

Bringing Politics Back In To Poverty Analysis: Why Understanding of Social Relations Matters More for Policy on Chronic Poverty than Measurement*

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Poverty becomes what has been measured and is available for analysis

Robert Chambers

(It is) a matter of a knowledge base that, however unintentionally, has opened itself to conservative interpretation by locating the crux of the poverty problem in the characteristics of the poor

Alice O'Connor

Preamble¹

Mainstream poverty research, even after experts had generally accepted the need for a multi-dimensional view of poverty, going beyond income/consumption measures to take account of holdings of assets and hence of longer run security, and of the factor of self-respect (see Chambers 1988, 1992), has generally failed to address the dynamic, structural and relational factors that give rise to poverty. There is a great deal of technically sophisticated research, much of it based on household surveys that have become increasingly refined over the past decade or so, that has provided ever more detailed profiles of poverty in different countries and regions. This research has also come up with any number of studies of 'poverty dynamics' – 'why some people escape from poverty and others don't', in the title of one World Bank Working Paper (Grootaert et al 1995) - that show the implications, for example, of the distribution of assets in a society or of access to human capital. In general, indeed, this research tends to converge around much the same set of conclusions: household characteristics, especially dependency ratios, matter; ownership of assets is highly significant; access to insurance such as that provided by holding a regular, secure job, or through being able to claim such a resource as a ration card, matters; and education counts for a lot. Latterly these studies have been extended to take account, too, of social relationships through the concept of social capital. But it is probably rather commonly the case – as it is in Guatemala (according to Ibanez et al 2002) – that it is better educated, relatively wealthy, middle-aged men who enjoy most social capital, and on the other hand that being very poor seriously constrains people's abilities to invest in social capital, even within the family (Cleverly 2005). So it is far from being clear that this factor cuts through the self-reinforcing circle of factors that are associated with movements out of poverty (see also Adato, Carter and May 2006; Kumar and Corbridge 2002). Little, if any, of this research aims to address the questions of how and why it is that the factors that are considered are distributed in the way they are through a society. These are questions of the political economy of contemporary capitalism, and of cultural politics. That they are largely ignored shows that poverty research plays a part in depoliticising what are in essence political problems. It is a part of what James Ferguson (1990) memorably described as the 'anti-politics machine'. Poverty research in international development shares in 'the idea that scientific knowledge holds the key to solving social problems', which, as Alice O'Connor says, 'has long been an article of faith in American liberalism' (2001: 3). If

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only – the implicit reasoning runs – ‘we’ can build a good scientific understanding of poverty then ‘we’ will be able to solve the problem. But the reality is that poverty knowledge is profoundly political, as is shown up so clearly in contemporary debates over poverty trends in India in the 1990s (see Deaton and Kozel 2004). The problem is that long chains of assumptions are necessarily made even in the most sophisticated measurements of poverty so that they are always open to question; and which assumptions different specialists are most ready to accept depends on value judgements. There is also an important sense in which, as O’Connor argues, poverty research, dominated as it is – in the case of international development - by people educated in a small number of mainly American universities, is an exercise in power. This has been recognised in recent years at the centre of poverty knowledge, in the World Bank, in its celebrated *Voices of the Poor* study. But the possible implications of that study, which are to argue for a different model of knowledge as the basis for action on poverty, have been ignored. Poverty research seems to show that the social sciences should, as Flyvberg has argued (2001) cease to try to emulate the natural sciences. They are more effective in generating the kind of knowledge that grows out of familiarity with practice in particular contexts, helping people to question relationships of knowledge and power - such as those giving rise to poverty - and thereby to work to produce change. Such a view has quite profound implications for the design of poverty research.

Re-conceptualising poverty: the story so far

My first epigraph comes from a paper written by Robert Chambers for the World Bank in Delhi twenty years ago, with the title ‘Poverty in India: concepts, research and reality’ (Chambers 1988, 1992). Though this paper was not on its own responsible for bringing about re-thinking on the concept and the nature of poverty in the 1990s (shown up in the differences between *WDR 1990* and *WDR 2000*), it was certainly a reflection of the changing ideas of the time. I start with Chambers’ arguments because I think that it may be helpful to reflect upon the extent to which or the ways in which analysis and understanding have changed – or not – since he wrote.

Chambers argued that there are two possible starting points for understanding poverty and ways of reducing it: with the perceptions of professionals – social scientists and development practitioners; or with the perceptions of poor people themselves. His paper compares these two sets of perceptions. The professionals define poverty in terms of deprivation and ‘the poor’ are those who are in various ways deprived. But in practice the professionals have concerned themselves with those aspects of deprivation that are most readily measured – flows of income or consumption – and a

huge amount of intellectual energy and resources have gone, and continue to go into poverty research which is concerned with refining these measures (which involve a chain of assumptions). But as Chambers says, the poverty line – which is what so much research has been about defining – ‘is not concerned with wealth or material possessions, nor with aspects of deprivation relating to access to water, shelter, health services, education or transport, nor with debt, dependence, isolation, migration, vulnerability, powerlessness, physical weakness or disability, high mortality or short life expectancy; nor with social disadvantage, status or self-respect’ (1988: 3). Many possible aspects of deprivation are left out of conventional poverty measurement, therefore (though of course some effort has gone, since he wrote, into trying to incorporate some of these possible aspects of poverty into measurement) – and thus it was that Chambers argued that poverty has come to be equated with what can most readily be measured. ‘Conceptually’, he suggested, ‘professionals are caught in their own poverty trap’ (1988: 6). And when it comes to action too, he thought, professionals also tend to focus on poverty defined in terms of lack of income, and perhaps physical weakness and isolation, rather than on those aspects of poverty that have to do with vulnerability and powerlessness, perhaps because ‘Members of elite groups ... find [these] less threatening aspects of deprivation to measure and tackle’ (1992:).

