WHY IS BOLIVIA DIFFERENT FROM INDIA? HOW CAN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES GET TO GRIPS WITH SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INEQUALITY?

Discussion paper to be presented at the conference 'Staying Poor: Chronic Poverty and Development Policy' to be held at the University of Manchester, 7-9 April 2003

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Introduction

Until going to live in Bolivia in early 2000 I had been visiting India several times a year since 1987 and immediately before that had lived in Delhi for three years. In autumn 2002, I travelled to India as the first "developing country" to be visited since returning to the United Kingdom from my two and a half year stay in Latin America. For me India, viewed from a Bolivian perspective provoked new questions about the nature of inequality. I was observing the practice of power as expressed in encounters on the street, in restaurants, in public transport and in offices. These seemed very different and somehow more exaggerated than in Bolivia. Authority appeared more overweening and deference more abject in northern India than in highland Bolivia. Why should this be so, bearing in mind Bolivia's history of five hundred years of often savage repression of its indigenous population and that it has the sixth highest level of income inequality in the world (UNDP 2001) ?

I became interested in the *performance* of inequality as expressed in social behaviour in public places. It triggered a series of questions about the reproduction and possibilities for the transformation of patterns of social relations that affect the life chances and well being of individuals, families and communities. I therefore welcomed the chance to undertake a literature review for the Department for International Development [DFID] on the subject of social and political inequality.

DFID has recently established three major policy themes for its efforts to support the elimination of global poverty. One of these is pro-poor political and social change. Greater interest in this issue has been stimulated by the commitment to a rights based approach to development and by recent work by a senior staff member on sabbatical (Unsworth 2002). DFID staff are being encouraged to take a greater interest in the

political, institutional and social processes that can serve as blockers or drivers of change for poverty reduction. The theme of pro-poor political and social change seems particularly relevant in relation to structural or durable poverty, in other words, non-idiosyncratic chronic poverty transmitted inter-generationally within families, communities and nations.

The current review builds on an earlier DFID piece of work when two years ago the Economic Policy and Research Department commissioned a literature review on inequality, with an associated series of seminars from scholars in the development studies community. The Social Development Department noted that this review had concentrated on "economic" inequality and thought it might be helpful if this were balanced by a complementary review looking at "social" and "political" inequality. I am half way through the review and this present paper reports reflections from work in progress so as to stimulate discussion and invite feedback [1]

I have begun to explore the literature on this subject within and beyond the locus of development studies[2]. The aim is to provide DFID staff, and those interested in other development agencies, with intellectual nourishment that could help them sharpen their analysis and reflect on their practice. In this progress report, I look briefly at the various ways in which development studies and practice have understood inequality, propose some issues that need greater exploration and conclude by considering the challenges facing international development agencies in addressing issues of inequality within and between nations and through the lens of international human rights standards.

Does inequality matter for poverty reduction?

A major problem in the debate as to the significance of inequality is that people are often talking past each other, giving different, implicit meanings to the word. For example, *inequality* is used in development practice with reference to the following

[1] I am indebted to Eric Hanley for his constructive and thoughtful comments. While the literature review in progress is funded by DFID, this present paper is entirely the author's own responsibility and does not in any way reflect official policy nor the views of any staff member. I am most grateful for the assistance of Jarrod Lovett in so heroically responding to the daunting challenge of investigating the current state of literature on this topic.

[2] That is the studies that serve as a resource of knowledge and information for development policy and practice.

issues: gender inequalities; growth and equity; inequality in opportunities, capability deprivation, chronic poverty, structural blockages to poverty reduction, inequality in middle income countries.

It is quite rare to be explicit about one's definition when involved in analysis, argument and policy. Thus 'inequality' is often made to carry a considerable theoretical load that remains unexamined. For example in a statement such as *globalisation is causing greater inequality* the term is subject to multiple interpretations and therefore different sets of observations which lead to alternative policy choices.

