Abstract for a paper to be presented at the Staying Poor: Chronic Poverty and Development Policy" conference of the CPRC, 7th – 9th April 2003

Panel: Political Perspectives on Chronic Poverty

"Imagining politics as a process of redistributive social justice: the good, the bad and the ugly"

Abstract

This paper reviews the history of the relationship between politics and development in its three moments: the purely academic discipline; the history of politics in development intervention; and the reality of politics processes in the poorest countries and communities. While these three moments are not mutually exclusive, the paper suggests that the third, the 'real' politics of the poor, is badly understood in the two former moments. This is primarily due to the positivist, normative and institutional basis of political science being ill-equipped to understand the politics of the poorest people: the 'good' applied to change the 'bad' often fails to appreciate the existence of the 'ugly'.

Introduction

> *"There is a range of different 'moral repertoires' upon which society at large may draw in order to validate any particular pattern of rights and obligations"*
> (Dean, 2001: 61, citing Offe C (1993) as the source of inspiration)

The academic discipline of applying political science in a development context, - the subdicipline of 'politics and development' - has had an intimate relationship with the political expediencies of the West and of donor agendas in particular. The politics of poverty reduction also reflects the trends and preoccupations of a Western context. This is particularly the case in terms of a relatively state-centred preoccupation, even when the state in question is incapacitated, and a market-based, individualised frame of reference for explaining poverty and providing remedies to it. In this paper I will review the 'meanstream' views of poverty reduction.

The main contention of the paper is that the predominance of the neo-liberal mindscape emasculates radical political theory and practise, while essentialising normative development abstractions. The policies the 'meanstream' suggests are insufficient to solve the crisis of asset and ownership inequality that is the proximate cause of chronic poverty, itself produced by the rapid commodification of southern societies under the onslaught of the Washington Consensus. Instead, 'politics in development' ignores radical traditions of communitarianism, mutualism and associational collectivism in favour of marginal institutional proscription. The politics in development has a largely institutional approach involving state and localised elites in negotiation with donor agendas, but largely failing to reform social and material relationships in favour of the poorest.

The third moment is that which is most difficult to theorise: the politics of the poor. This can be briefly characterised by long periods of prolonged material suffering, of

mufakose #, with brief eruptions of reflexive resistance. The politics of the poor provides for chaotic, spontaneous, reflexive interregnums that occasionally provide interruptions in an extended process of *kafira mukati*∗ under the 'dull compulsion of everyday life'. Within this politics lies a challenge to the elite ownership of modernity and power, and a demand for the right to own development as radical social change.

The challenge for those studying the role of politics in development processes is to look at the supposed 'ugly'. This is not to say that the politics of the poor is 'ugly' in its literal meaning, rather that most policy-makers would suppose it to be and thus fail to see it: the everyday life of the poor remains a mystery because they would find it too uncomfortable to appreciate. The political processes that the poorest are involved in reflect the realities of living in poverty. A successful development policy that aims to create a virtuous circle of 'good' politics and poverty reduction is required to positively relate to these realities. The paper concludes that the contemporary policy orthodoxy of 'good globalisation' – economic liberalisation, social safety nets and empowerment leaves the proverbial Cinderella cleaning the grate on the night of the ball. Instead, extending memory to other historical periods of radical redistributive change illustrates that much more widespread policies of redistribution and global regulation are needed to tackle the processes within capitalism that create and sustain poverty. This historical understanding of political agency within collectivities is a closer frame of reference to the politics of the poor majority.

Shona for 'no where to turn to for respite', but literally-'die all ways'.

∗ Shona for 'suffering meekly'

The 'Good'

To summarise briefly the classical liberal position, the functional nation-state has territorial integrity, sovereignty and legitimacy. Its functions, meanwhile, are to provide a legal system (uphold the rule of law); guarantee the currency (uphold the rule of money) which together can be seen as setting the terms of market and social interactions. It also taxes citizens in order to provide welfare services and provides a sense of identity and 'nationhood' to secure social order, while arbitrating or repressing dispute. From this model, wherein the state is seen as rational and able to carry out these roles, begin analyses that point to the inability of poorer states in the face of these functional expectations. This, I would argue, is an indefensible methodology since it is (at its worse) teleological, functionalist and essentialist.

Thus, a normative list of liberal democratic institutional attributes of the West (as above) are often juxtaposes with their non-existence in the Rest, explaining the difference in terms of a number of factors related to the experience of colonialism and late state formation (eg Moore, 2001; Tornquist, 1999). For example Moore (2001) argues that compared to the states of the rich world, those of the poor tend to be relatively independent, or 'disconnected' from their citizens,
> "to have autonomous sources of finance and other critical resources, and/or be able to use international connections and resources to rule over their citizens in a relatively unrestrained fashion" (2001, 3-4).