Chambers contrasts this ‘professional’ way of thinking about poverty with the concepts of the poor themselves, at least as these have been interpreted ethnographically. He was particularly influenced by the analysis of poverty trends in villages in his native Rajasthan by the Indian social scientist N S Jodha. Drawing on data and experience from over twenty years Jodha showed that while according to conventional measurement poverty had increased, according to almost all of the very many ways in which – given his understanding of these ways of thinking – village people themselves conceptualise changes in their well-being, they had become better off. In summary they were better off because they were more independent and relied less on particular patrons; relied less on low pay-off jobs or options; had improved liquidity and mobility; consumed a greater range of commodities; and owned more consumer durables. Reflection upon Jodha’s findings, and those of several other close observers of rural India led Chambers to argue that if ‘we’ (professional outsiders)

take account of poor people's own concepts and concerns then we should give much greater weight to qualitative social and psychological aspects of well-being. And he summed up by arguing that we should think about poverty in terms of different dimensions that are all relevant to poor people themselves. Incomes and consumption do matter (he labels this dimension 'survival'), but so do net assets and security² (labelled 'security') and beyond even security there is the dimension of independence and self-respect ('self-respect').

These arguments contributed to establishing the importance of taking account of the multi-dimensional character of poverty, and of not allowing it to be understood simply in terms of the flows that are most easily measured. They also helped to bring much more sharply into focus the importance of taking account of the perceptions and understandings of poor people themselves – recognition of which led in the next decade to that major programme of participatory research undertaken by the World Bank that gave rise in the end to celebrated publications on the 'Voices of the Poor'. These adumbrated parts of Chambers' original argument - reflected in the list of chapters that discuss the ten dimensions of powerlessness and illbeing that emerged from the study, and in the summing up 'call to action' in the volume *Crying Out For Change* (Narayan et al 2000): 'From material poverty to adequate assets and livelihoods', 'From isolation and poor infrastructure to access and services', 'From illness and incapability to health, information and education', 'From unequal and troubled gender relations to equity and harmony', 'From fear and lack of protection to peace and security', 'From exclusion and impotence to organization, inclusion and empowerment' and 'From corruption and abuse to honesty and fair treatment'. This list of headings recalls Chambers' earlier listing of different dimensions of deprivation or poverty (quoted above) rather closely, though it was derived from large numbers of interviews in 23 countries in which it was found that 'Despite very different political, social and economic contexts, there are striking similarities in poor people's experiences' (Narayan et al 2000: 1). One wonders whether these 'striking similarities' are not the artifacts of the categories that were employed, and of the universalising drive of the sort of normal science that underlay the 'Voices' research

² At about the same time that Chambers was writing analyses of the ways in which people respond to the stress of drought and famine showed, of course, that in these circumstances they may choose to forego consumption in order to maintain assets, striving to balance out immediate survival and longer run security: see, e.g, de Waal 1989

as much as it does econometric cross-country research. Certainly the results of the research, as they are presented, display the same features that characterise the literature on the measurement of poverty: causes and effects are muddled up, and the characteristics of individuals, or of households, that are associated/correlated with poverty are represented as causal. There is no analysis of the structures and relationships that give rise to the effects that are taken to define poverty.

This is also the principal limitation of Chambers' analysis of the conceptualisation of poverty, and of poverty research: in his account of it poverty remains a characteristic of individuals or of households (it is individuals or households that lack incomes, security and self-respect) and the effects of poverty are sometimes represented as causes. Still, his paper does show that 'poverty' is a construct, and that it is construed in different ways by different actors; he does begin to recognise that these constructions are profoundly political – in the passing remark about those ideas of poverty that maybe suit the interests of elites; and there is more than a suggestion there that conventional poverty analysis rests on a mistaken view of 'science' that elevates measurement and disregards contextualisation. The last is a point to which I return later in this paper. The other points that I have raised here have been taken up by several other writers in the more recent literature of poverty, perhaps notably by Maia Green and David Hulme (Green 2005; Green and Hulme 2005). The core of their arguments is that through the way in which it is conceptualised in mainstream poverty research, poverty becomes a tangible entity, or a state that is external to the people affected by it: individuals or households fall into it, or are trapped in it, or they escape from it. It is not seen as the consequence of social relations or of the categories through which people classify and act upon the social world. Notably the way in which poverty is conceptualised separates it from the social processes of the accumulation and distribution of wealth, which depoliticises it – and depoliticisation is of course a profoundly political intellectual act. The result is that there may be continuity between analyses of poverty and the prejudices of social elites about the poor: poverty is the outcome of the behaviours of those who are affected by it, and they may in fact be judged adversely because of it; and it has to be eliminated to

maintain social functionality³. Poverty is a kind of a social aberration rather than an aspect of the ways in which the modern state and a market society function.

What has been going on in mainstream poverty research in the time since Chambers wrote his seminal critique? How much has research been changed by the changing ideas that Chambers' paper exemplifies? In practice, though there has been more exploration of alternative approaches, as in some of the work of the CPRC, a great deal of intellectual effort has continued to be expended on poverty measurement, and on the related analysis of 'poverty dynamics' by comparison of the characteristics of individuals or households that have remained poor (in the sense of being below the conventionally defined poverty line) over time, or that have moved into or out of poverty. Poverty research in the World Bank, for instance '... aims to (i) improve current data and methods of poverty and inequality analysis, including greater standardisation of household survey data, and making data more accessible to users; (ii) use the improved data and existing data sources to better understand what makes 'pro-poor growth': why do some growth processes have more impact on poverty than others?'. These clearly stated objectives respond to what is perceived as governments' needs for 'resources and tools to fully grasp the extent and distribution of poverty in their countries; to analyse the forces behind poverty and growth, and to develop policies to ensure that the poor benefit disproportionately from growth' (quotations from the World Bank website). The focus remains on measurement, which still relies on the headcount measure, and is based on nationally representative income and/or expenditure surveys, involving – as pointed out earlier - chains of assumptions. There is also work going on dealing with risk and vulnerability, and aspects of social exclusion, but it appears to be somewhat peripheral to the main thrusts of World Bank poverty research.

