse presents a culture of poverty, a world out of the reach of society itself, and thus, out of any notion –if it exists- of social justice.

Implications for social policies

In the perspective of a process of development that is politically and largely determined by the elite perceptions of poverty, to try to elucidate how these perceptions evolve in a moment when the nature of poverty has changed and has become a deeper and more complex phenomenon, constitutes a very important complement of other actions for the design and execution of public policies in the social field. It also gives an idea of the possible direction of social policies in the future.

In relation to the results of the study:

The perception, even if it is changing, that one of the only elements for reintegration should be made through education implies an agreement of the importance of this variable. Policies based on this element would seem to be supported. However this implies a long-term solution. In short term views, given that they are just three actors (poor themselves, religion and the Government) mentioned in the solution of poverty, it becomes more difficult.

The principal line of Costa Rican development in the last years has integrated women in a broader space to the labour market and this has transformed the institution of the family and the family's survival as well (Centro Nacional para el Desarrollo de la Mujer y Familia 1997). Since they are perceived as a fundamental element for the situation of poor households, it would appear that the better-off of their situation and conditions would thus be supported by Costa Rican elite and would effectively contribute to ameliorate urban conditions in general. However certain social misperceptions need to be addressed. In especial those that see women as an active element for survival but no as an agent of change, to overcome poverty conditions.

State is still pointed out and would seem to be in charge of tackling this situation but a change of its function is required: it has to regain its lost trust in order to be supported again by the whole population in those issues. About how to regain confidence nothing is said, and the future in that matter seems dark.

The tendency of the elite to exonerate itself from any responsibility towards poverty by projecting blame onto other actors and other 'unavoidable' processes and by placing the poor out of society's reach is being seen. In general, poor people are expected to solve their situation by themselves. In order to do so they are presented as relying on solidarity and family nets and general attitudes such as hope, 'love for life' and faith (the role of religion here). Those elements have been seen lately as important elements incorporated in the understandings of poverty, however, from a social justice perspective, they do not imply a collective action from society since they do not need the action of the non-poor. They are mechanisms that rely solely –as they are presented in the novels- on the poor's communities. Also, and related to the former, those mechanisms assure the everyday survival but never the overcoming of deprived conditions.

The results of the study even if disappointing from the social justice angle of the historical Costa Rican development and thus from the idea of a collective action towards an inclusive society, are not surprising. They reflect a world-wide attitude where two processes occur simultaneously. On one hand new worlds increasingly interrelate – within the globalisation process- and, on the other, some of them become more distant. Poverty in that sense is a world that, for those who are not within its boundaries, just as Harrington states, becomes invisible and foreign. In that sense, even if we wanted to believe so, this country has proven not to be an exception. Perhaps Costa Rican elite is still able to perceive poverty but, apparently, this initial visibility does not imply a collective action against it anymore.

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