He then isolates several factors that he sees as causing political underdevelopment. These are 'unnatural birth' (of the state); incomplete state formation; histories of external control; declining costs of military superiority (over domestic peoples); international criminal networks and opportunities; unearned state income (in the sense of not requiring an organised tax system); and the politically corrosive effect of donor competition, (Moore, 2001). Similarly, Tornquist observed that the mercantile integration of the political and economic spheres was exported to the colonies, integrated with feudal social structures, and that this symbiosis, "still characterises the relation between politics and development in the majority of developing countries today" (Tornquist, 1999: 11). While these authors go some way to illustrating he specificity of late state formations, they are held back by the methodology of analogy.

However, these theoretical mores in terms of the relationship between the state and market are reflected in *leit motifs* which appear in, particularly, developmental, business and journalistic literatures. These can be summarised and represented as themes, or tropes, which have arisen due to theorising using (an inappropriate) 'history by analogy' (Mamdani, 1996, and reviewed in Ahluwalia, 2001: 72, 98). However, reflecting on these themes it soon becomes obvious that the ideal form is a liberal myth, or a construct definition, whereas the post-colonial model, is more like a list of attributes or characteristics that are the first models juxtaposition or negation (see Bracking, 2003). Neither model exists in a pure form, but rather every social formation has aspects of exclusive and inclusive frontiers between the state and market, resembling, more accurately, Gramsci's 'ditches and trenches' around the modern state (Gramsci, 1971).

A review of research on the politics of poverty

Thus, there is little headway to be made from applying the distinctive liberal dualism of the public and the private. This is particularly the case when looking empirically at different systems of power, since there is a *disarticulation* between formal institutional power structures and the relationships of power in many countries, and particularly in Africa. This reality frustrated poverty policy and implementation since private power-holders can frustrate poverty reduction agendas. Additionally, it is precisely this disarticulation that frustrates the expectations of normative political scientists attempting to pursue the good governance and democratisation agendas, which are generally understood as 'pro-poor', but in actuality have varying effects on poverty in practice (see Potter, 2000: 374-379).

Moore and Putzel remarked that politics only became an important issue in development research when something went wrong:

> "There is a tradition in aid and development agencies of bringing in political analysis, if at all, in terms of problems and difficulties. 'Politics' is why desirable things may not happen. Politics is messy. Political analysis is used only to explain and to try to fix things that have already gone wrong." (1999, 5)

Political analysis has been applied variously to explain the failure of a project by spoilers unforeseen in the planning stage, or the failure of a programme of reform due to inadequate political will or elite motivation (Unsworth 2001; McCourt, 2001; Hossain and Moore, 2002 endnote 3). I suggest that, these are the types of achievements that 'high' political science, based in an institutional reference frame can make to 'politics in development'.

However, they fail to engage with politics lived, materially embedded in everyday life. The politics of who, how and why resources are owned, distributed and enjoyed in the patterns that they are. This can be analysed at two levels: at the level of state practice which breaches the outcomes of a free-ranging capitalism, and at the level of horizontal exchanges between the poor themselves.

Property regimes and redistribution

'every fence tells a story'   Ugandan project respondent

Understanding these outcomes requires us to return to a theoretical understanding of property rights. Rousseau once remarked in his *Discourses on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* in 1755, that modern society began when the first person put a fence around 'his' land, and the resulting social construct that became 'private property' an unalienable commodity. This act, for Rousseau, created a new form of inequality beyond that benign variety, which naturally existed among people - of height, speed or whatever – into unequal holdings of private property that would magnify inequalities over time. While Rousseau is right to illustrate the importance of private property to the modern age, what is significant here is that it was and remains a socially constructed agreement. The people around the first fence could - and probably did! - pull it down. Over time however, their resistance was reshaped by a commodification of social relations as a whole: an acceptance of a discursive authoritarianism of liberalism's marriage to 'freedom, equality, property and Bentham' (Marx, 1867/1999:113, cited in Bracking and Harrison, 2003 forthcoming), that is, capitalism.

In practice, however, the divide between private property relations, and the sphere of public policy and governance in industrialised states bears little resemblance to the mutual exclusivity of the 'public' and 'private' apparent in the mainstream literature. Instead, the relationship between public and private spaces in a society is complex, dialectical and shifting with the particular regime of state power. In fact, in times of rapid change, whether ushered in by economic crisis, a developmental state or as a consequence of radical reform or revolutionary periods, it is not unusual or unlikely that public/private boundaries will change dramatically. In periods of relative social stability, the boundary, or frontier of private ownership becomes accepted, adhered to and hegemonic. In this period the boundary is set in law as 'property rights' and 'human rights'. However, radical social change of a redistributive nature will inevitably disrupt previously hegemonic understandings of ownership relations. In respect of southern states then, whose societies are undergoing rapid change as a consequence of shocks, slumps and interventions from external environments, we can expect that hybrid institutions could play as important a role in economic change.