Another vein in recent research that departs significantly from the mainstream work of World Bank researchers is that of the asset-based approach developed by Christopher Barrett, Michael Carter and their associates (reported on extensively in a special issue of the *Journal of Development Studies*, February 2006). This is based on

³ An example of how the prejudices of elites influence understandings of poverty – and in this case how poverty has been sought to be eliminated in a quite literal way is in Nandini Gooptu's work on 'The "Problem" of the Urban Poor' in northern India in the interwar period (Gooptu 1996).

the persuasive view that ‘...flow measures tend to be more subject to considerable measurement error than stock variables, even in well-run surveys, because they can only rarely be directly observed and verified. Moreover, productive assets are the durable inputs used to generate income ... Understanding the dynamics of assets is thus fundamental to understanding persistent poverty and longer-term socio-economic dynamics’ (Barrett, Carter and Little 2006: 169). The asset-based approach – which in fact recalls in some respects work done in the 1970s on differentiation and class formation in agrarian economies (a point discussed later) – has come up with impressive results, drawing on longitudinal data of both qualitative and quantitative kinds⁴, that show up the factors influencing movements into and out of poverty and highlight the existence of poverty traps. The possession of assets, whether of land, labour, livestock, human or social capital, greatly influences the capacities of individuals and households to withstand shocks, such as drought or – as is shown very often to be of particular significance – episodes of ill-health (reflecting the fact of the particular dependence of the very poor on their own bodies). Greater attention is paid in this work to structural determinants of poverty but it is a moot point as to whether it has much to say about ‘the dynamics of those underlying structural positions’ – as Barrett, Carter and Little claim in their introduction to the Special Issue (2006: 169) – as opposed to treating precipitating causes of movements into or out of persistent poverty.

I will come back to the asset-based approach later in this paper but turn now to examine two country cases in which a lot of effort has gone into poverty analysis on the lines suggested by the World Bank poverty research programme, Vietnam and India. I aim to point up difficulties that derive from the model of knowledge that underlies the poverty research industry.

⁴ The way in which this work has sought very deliberately to build links between quantitative and qualitative research in the way suggested in the *Conversations Between Economists and Anthropologists*, orchestrated by Pranab Bardhan (1989) is very welcome, though in some cases the use of qualitative cases studies is only to provide descriptive support to arguments drawn from quantitative analysis.

Questioning the mainstream model of poverty knowledge

Vietnam is very widely regarded as a success story of liberalisation and economic globalisation (see, for instance, *The Economist* August 5-11 2006). Economic reform and integration into the global economy are held to have brought about economic growth that has been remarkably pro-poor (Klump and Bonschab 2004). Indeed, according to data from the Vietnam Household Living Standards Surveys (VHLSS) poverty fell by one-third between 2002 and 2004, which scarcely seems credible. The Vietnam story depends on analysis of the Vietnam Living Standards Surveys of 1992-93 and 1997-98, and then of the two rounds the VHLSS. Though sample designs and sample sizes in these surveys have changed they are held to provide comparable results and they are widely used and widely respected. Yet Pincus and Sender (2006) have recently shown that there are serious problems with the design of these surveys that are likely to have resulted in under-estimation of the total numbers of very poor people in Vietnam. These authors do not deny that rapid growth in Vietnam has improved living standards for many, but they show that there are strong grounds for believing that there are many more very poor people in the country than are represented in the surveys on which poverty measurements are based. It is particularly those who migrate for wage work who are likely to have been missed and Pincus and Sender argue that ‘... the failure to capture migrants in surveys that aim to measure living standards in a rapidly urbanising country in which the structure of the labour force is experiencing profound change leads to questions concerning the *intent*, representativeness and accuracy of the surveys’ (2006: 7, emphasis added). Migrants are excluded because the sampling frame consists only of the official lists of registered households in communes and urban wards of Vietnam, who must have lived in the enumeration area for at least six months. The problem is compounded by the fact that these lists of registered households are anyway often outdated. The resulting exclusion of mobile people reflects the precarious legal position of migrants in Vietnam where the *ho khau* system of registration of households, designed to control migration to cities, makes it difficult for people to migrate legally. The two authors show by means of comparison of VHLSS data with the evidence of surveys

conducted by the Statistics Office of Ho Chi Minh City that the former excludes quite large numbers of young migrants; and that VHLSS population estimates and census figures don't match up, especially for those aged 20-29. Yet in an experimental survey conducted in rural areas of Hanoi and four neighbouring provinces Pincus and Sender found that they were able easily to identify relatively large numbers of 'illegal' migrants, in spite of the blocking tactics in some cases of local administrators, and they show that such migrants – not all of whom, by any means, are poor - have very diverse characteristics. The survey still makes it clear that 'large numbers of desperately poor people are living in geographical areas that conventional analysis has classified as "non-poor"', and that 'It seems likely that VHLSS has mis-estimated poverty by excluding a large number of very poor and vulnerable households ...' (2006: 40). Pincus and Sender further make the point that it is difficult to square claims from the living standards surveys regarding the rapid decrease in the incidence of income poverty with anthropometric data or with data on child malnutrition.