The World Bank web-site on the subject (World Bank 2003) asks "What exactly is inequality?" It notes that inequality means different things to different people: whether inequality should encapsulate ethical concepts such as the desirability of a particular system of rewards or simply mean differences in income is the subject of much debate. Despite, asking the question, it is already assumed that the conceptual debate is no wider than arguments between different schools of economics. Non economic social scientists may well be giving the term other meanings. Without explicit conceptual clarity they could find it difficult to make their case with colleagues from other disciplines. They are further constrained in discussing the significance of inequality by the bias in development studies literature towards a *distributional* understanding of the term, for example by the World Bank, as " the dispersion of a distribution, whether that be income, consumption or some other welfare indicator or attribute of a population" (World Bank ibid).

Non-economic social scientists are more likely to conceptualise the term as *relational* and *meaningful*. Wood suggests that people are poor because of others (2003). Certainly, poverty is a state that is defined, by those observing or experiencing it, in relation to others who are not in that same state. There was no poverty in the Garden of Eden. Social theories are concerned with inequality that is experienced, explained, symbolised and reproduced as a characteristic and outcome of a social (including political) relationship.

These different understandings of inequality often blend together in development debates as well as in politics. Disparity as measured on a graph becomes *meaningful* when people perceive the disparity as unfair. It becomes *relational* when protesters use the evidence to justify and express their dissatisfaction with the existing structure of relations of domination and subordination. It is not surprising that international development agencies find it difficult to get to conceptual grips with the complexity and ambiguity of the subject of inequality. Inequality has to be 'unpacked' to gain explanatory power (Hulme and Shepherd 2003).

Whether it matters and what do about it appears particularly problematic for development agencies when they consider the situation of middle income countries. Arguably in such countries there is sufficient wealth for all individuals and their children to escape from absolute poverty. Inequality is seen as cause, explanation and outcome of the continued existence of poverty. Severe or growing inequality is also seen to contribute to political unrest and social instability which in turn affect people's livelihoods and their capacity to contribute to sustained economic growth[3]

A less common but equally important and possibly contentious question is to whom does inequality matter? If inequality is about relative positions, one's views are likely to be influenced by where one sees oneself placed. It is no accident that it was women who initially established concerns about gender inequality onto the development policy agenda. In contrast concerns about racial inequalities have until very recently received much less emphasis and the body of associated academic literature in development studies is much less developed.

Although it is still relatively early days, overall I find that while development theory and practice are increasingly using contested and complex concepts such as "culture" and "ethnicity" they are largely doing so in fairly reified and simplistic ways, without much reference to the rich hinterland of contemporary social theory that relates to these concepts. I hope to be proved wrong in my assertion that while there is an enormously rich, diverse, controversial and complex literature on inequality in the

[3] Goodhand (2003) notes that while there is no agreement in the literature as to whether chronic poverty is a cause of conflict there is a growing body of empirical research which points to the importance of extreme inequalities as a source of grievance which is used by leaders to mobilize followers and to legitimate violent actions.

social sciences, development theory (and associated practice), development studies have on the whole only drawn seriously and rigorously on some few elements from contemporary social science theory. These are principally from (1) the discipline of economics, including associated schools of ethics (2) social anthropology and cultural studies in relation to gender (3) political science concerning the study of elites. In the following section I consider the principal ways in which the development arena has approached inequality.

Understandings of inequality in development policy and practice

The ancestors of modern social thought, Marx and Weber still loom large in the conceptualisation of inequality. As such they present a daunting challenge to anyone attempting a literature review. For Marx, inequality was a about class formation and the ownership and control of the means of production. For Weber, prestige or status was at least as enduring a basis of group formation as a common situation in the market (class). Marx had interpreted all social and political associations as part of a superstructure determined by the inequalities within the organisation of production. Weber denied that political action must follow from class formation (Bendix 1974) but elaborated the concept of hierarchal power relations in the constitution of the social order.