Experiences of state-led programmes of redistribution

The overall framework of 'patrimonialism', remains the most prevalent and pursuasive body of political analysis of African state and political relationships (see Boyle 1988; Callaghy 1987; Sandbrook 1985; Bratton and van de Walle; 1994, or an excellent review of this literature in Ahluwalia, 2001). However, for our purposes of finding public policy instruments of poverty reduction it obscures as much as it

illustrates. This is because it is insufficient in an important respect: its inability to analyse redistributive social relationships outside an *assumed* framework of illegitimacy. Handing state contracts to a small emerging elite of indigenous businessmen is depicted as cronyistic, while changing ownership relationships in favour of nationals is often depicted as illegitimate graft. Thus, redistribution of wealth in sub-Saharan Africa has been restricted by ideas of the 'proper' scope of public policy. That is, that private property is inalienable, and that financial collapse will be the outcome if governments attempt to change property 'rights'.

Ultimately, the debate can only hinge on the context and depth of legitimacy held by a particular government in terms of its democratic and governance contract. For example, critics of empowerment processes have dubbed these patrimonial and corrupt. On the other hand, there are also clear examples where corrupt practise and self-aggrandisement is legitimised by the rhetoric of redistribution. One person's rightful entitlement is simultaneously seen by another as illegitimate patronage. In sum, the character of each transaction can only be judged in the context of the prevailing legitimacy of the government, and the depth of popular support for its redistributive policies. This in turn will be positively effected by how inclusive these policies are, and how transparent is their implementation. Theoretically, this analysis contrasts with the 'given' disfunction that theories of patrimonialism, embedded in the *proper* divide of the private and public, seem to imply.

In the context of poverty, inequality and post-colonial social relationships there has been a wave of policy programmes designed to change the boundaries of property rights. There is a long history of redistributive reform attempts in sub-Saharan Africa, beginning with Africanization during and after Independence, progressing to co-ownership projects under SAPs, and now revisited through widespread empowerment and indigenisation programmes. These promise and sometimes deliver the benefit of helping 'indigenous' business people gain initial working capital, list capital ventures and access finance in the name of economic progress and growth. They also lead to industrialisation and job creation. However, they are also subject to graft, cronyism, and elite replacement with little economic benefit to the masses (endnote 9).

In the Zimbabwean case, land redistribution has degenerated to widespread illegality and malnutrition, resulting in an economic crisis of tragic proportion (Sachikonye, 2002). In post-independence Namibia, there is a mixed picture of the effects of indigenisation so far. For example, there is an imaginative government policy for indigenisation of the fishing industry. Indigenous companies were allocated licenses in 1993 permitting them a right to fish, while ex-patriate South African and German companies who had previously dominated the industry were required to form partnerships with license holders to continue in business. Melber (2003) has analysed the policy, and concludes that some redistribution has occurred. However, by means of a complex web of holding companies ownership has become opaque, and a certain level of rent-seeking behaviour is occurring between the political elite, many of whom were the beneficiaries of the license scheme, and the original owners (ibid). The interesting aspect of this policy is its use of a natural resource license, which has wider applicability, and resonates from the way companies were once regulated.

Ways forward

As significantly, current participatory poverty evaluations demonstrate a static approach which also misses this agency dimension by asking what it is like being poor, and what do the poor think of as the causes of their poverty. These experiences show a deficit in diachronic questioning which could explore change in poverty as the poor act, either individually or mutually, to overcome it. If we are to audit people's political assets in the formal institutional sense, we need to also explore political strategy and possibilities. This reflects the concerns of a number of CPRC participants, particularly Andrew Sheperd's concern of

> "what growing inequality does to social solidarity, willingness to pay taxes to support the poor, indigent, sick etc. Does it increase/lower it and why?" (forwarded e-mail from Sam Hickey, 3 May 2002)

and Anand Kumar's concerns that we address

> "a) patterns of relationship between various forms of inequalities and chronic poverty on the basis of looking at the matrix of inequalities (class, gender, caste, regions, race, education, age, sector, etc.) over a period of time, b) the consequences of various approaches of the State for these patterns, c) the functional (neutralising the market factor, minimising the role of credit institutions, legitimacy to the mobilisations against poverty, etc.)and disfunctional aspects (political patronage, bureaucratic corruption, dependency of the recipients, etc.) of the State's intervention in the instances of chronic poverty". (ibid)

Other writers also share these concerns, and particularly in the areas of political sociology and discourse theory have begun to offer both methodologies and analysis to understand change and agency. First, Webster and Engberg-Pedersen offer us three levels in which to understand the politics of poverty in terms of the general concept of political space (2002, 8-11). They isolate three levels in which the poor contest political space:

> "*institutional channels* through which policy formulation and implementation can be accessed, controlled or contested by the poor; *political discourses* in which poverty and poverty reduction are significant issues; and *social and political practices* of the poor which may be a basis for influencing decision-making, agendas, policy and programme implementation, etc." (Webster and Engberg-Pedersen, 2002: 8, my emph.)