Analysis of the 'determinants' of poverty in Vietnam, based on the living standards surveys – it is rather analysis of the characteristics of those who are shown as still being poor – highlights geographical factors (Klump and Bonschab 2004, for example, refer to emerging regional imbalances in Vietnam), and those of household size, ethnicity and educational attainment (the 'usual suspects'); and this analysis has led through to policy recommendations in the *Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy* that is Vietnam's PRSP. Poverty reduction is expected to be driven in future by private sector development, especially of household enterprises; and it will be assisted by better targeting to ensure that poor people get access to basic services, by the provision of infrastructure for poor and remote communes, and by giving ethnic minorities greater voice in the design of anti-poverty programmes. Pincus and Sender argue that what is striking about these 'standard policy recommendations' is what is omitted. The emphasis is on household enterprise, when 'Studies from a range of developing countries show that the most secure route out of poverty for the majority of the poor is access to regular waged employment [the argument is spelled out in Sender 2003; but the point is also made in a recent study of poverty reduction in Bangladesh, in which it is argued that it has been waged

employment in the rural non-farm sector rather than self-employment that has been associated with poverty reduction: Sen et al 2004]. Although the standard recommendations cite job creation as a major objective, no attempt is made to account for labour market dynamics, the determinants of the growth of unskilled wage employment and real wages' (2006: 22).

It is very odd indeed, as Pincus and Sender say, that in a country like Vietnam where so much emphasis is placed on urbanisation and the development of labour intensive industries, poverty rates should be calculated based on data 'that systematically exclude migrants to cities and industrial areas' (2006: 41). It is not that the significance of migration has not previously been recognised (it is discussed for instance by Klump and Bonschab 2004), and the two authors argue that 'It is inexcusable that the poverty analyses for Vietnam should make no reference to the fact that the VHLSS sample is limited to long-term, legally registered households' (2006: 41). It is for this reason that they see deliberate *intent* on the part of poverty analysts in the World Bank and the government to paint a particular picture of poverty reduction in the country. This may be going too far, but it is easy to understand how one narrative of change, attractive to those persuaded by theoretical arguments in favour of particular policies, comes to drive the construction and interpretation of data. The way in which Vietnam is constructed as a 'successful globaliser' may not be quite so crass as the way in which Lesotho was constructed by development professionals as an 'underdeveloped economy' in the 1970s (as shown by Ferguson 1990), but the process is the same. Narratives, some of them having almost the status of myth, drive the collection and interpretation of data – as Roe and others have analysed (Roe 1991) – and the whole process is more or less transparently political.

Just how politically charged the apparently scientific task of counting the poor can become is shown up very starkly in what Deaton and Kozel (2004) refer to as 'the Great Indian Poverty Debate'. This is the debate over the impact of India's liberalising economic reforms, initiated in 1991, on the incidence of poverty. Different perceptions have become highly politicised in circumstances in which the gap in terms of the measure of average consumption derived from the National Accounts on the one hand, and from the results, on the other, of the regular household

income and expenditure surveys run by the National Sample Survey Organisation has grown wider, and the reporting periods used in the sample surveys for different categories of consumption have been changed. One set of changes in reporting periods in an experiment conducted by the NSSO increased estimates of per capita incomes by 15-18 per cent, thus halving the numbers of the poor. Those who are supportive of the economic reforms prefer one interpretation of inconsistent data sets, while the critics of reform prefer another. Deaton and others have attempted a considered reconciliation of the data, but the debate as a whole shows just how sensitive measures of poverty are to statistical problems and the different ways in which these problems are addressed. It also exemplifies Chambers' point that 'poverty becomes what has been measured'. Even if there were not the particular technical problems that have arisen because of changes in the design of the sample surveys in the 1990s, so that successive rounds of the NSS are not easily compared with each other, it would still be the case that the measurement of trends in the incidence of poverty is highly sensitive to judgements made in a whole string of assumptions.

What puzzles many observers of Indian development is what the economic processes are that can have brought about the kind of reduction in income poverty that is claimed by some. How can it be that poverty has declined as much as some maintain when, as is widely recognised, India has been experiencing high rates of growth but without the creation of many regular jobs – 'jobless growth', as it is described - and when the agricultural economy over much of the country is reasonably understood as being in a state of crisis? The problem is brought out in studies of employment and poverty trends in the city of Ahmedabad, once known as 'the Manchester of India'. In the last twenty years of the last century as many as 100 000 'good jobs' were lost in the cotton textile industry, and there has been extensive casualisation of employment – as has happened very widely. Ethnographic research shows that in these circumstances households have very often become more dependent upon women's work for their survival – in what has been described as the 'global feminisation' of labour (see, for example, Castells 1997). This has posed a serious threat to the dignity and the self-esteem of men, who have reacted in ways that may have harmful social and political consequences (an important theme that I cannot pursue here). There are scholars, however, who argue that the evidence from Ahmedabad shows that the

policy of flexibilising labour markets – which leads to casualisation of labour - is working, because there has been (in the 1990s) substantial growth in employment, a rise in the level of real wages and greater participation of both men and women in the labour process. Such positive conclusions from the analysis of National Sample Survey data (by the Deshpandes, by Dutta and Batley and by Kundu) conflict with those from the ethnographic research of Jan Breman (2001). This shows that the increased vulnerability of households has led to the greater involvement of dependent members of families, both women and children, in work, and that while workers may have ‘regular’ jobs in the dynamic sectors of the urban economy such as powerloom units, diamond ateliers and garment workshops, they can be dismissed at any time and do not enjoy the social provisions that have historically accompanied ‘formal sector’ employment. Breman further points out, on the basis of survey evidence, that underemployment and low pay are extensive and that the percentage of the population living in slum areas almost doubled between 1981 and 1996-97. These differing views of what is going on in Ahmedabad reflect precisely the point made by Kanbur in his comparable observations of the radical differences that exist in perceptions of poverty trends in Ghana (2002): both the ‘optimists’ and the ‘pessimists’ can in a sense be ‘right’ because they are looking at different things. The optimists may be right. Employment in Ahmedabad may have increased. But what about the quality of that employment, asks Breman? If more people’s livelihoods are more vulnerable, doesn’t this connote a deterioration in levels of well-being, even if real wages have risen? Doesn’t it mean that they are more likely to enter into relations of dependence on particular patrons, with negative implications for their self-respect and psychological well-being?