Playing around with Marx and Weber can still be politically dangerous for modern social researchers. In China a research team challenged the Communist Party orthodoxy on class formation by publishing a study on social change in the previous twenty years (Li Peilin 2002). They described a working class that enjoyed little power and was of low economic and social status compared with Weberian bureaucrats and the new economic elite. Workers on strike in China's north west "rust belt" waved copies of the book to claim social justice from management and the book was banned. [4]

Marxist theories of political economy have influenced critical 'world system' perspectives on development and globalisation but have made few official inroads into the thinking of official international development agencies. 'Inequality' as

[4] Personal communication from Li Peilin and Zhang Wanli.

studied by economists for development agencies, has tended to mean disparity between individuals, as measured by the observer rather than as experienced by the actor. Thus with some justification Stewart was able to state that 'inequality' in the former sense has been "a neglected dimension" of development[5] (Stewart 2002) One reason for this "neglect" may well have been the tendency to favour the apolitical and the technical approach to development policy and practice. Conceiving inequality as categories of econometric difference between individuals suits the conventional development planning approach to poverty reduction. It also handles the issue in terms of theory and abstraction rather than through an engagement with the experience of discrimination and subordination.

Classic liberal economics, based on utilitarianism, cannot easily handle the concept of inequality as more than categories. Utilitarianism is ultimately concerned with efficiency-oriented approach, concentrating in promoting the maximum sum total of utilities, no matter how unequally that sum total may be distributed (Sen 1995). Thus adapting the Rawlsian theory of social justice for development policy has been enormously influential in permitting economists to recognize that equity matters. Sen has made it permissible in the most orthodox circles to refer to 'freedom' and 'justice'.

Sen has provided the foundations for sharing a common ethical vision. Nevertheless, for anthropologists like me, the rational choice theory emphasis on atomised individuals and on their theoretical action still seems fairly detached from the conceptual requirements for interpreting what people do in relation to each other. Mainstream social thought has always had an interest in issues of identity, power and action in relation to group perceptions of difference in life chances and outcomes. The economists' interest in welfare *outcomes* based on preconceived theory contrasts with the interest of other kinds of social scientists in the dynamics of *processes*. Despite the still prevailing dominance of the *development gaze*, "an authoritative voice which constructs problems and their solution by reference to a priori criteria" (Grillo 1997), recent commitment to country ownership and participatory governance for poverty

[5] At least neglected by economists, if not by others!)

reduction strategies has led international development practice to become more interested in process than hitherto.

While economists were learning to care about poverty as being more than a market failure, others were bringing into development studies concepts from evolving social theory concerning discourse and power (Gaspar and Apthorpe 1996, Crush 1995). The recent work by the IDS Participation Group on power, knowledge and political spaces seeks to operate within and improve development agency practice rather than reject it outright. Here discourse analysis is used, not just to deconstruct, but to illuminate problems as a step towards solving them. Understanding the ways in which poverty knowledge affects poverty policies may enhance the participation in policy processes of those who until now have been excluded. (Brock et al 2001).

This recent work draws on actor-oriented and social constructionist forms of social analysis exemplified by Long (2001) However, so far this interest in process has not significantly focused on the processes that maintain and reproduce relational inequality, probably because the idea of "durable inequality" (Tilly 1998) tends towards structuralist approaches to social theory. In other words, an emphasis on agency assumes recognises that although some people have more power than others, that power is fluid and shifting, giving actors the opportunity to contest, challenge, negotiate and capture. The social theory of agency thus privileges peoples' capacity to change their lives rather than be constrained by the deep structures of power and oppression that hold them down. Even powerless people have agency for resistance where the relationship between dominant elites and subordinates is a struggle in which both sides are continually probing for weakness and exploiting small advantages (Scott 1990)

Practitioners draw on the different theoretical approaches summarised above when seeking to address inequality. Nevertheless, they are not necessarily clear as to the conceptual origins of their own policy approaches. That lack of clarity provides the opportunity for pragmatic 'mixing and matching' but also risks confusion and misunderstanding. Many irritable discussions, for example concerning the design of sector wide approaches or the fundamentals of a poverty reduction strategy, are based on implicit but different theoretical approaches.