Going against ‘normal science’ and making social science matter

Reflection upon these examples of the kinds of difficulties that arise in poverty measurement – difficulties that are ontological as well as practical problems of methodology - points to the underlying problem with the whole model of knowledge on which conventional poverty analysis rests. It is the model of what we may call ‘normal science’ which aims at developing explanatory and predictive theory of

universal application, based on generalisation from empirical observation. This is a model that has worked well in the natural sciences which have been characterised by the cumulation of knowledge as well as by shifting paradigms. It is quite clear, I believe, that the social sciences have not done nearly so well as the natural sciences in developing explanatory and predictive theory of universal application (there are few law-like generalisations that can be made about human behaviour). Neither have they done very well in cumulating knowledge, while they are characterised – as Bent Flyvberg has put it – not so much by paradigm shifts as by style changes: ‘... it is not a case of evolution [in the social sciences] but more of fashion’ (Flyvberg 2001: 30). And there are powerful reasons for this difference which have to do essentially with the nature of the phenomena with which social scientists deal – the actions/behaviour of self-reflecting human beings - while the background conditions of the natural sciences are physical facts. In social science the object of analysis is a subject, whereas the objects of research in the natural sciences don’t talk back. Of course studies of science have shown that there is no radical distinction between the natural and the social sciences⁵, and hermeneutics is now recognised as applying to natural science too – but it can still be demonstrated that the natural sciences are relatively cumulative and predictive, and the social sciences not⁶. This has been a source of considerable anxiety for many social scientists – reflected in my own experience, in regard to poverty research, in the ‘Conversations between anthropologists and economists’ set up by Pranab Bardhan (Bardhan 1989). In these conversations some argued tenaciously that it must be possible to establish ‘the facts’ about poverty and to develop predictive theory of universal application, whereas others (not all of them anthropologists) argued that knowledge about poverty must always be context-dependent. Now there is even greater fear amongst many social scientists of a descent to relativism, which the currents of post-modernism over the last two decades have served to intensify.

⁵ This is brought out eloquently in Stephen Jay Gould’s history of geology in *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle* (1987), which shows how archetypal differences between scholars in terms of their conceptions of time and history led to very different theories about the ‘facts’ of geology.

⁶ There are fascinating studies of the sociology of science in the development literature like the book by Michael Thompson and others called *Uncertainty on a Himalayan Scale* (1986) which shows just how uncertain the physical facts about land degradation are. But still, as Thompson says at one point, water does almost invariably flow downhill. There are established physical facts.

Flyvberg's argument in *Making Social Science Matter: why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again* (2001) is that social scientists set themselves an impossible task in seeking to emulate the natural sciences. The crux of the difficulty for the social sciences is that human beings are 'skilful' – referring essentially to the ability of human beings to make judgements, and change their ways of thinking and of behaving. Human skills go well beyond following rules; they are context-dependent. The kind of theory that is developed in 'normal science', on the other hand, depends on freedom from context and the existence of rules (see Flyvberg's summary of his arguments, 2001: 47). The social sciences, however, have distinctive strengths in areas where the natural sciences are weak – precisely in dealing with reflexive analysis and discussion of values and interests. Such analysis is necessarily context-dependent; but recognising the centrality of context does not mean descending into relativism.

Flyvberg's aim is 'to help to restore social science to its classical position [based on Aristotelian concepts] as a practical intellectual activity aimed at clarifying the problems, risks and possibilities we face as humans and societies, and at contributing to social and political praxis' (2001: 4). On the face of it this is probably not a radically different ambition from that of those like the poverty measurers who seek to pursue social-science-as-normal-science. But the latter work with a model of knowledge which implies that scientific analysis can establish, for example, whether or not policy changes in India in the 1990s have led to a reduction in poverty, and that policy-making can be an exercise in rational problem-solving. Flyvberg's view, however, of what sort of knowledge is possible about people and societies is that it is interpretative, and dialogical. In social-science-as-normal-science the key task is taken to be the making of deductions and discovering of general principles across large samples, and detailed case study research is often regarded as unproductive (as it was by some of the economists at the 'Conversations' conference to which I referred earlier). If we recognise the context-dependence of human action, however, then the kind of concrete, context-dependent knowledge that may be derived from careful case study research is seen as being 'more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals' (Flyvberg 2001: 72). Interestingly, a very similar conclusion is reached by two economists in a recent review of theory and of empirical research

on economic growth. Kenny and Williams follow Perroux in arguing that ‘economics has yet to get to grips with the idea that individual economic agents are active, thinking persons, not simply through-puts in the working out of timeless and spaceless economic laws and relations’ (2001: 13); they argue that ‘the social world is more causally complex than the natural world’ and that ‘events rarely, if ever, have a single cause, but are rather the result of a conjuncture of several factors or conditions’ [so particular historical analysis is essential] (2001: 13); and they conclude that ‘more energy should be directed toward understanding the complex and varied inner workings of actual economies rather than trying to assimilate them into abstract universal models’ (2001: 16)

The approach to research that Flyvberg advocates, therefore, is to address real-world problems of particular societies, probably using a case-study methodology, in an interactive and engaged way (not to be equated, however, with ‘action research’) and to be ready to use a good deal of bricolage in drawing on the work of other professional social scientists – doing ‘what works’ to address the key underlying questions: (i) where are we going?; (ii) who gains, and who loses, by what mechanisms of power?; (iii) is this desirable?; (iv) what should be done? Let me come back to this approach later in this paper when I outline a different approach to poverty research from the currently prevalent fashion.

Poverty research and the ‘anti-politics machine’

There are very strong similarities between the history of poverty research and (less clearly so, perhaps) policy practice in the context of international development, and that of ‘poverty knowledge’ in the United States, as this has been analysed by Alice O’Connor (2001) – and I find it quite striking that O’Connor’s suggestions about ‘what is to be done’ in poverty research are closely comparable with Flyvberg’s general propositions for ‘making social science matter’. O’Connor’s argument starts with the observations that ‘The idea that scientific knowledge holds the key to solving social problems has long been an article of faith in American liberalism [and that]

Nowhere is this more apparent than when it comes to solving the “poverty problem” (2001: 3). As I have suggested earlier, the international poverty research industry, too, rests on the same article of faith - that scientific knowledge holds the key to solving the poverty problem. O’Connor shows that although early work on poverty in the United States linked it with unemployment, low wages, labour exploitation and political disenfranchisement – ‘and more generally (with) the social disruptions associated with large-scale urbanization and industrial capitalism’ (2001: 18) [note the similarity with Pincus and Sender’s arguments about contemporary Vietnam] – it was quite soon turned away from these matters of political economy. Latterly this has been associated with the influence of research foundations and government agencies, which have provided large amounts of funding for poverty research, and have been able to set the agenda. They have required that research should be ‘policy relevant’, ‘scientific’ and free from ideology – but in all the work that they have financed poverty has never been defined as anything other than an *individual* condition. Poverty knowledge rests on an ethos of scientific neutrality, but it is very clearly distinguished by what it is not: ‘(C)ontemporary poverty knowledge does not define itself as an enquiry into the political economy and culture of late Twentieth Century capitalism; it is knowledge about the characteristics and behaviour, and, especially in recent years, about the welfare status of the poor. Nor does it much countenance knowledge honed in direct action or everyday experience ... (which) kind of knowledge does not translate into measurable variables that are the common currency of “objective”, “scientific” and hence authoritative poverty research’ (2001: 4). The technically very sophisticated survey research on poverty that has been carried on has by now built up a very accurate statistical portrait of poverty in America, but the results of the interactions between politicians and policy makers, research foundations and researchers have been to ensure that poverty is seen as the failure of individuals or of the welfare system ‘... rather than of an economy in which middle- and working-class as well as officially poor Americans faced diminishing opportunities’ (2001: 241) [cf. contemporary India?].

Very similar features characterise poverty knowledge in the international context as well. Here too early studies of poverty - such as Dadabhai Naoroji’s *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901) which sought explanation for endemic poverty in India in

the political economy of colonialism - were concerned with the structural conditions that caused the effects of poverty, but the poverty research industry that became established in the 1970s has turned to analysis primarily of the characteristics of the poor and of the correlates of poverty. Studies of the causes of poverty, or latterly of 'poverty dynamics' establish correlations between the characteristics of individuals and households and poverty – generally understood in terms of flows of consumption. Such studies have tended to highlight much the same broad set of factors: features of households (high dependency ratios; female headship; ill-health of members); assets (holding few productive assets); education (illiteracy); nature of occupations (lack of regular waged employment amongst household members whether resident or working elsewhere); sometimes factors having to do with ethnicity and/or geography (e.g being a 'tribal'/indigenous person in a remote area) – and the significance of crises or of other idiosyncratic factors which in turn highlights the general problem of the lack of insurance. What international poverty research has *not* done very much has been to explain how and why these factors have the effects they do, in the context of an analysis of the political economy of the locality and of the state. Poverty research does not usually address the processes of accumulation in contemporary capitalism and evades the problems of the distribution of economic resources and of political power, apparently offering technical solutions to the problem in a way that is not threatening to the elites who benefit from existing structures and relationships. The current mantra about the role of 'private business' in growth and – it is hoped – in 'pro-poor growth' and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals is only one, particularly egregious instance of how language matters. International poverty research, too, aims to be 'objective' and 'scientific' and – Chambers' paper and the later 'Voices of the Poor' work notwithstanding – has not much countenanced knowledge deriving from direct action or everyday experience. Just as it is striking that in the United States the problems of the poor have not been connected with the economics of rising inequality but rather have been 'centred squarely on issues framed as "family values"' (O'Connor 2001: 10), so it is striking that in Vietnam, for instance, contemporary poverty knowledge should ignore the everyday experience which teaches that the industrialising, urbanising economy draws in large numbers of migrant workers who are likely to be missed out in a sampling frame drawn from lists of only registered households. As O'Connor says in the second of the epigraphs of

this paper, poverty knowledge in the United States has opened itself to conservative interpretation. Poverty knowledge in the international context, too, opens itself to conservative interpretation, at least in the sense that by reducing the problem of poverty to the characteristics of individuals, abstracted from class and other power relationships – note the language of ‘private business’ rather than of ‘capitalism’ - it has the effect of depoliticising it. The poverty research industry constitutes a part of what James Ferguson (1990) memorably described as ‘the anti-politics machine’.