Current approaches in development agencies understands inequality in the following ways:

- ?? Observed (measured) inequality in distribution and/or consumption. This is the principal approach of the World Bank, as indicated on its inequality web site. It looks at inequality in terms of disparities and quintiles. Based on utilitarian economics it explores whether inequality is inefficient, that is constraining growth. Income differential can be compared against other ways of classifying humanity, for example on the basis of sex, age, geographical location.
- ?? Understanding and measuring inequality as difference in opportunity. This approach is based on Weberian sociological concepts of status and rank in social systems. Ascription of social class positions are seen as fundamental factors in determining opportunities, for example in access to education or health care. 'Social inequality' is commonly used in this sense of the term.
- ?? Capability deprivation : the human development index to inequality. This is the principal approach used in the UNDP Human Development Reports, building on the work of Amartya Sen as described above. The Human Development Report on human rights (UNDP 2000) sought to bring Sen's approach to capabilities and freedoms into a human rights framework and proposes that a marriage of the two results in a recognition of the duties of other to enhance the human development of a third party. The emphasis is thus on state accountability.
- ?? Rights based approaches are based on the premise of the universality of human rights in which everyone has equal rights. The DFID policy paper (2000) notes that in practice it is often particular *groups* of people who cannot claim their rights in different areas of their lives because of discriminatory policies that result in inequitable outcomes. This leads to an interest in *political* inequality, citizenship and good governance. Much current work on rights has evolved from participatory approaches to development that draw on actor-oriented, bottom up perspectives (Nyamu 2002).
- ?? Social exclusion is the title of the parallel session where this paper is presented. The significance of the term stems from its French origins and the

> conceptual (Durkheimian) stress on social solidarity. Thus it is "the process through which individuals or groups are wholly partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live" (De Haan 1999). De Haan argues that the greatest value of the concept is the potential to explore the processes that cause exclusion and thereby deprivation (ibid).

This list is not exactly a time line although the last three are more recent newcomers. However the first two are still much in use and still evolving as well while continuing to dominate the thinking of conventional development practice. Not included in my list is the approach of political economists who argue that the persistence of inequality within and between nations is an inherent aspect of global capitalist development. They are not included because no international development agency has so far given this argument official recognition. One possible entry point for this approach for radical staff inside the agencies may be through voices from the South in coalition with radical NGOs from the North [6]. How to respond to these Southern interpretations of the persistence of durable inequality is one of the reasons why development agencies find it difficult to get to grips with the subject.

Gender and development studies have drawn on wider conceptual thinking. They are an interesting example of the potential for development practice to ground its approach to inequality in more explicit and robust theory, for example on the issue of gender and cultural change (Jolly 2002).

Other than in the field of gender, inequality in development theory has focused mainly on <u>what</u> kind of inequalities exist - political, income/consumption, levels of human capital (less on status and prestige) and the <u>degree</u> of inequality. Less has been published on the <u>processes</u> related to the reproduction of inequality. Constructivists who have been interested in process have been cautious about the concept of 'inequality' because of its structuralist connections while neo-Marxist thinking on

[6] As an example, CIIR is organising a conference in southern Africa with the Southern Africa Catholic Bishops Conference for which it has produced a background paper that argues that "for African elites who are unlikely to benefit formally from globalisation….the opportunities now lie less with formal aid or loans than with 'under the counter' deals with Northern companies and relationships with informal national and international actors. Elites the world over use structural adjustment programmes for their own ends, selling off state assets to friends, relations and allies in the name of privatisation." (Kibble 2003). I am grateful to Eric Hanley for drawing this example to my attention.

'dominant' and 'emergent' cultures has only crept in through small back doors (Williams 1994).

For this reason it is worth considering the state of current thought in the wider social science literature. My reader may well exclaim "For goodness sake, don't throw any more theory at me! Let us bury our conceptual bearded 19th Century ancestors and get down to the business of eradicating poverty." The trouble is that the ancestors stay with us whether we like it or not and a better way of managing them may be to take a look at what is happening outside development studies in conceptual approaches to inequality. After all, I am not sure that any of the approaches I have summarised so far have sufficiently helped me find an answer to why India appears different from Bolivia.