Alice O’Connor concludes her history of poverty knowledge in the United States by arguing that this knowledge needs to be reconstructed and she suggests five important steps towards this reconstruction:

1. Shifting from explanation of individual deprivation to explanation of inequalities in the distribution of power, wealth and opportunity;
2. Recognising that studying poverty is not to be equated with ‘studying the poor’;
3. Getting away from the research industry model;
4. Challenging the privilege attached to hypothesis-testing models of enquiry;
5. Recognising that the ideas of value-free social science and of finding scientific ‘cures’ for social problems are chimaeras.

The last three of these points correspond very closely with Flyvberg’s general critique of the attempt to establish social-science-as-normal-science, and all are entirely apposite in the case of international poverty research. Very significant amounts of money and of intellectual resources continue to be poured into surveys like the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey, for the production of poverty headcounts based on detailed expenditure surveys that are prone to enormous errors – think, for instance of the impact on poverty estimates for India of changing reporting periods. To what end? They can never provide definitive answers to a question like that of ‘what has been the impact on well-being/ill-being of liberalising economic reforms?’, and they actually provide very little information on the causes of poverty. In so far as it is important to monitor trends in income and its distribution then there may be simpler and cheaper methods, such as collecting visually-confirmed data on the consumer durables owned by households, or by collecting information on the

education of all household members. There is a growing body of research showing that the ranking of households by these means is not significantly different from that obtained by collecting information on household income per capita (work by Filmer and Pritchett 1998; Sahn and Stifel 2000; Stifel and Christiaensen 2006, all cited by Pincus and Sender 2006). And how many more studies are needed to test hypotheses on poverty dynamics using data obtained from living standards surveys? Such studies have often tended to confirm what Pincus and Sender reasonably describe as more or less ‘standard’ policy recommendations deriving from demographic and geographic explanations that downplay the role of class formation and factors such as gender discrimination in the labour market.

Re-focusing poverty research

Rather than devoting international poverty research to the refinement of measurement (in the way that happened years before in poverty research in the United States) and to hypothesis testing aimed at establishing predictive theory, it will be more productive to redirect research so as give greater attention to the analysis of the social processes, structures and relationships that give rise to poverty – recognising that the creation and re-creation of poverty is inherent within the dynamics of capitalism (Harriss-White 2006). Such research will often be based on strategically selected case studies, in which researchers build up familiarity with social practice in particular contexts (as Hulme and Shepherd suggest is likely to be necessary in analysing chronic/persistent poverty: 2003) – and desirably will help people themselves to question the relations of knowledge and power that give rise to poverty (though it is clearly essential in this case that this is done responsibly so that poor people are not left to be victims of reprisals at the hands of the power-holders).

Within current poverty research some of the most interesting work is that around the assets-based approach. It is quite striking, however, that this recalls in significant respects a much earlier vein of research on differentiation and class formation in rural societies. Assets researchers construct indices of assets (such as ‘Tropical Livestock Units’ in the work of Little and others on Ethiopia [2006], or Livestock and Asset

Points in Whitehead's work on Ghana [2006]) and then identify thresholds – such as the 'asset poverty line' used by Adato, Carter and May, 'defined as the level of assets needed to generate an expected living standard equal to the poverty line' (Adato et al 2006: 230). This is similar to the procedure adopted by scholars who sought to study peasant differentiation (see for example Harriss 1982, for an analysis that involved the construction of an index of 'Livelihood Units', in explaining patterns of differentiation amongst rural people in northern Tamil Nadu in the 1970s). Recent work, encouraged by development agencies, on 'livelihood diversification' is also anticipated in the differentiation literature – which was concerned with the portfolios of livelihood activities of peasants in different presumptive classes, and drew attention to the importance of rural non-farm activity at an early stage (see, e.g Byres 1981; Harriss 1985; Bhaduri et al 1986). Indeed, the analysis of processes of differentiation in rural societies in some respects went beyond the livelihoods approach that has found such favour with development agencies. The latter '...is less (well) able to grasp the external influences on (the) disparate components ('of income that rural people have to pull together in order to make a living of sorts') (and) the extent to which rural dwellers are embedded in regional and transnational economies' (Green and Hulme 2005: 868). Precisely these 'external influences' are brought into the analysis of the reproduction of households in the context of the development of capitalism – for example by Deere and de Janvry (1979).

The point of drawing attention to the ways in which some aspects of contemporary poverty analysis are anticipated in this older literature is not just because the writer is an old curmudgeon, but because the older literature has certain strengths that are less apparent in contemporary assets-based approaches. These do help to identify structural determinants of poverty and they are 'dynamic' in so far as they show how households move in and out of poverty. But their dynamic analysis remains quite descriptive, and though they are sometimes concerned with social relationships (as in the work on social capital and social exclusion by Adato, Carter and May, 2006), they do not address questions of political economy, nor do very much to link up local patterns with wider processes of capitalist accumulation (see also Green and Hulme 2005: [9 of web copy]). This is attempted in the older literature on the political economy of agrarian change. For instance, the work on African rural economies of

Henry Bernstein and others shows how places for petty commodity production are continually destroyed and re-created with the development of capitalism, and his analysis of the ‘simple reproduction squeeze’ to which such producers may be subject places them into relation with other classes: it is a relational analysis, showing how poverty is reproduced under capitalism to the benefit of owners mainly of money capital (see, e.g Bernstein 1977; 1990). The analysis has the qualities that Green and Hulme look for in the concept of chronic poverty, identifying ‘those in society who have minimal or no prospects for economic and social mobility and are structurally constrained by the social relations which produce poverty effects’ (2005: [9 of web copy]) Work of this kind has some of the features, at least, of the sort of social science advocated by Flyvberg. It does address his key questions: (i) where are we going?; (ii) who gains, and who loses, by what mechanisms of power?; (iii) is this desirable?; (iv) what should be done?

To give a further, more detailed example: analysis of what was labelled ‘semi-feudalism’ in West Bengal has been concerned with the relationships that give rise to poverty rather than with measurement (though it also came up with convenient measures of assets). This is a context in which the large majority of rural people who own very small holdings of land, or whose livelihoods are based upon agricultural and other forms of casual labour, depend upon their relationships with the small class of larger landholders who are themselves subordinate to the overarching power of the numerically tiny but economically overwhelmingly preponderant group of rice-millers. Household reproduction in this context is described in village studies from the 1950s (AERC 1958), and was analysed and modelled by Amit Bhaduri some years later (Bhaduri 1973). He shows how relationships of dependence (and the ‘compulsive involvement’ in markets, or ‘forced commerce’ that it entails⁷) ensure that the class of larger landholders comes to control most of the product of the region through rents from share-cropping and interest on loans for subsistence and for production, so that they are then able to earn speculative profits from trading in rice. He then sought to show, more controversially, how in these circumstances the larger landholders would have no incentive to invest in productivity raising technology,

⁷ I refer here to the comparable arguments of Krishna Bharadwaj (1985) on ‘compulsive involvement’ in markets, and of Amit Bhaduri (1986a) on ‘forced commerce’. Both are concerned with the implications of the ways in which the commercialisation of rural economies takes place, in circumstances in which there are big disparities in entitlements.

because this could relax the dependence upon them of the small producers – but in the present context what is significant about this work is the way in which it shows how processes of accumulation bring about the reproduction of poverty. The wealth of some is causally linked to the crushing poverty of others⁸. Some years later I showed how, in spite of changes in the rural economy that followed from the modest land reforms that had been brought about by the then recently elected Left Front government of West Bengal, the reproduction of households depended upon the same mechanisms (Harriss 1982a[2006]). This analysis also showed how a variety of non-crop agriculture based activities, and some non-farm activities, were involved in the survival of ‘poor peasant’ and agricultural labour households (‘livelihoods analysis’, according to the more recent terminology). Work by Barbara Harriss(-White) on the paddy and rice trade (1983), conducted at the same time in the early 1980s showed how legislation enacted to ensure rice supplies to Calcutta underpinned the overarching power of the rice millers, on whose capitals the entire rural economy ultimately rested. Connections were made, therefore, with wider processes of capitalist accumulation, and the whole body of literature and the analysis it develops shows how poverty is reproduced through these processes. More recent work has shown how agrarian reform in West Bengal, the institution of panchayats and (in some instances) political mobilisation of agricultural labour, have been instrumental in relaxing the conditions of ‘semi-feudalism’ and in bringing about higher levels of agricultural productivity and the reduction of income poverty – with the development of rural capitalism (see Harriss 2006 for a short review of literature). The widely attested relative success of the state of West Bengal in reducing poverty (see Besley, Burgess and Esteve-Volart 2004) has come about significantly as a result of structural reforms and innovations rather than through programmes focussed on ‘the poor’.

Considerations of space preclude the development of further examples of research that shows how relationships that arise in the context of the development of capitalism influence the reproduction of poverty. The commentary above on the work of Pincus and Sender on Vietnam refers to their emphasis on labour markets and how they work. Another example of research that traces the links between the operations of

⁸ As Maureen Mackintosh has put it in a critical commentary on the nature of markets ‘profits of a few thrive in conditions of uncertainty, inequality and the vulnerability of those who sell their labour power, and of most consumers’ (Mackintosh 1990: 50).

labour markets and poverty is in work by Gillian Hart in Indonesia (Hart 1986), and later by Jonathan Pincus (1996). In all of this it is extremely important to bring gender relations into the analysis – as, for instance, Ann Whitehead shows in relation to West African societies (e.g 1981), and Bina Agarwal in regard to South Asia (e.g. 1994).

Conclusion

I have argued here that mainstream research on poverty in international development suffers from the same flaws as those that Alice O'Connor brings out in her analysis of 'poverty knowledge' with regard to the United States – and for similar reasons. O'Connor refers to the role of research funding agencies in bringing about a preoccupation with measurement that has abstracted poverty from its context in the way in which a particular capitalist economy is functioning, and to the mistaken appeal to 'scientific neutrality' as the means of justifying this. She then shows how this kind of poverty knowledge has suited conservative interests. The same conclusions can reasonably be drawn in regard to international development – and they substantially explain the persisting dominance of 'measurement approaches' in spite of the strength of critiques, like that of Robert Chambers, that were developed more than twenty years ago. Poverty knowledge exemplifies the kind of social science that is critiqued powerfully by Bent Flyvberg, and there is reason for taking seriously his arguments about building 'social science that matters' – arguments that converge with O'Connor's on the reconstruction of knowledge about poverty. These are worth recalling here: shifting from explanation of individual deprivation to explanation of inequalities in the distribution of power, wealth and opportunity; recognising that studying poverty is not to be equated with 'studying the poor'; getting away from the research industry model; challenging the privilege attached to hypothesis-testing models of enquiry; recognising that the ideas of value-free social science and of finding scientific 'cures' for social problems are chimaeras. Though the 'assets-approach' in the recent literature has brought some advances it too fails to examine the social and political-economic relationships that bring about the effect of poverty. I have argued that the earlier and now largely disregarded literature on the development of capitalism in rural economies (discouraged, of course, by what O'Connor refers to

as the ‘research industry’) does develop the analysis of these relationships - that is so strikingly lacking in mainstream research on poverty in international development. It is a literature, it is true, that is concerned very much with ‘process’ rather than with ‘output’ (following one of the distinctions between anthropological and economics-based approaches recently made by Bardhan and Ray 2006) – but this seems more likely to be conducive to practical action (including ‘policy’) to address the causes of poverty.

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