New directions?

Outside the sphere of development studies, there is a growing literature on inequality based on approaches that balance an appreciation of agency and structure and analyse the *relationships* that arise between those who seek, or seek to preserve, an unjust share of resources, power and privilege for themselves and those who resist or adapt. One way of thinking about inequality that appears to be particularly missing from development studies is a consideration of the emotions associated with the performance of inequality. Perhaps because of the 'technical' traditions in development practice the matter of how people feel about their situation is one that is rarely discussed.

Emotions are clearly equally significant in challenging the status quo. A massacre of striking miners in Oruro in Bolivia on the 23rd June 1967 was evoked by the protestors in an ex-miners' barrio in Cochabamba when demonstrating in 2000 against the new water law and foreign investment in a natural resource. The meaning they gave to the new situation and the action they took was influenced by the grief and anger they felt about an earlier event. . In this instance the emotionally charged memory of structural inequality and oppression in the past contributed to a more powerful response than had been anticipated by the regime at that time.

Emotions can also maintain the status quo. In a literature review of the treatment of inequality in the USA Schwalbe and colleagues propose four generic processes central to the reproduction of inequality: *othering*, *subordinate adaptation*, *boundary maintenance* and *emotion management*. With reference to this last one they argue that the emotions of subordinates are managed by those with an interest in preserving the status quo, through ritual ('the opium of the masses') and by conditioning the subordinate to internalise her subordination. In addition to these and drawing on gender studies they propose that subordinates, may be obliged not only to manage their own feelings but also the feelings of the dominants. "It's your fault that I feel bad". Women in the western world have had the responsibility of shielding men from their emotions because of the high value placed on objective and rational behaviour.

In post Descartian Europe women, the working classes, the conquered and the colonised were considered by the powerful to share common characteristics of childishness, irrationality and emotionality. During the Cochabamba water protests the leading Spanish language newspaper in Bolivia, [7] carried a long readers' correspondence on the essential difference between indigenous and European modes of thinking and the inability of the former to consider *rationally* how best to manage water resources. It appeared that from the perspective of the ruling class the uprising in Cochabamba and the associated protests in other parts of the country could be seen as yet another incident in the long perceived history of violent and savage behaviour of the Andean peasant contrasted with the self-control of the heirs to the Enlightenment.[8]

From my own observation in Bolivia I noted how when Aymara are "invited in" to spaces controlled by the elite (Brock et al, 2001) they do not show any feelings. Their lack of emotional expression is thus in striking contrast to how the dominant group perceives them and may well be in response to that. In a certain sense they are "absent" from the space, thus retaining their sense of dignity and identity in a situation not of their creating. In other words they do not perform subservience and therein lies perhaps part of the difference between Bolivia and India. It can be argued that the strong preserved sense of cultural identity and pre-Conquest history present in

[7] Significantly called *La Razón*
[8] see Olivia Harris' discussion in this respect in relation to Aymara ritualised violence (2000)

Aymara communities permits feelings of pride and autonomy despite discrimination and poverty [9].In contrast, it can be argued that the Dalits of India were until the early 20th Century less able to exert agency through overt acts of resistance because of their full adverse cultural and political incorporation into Hindu caste society. The Dalits were not only made to feel inferior. They themselves had internalised those feelings of inferiority and worthlessness[10].

The significance of emotion is just one example of a possible more nuanced approach to inequality in development theory and practice. We need to deepen our understanding of inequality in connection with the meaning that social actors give to the state of inequality and to the expression, reproduction and potential transformation of social relations that are unequal in terms of attributes such as power, status, wealth and opportunity. This is a fairly conventional sociological understanding of inequality but its *explicit* usage is still rare in development studies and development policy debates. Its ambiguous status has made it difficult to establish a coherent debate as to the significance of *relational* inequality for the perpetuation of income/consumption poverty. Undeniably inequality is a complex, elusive and often emotionally charged concept but the domination of development studies by rational choice theory, combined with the latent but growing presence of other ways of thinking has led to confusion.

The initial question in this paper as whether inequality matters can thus be more usefully debated when we are clear as to the different meanings given to the term. We can then form an opinion on the soundness of the evidence as it is depicted in propositions construed from the meaning assigned to the term - and can inquire as to the underlying values that may have influenced its meaning (Galaty 1999). The challenge is to state what is meant by inequality, be transparent concerning the normative position taken in deploying such a meaning and to recognise the implications of these for the way evidence is used and policy recommended.

[9] ibid,. Harris' introductory chapter discusses the "longue durée" research tradition in Andean anthropology

[10] I am grateful to Jarrod Lovett for discussing this point with me.

I suggest that a serious commitment by development practitioners to pro-poor political and social change requires a stronger grounding in the social theory of inequality than what is currently available. The March 2003 *Insights* on development research, on the theme of "Chronic Poverty" notes that the chronic poor "experience social exclusion because of their gender, age, ethnicity, disability, caste and social position, among others." (Insights 2003). Such a rag bag of ascribed statuses makes social exclusion virtually meaningless for analytical purposes. In contrast Wood (2003) draws on both classic and more recent social theory in an informed and illuminating article that explores the dilemma facing poor people in their search for security but such contributions appear to be the exception rather than the general practice.

Wood's paper is an exception. Compared, with the extent to which development studies of inequality and structural poverty draw on general economic theory, it would seem that social theory remains the Cinderella of such studies. This may be an outcome of development studies depending so heavily on the patronage of aid agencies that tend to look for easy and rapid solutions. Concepts in social theory are being used (or abused) by a linear planning set of mind, one that I might style as the *remove the barriers approach to poverty reduction.* Neither analysts nor practitioners of development have been able to refine and apply their concepts enough to contribute to a dynamic systems approach to change (Harding 2002).

One reason for this could be the inaccessibility of much of the academic literature. Nearly fifty years ago C Wright Mills referred to the 'inhibitions, obscurities and trivialities' that impede wider access to the intellectual promise of studies of society (Mills 1959). Such impediments have not gone away and some of the post-structuralist literature reads with as much difficulty as Talcott Parsons. However, while I believe there are opportunities and responsibilities to clarify complex ideas (and I hope that the article I write to accompany the literature review will perform such a role), I cannot accept inaccessibility of the literature as the main reason why development agencies find it difficult to get to grips with social inequality. After all, agencies such as the World Bank frequently commission work in the area of econometrics that is largely inaccessible to the mathematically illiterate, such as me.

Perhaps the challenge lies more in the approach of much of the social theory literature that *does* touch on development issues ? Much is either very post-modernist (and therefore essentially nihilist) or is critical of international development aid as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution. While very worth while reading, in either case, it is depressing for the practitioner who is at risk of abandoning either the reading or the practice!

Perhaps the most significant challenge to development agency thinking about social inequality may lie at the level of the personal and institutional. That the day to day practice of international development agencies remains embedded in their colonial and neo-colonial origins is a proposition that many agency staff would not be prepared to recognise. However, personally I believe that the *performance* of inequality has informed much of my own professional behaviour during the last thirty years. It has impeded my capacity to support those seeking to transform deeply embedded relations of inequality. Indeed, as I argue when considering donor practice around PRSPs, such behaviour can help sustain and reproduce the very inequalities that agencies seek to remove (Eyben 2003). How can aid can support rather than undermine efforts to transform the social relations of inequality?

One way forward may be to shift the institutional analytical paradigm so that it can accommodate 'relational' inequality as a further analytical concept to those initially rejected but now generally accepted, such as Sen's theory of freedom and justice. The task is to clarify the parameters of this concept and to prepare practitioners for the changes in institutional approaches that will be required as a result of this shift.

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