This causes us to think separately about *formal institutions*, and *ideas and practices*, rather than merely conflating them in institutional analysis around the archytypal neo-liberal market and state forms. However, this disaggregation in itself could potentially cause mystification since discourse and practice are constantly informing and reinforming each other to make up the patterns of political agency in its historical sense.

Fortunately, there are a number of other original contributions which suggest a way forward. Dean is particularly salient, contributing an exploration of the relationship between *moral repertoires* surrounding poverty; how these correlate with social development strategies; and how these in turn relate to welfare state regimes (2001, 54-74). He applies his methodology to the British case and finds that the poor are more likely to use concepts of blame and fate in others' poverty than are those who are themselves richer who have a greater proclivity to structural explanation (Dean, 2001: 58-9). This research work involves analysing long, structured but flexible interviews. Relatedly, Sachs shows that the poverty agenda is a post-War creation and served to conflate three distinct meanings of frugality, destitution and scarcity (1999, 8-12). These would need to be unpacked in an exploration of agency. Similarly, Mafeje writes of the typologies of poverty policy regimes in a medium-term historical frame with reference to changing responsibilities, obligations and norms as these are expressed in development discourse, noting the shift from poverty *alleviation* to poverty *reduction* (2001, 33-48).

Outside of the poverty literature, but pertinent enough to mention here, is work done by Hay (1996) on the various socio-political moments of the state. This demonstrates the efficacy of deconstructing static, and arguably ossified, concepts such as 'the state'. Here we see how institutional forms relate with discursive constructions. He notes three 'moments' of the state: the *state as nation*, the state as an 'imagined' national community (cf. Anderson 1983; Hoffman 1995: 67-8); the *state as territory*, the state as a strictly bound sovereign terrain (cf. Tilly 1973; Shaw 1984; Giddens 1985; Mann 1985, 1988; Agnew and Corbridge 1995; 78, 80-100), and the *state as institution*, the state as a set of apparatuses and practices unified through some form of centralised coordination (cf. Weber 1978). This work suggests that we could operationalise such moments as identity, geography and institutions in terms of how we analyse poverty in order to overcome a static and individualised conception.

As Dean summarises,

"Since Max Weber, we have known that there is no single Reason or universal standard by which to judge all forms of thought and that what we call Reason is only the 'specific and peculiar rationalism of the West' (1985: 26; Dean, 1994a: 78-91). After Foucault, we know that, even within the latter, there is a multiplicity of rationalities, of different ways of thinking in a fairly systematic manner, of making calculations, of defining purposes and employing knowledge" (1999: 11)

We need to find out how the poor and rich understand their obligations to others, their rights and others' rights, and how they justify inclusions and exclusions within various mutual associational and self-help practice. In turn, this would help toward the goal of finding out how the agency of the poor can be expected to reduce poverty, and how the various discourses of exclusion/inclusion and its inequalities help explain non-action. These can then be traced to understand the relationship between discourse, the construction of responsibilities and national public policy patterns.

Everyday life

One way to proceed would be to review sociological accounts of how 'everyday life' can be understood and theorised. For example, Featherstone notes that:

"Everyday Life is usually associated with the mundane, take-for-granted, common-sense routines which sustain and maintain the fabric of our everyday lives." (1992, 160).

While the working lives of the poor and adversely incorporated are little understood in their detail, policy-makers often assume that a little more effort, a greater developmental push and more self-organisation on the part of the poor will lead to the Holy Grail of increasing incomes and poverty reduction. The relational incentives and disincentives to do so remain opaque. For example, chronic poverty is often associated with a widespread insecurity in terms of property and assets. A Harare resident in August 2002, referred to 'the soup' where the incentive for one individual 'bubble' to try and escape was irrational as the result would always be to fall back into the collective broth. Thus, taking on extra employment to buy an asset, such as a bicycle, would be irrational since the asset would soon be stolen. In its broadest sense, displaying wealth would attract attention and increase the moral claims of others for a gift or loan.

This is not to say that individuals always defer from attempts to improve their standing, rather that there is an incentive to hide the rewards of various remunerations

from kin. This incentive to retain invisible wealth deters the growth multiplying effect of savings as they are converted to investments in a longer time-span. Alternatively, income may be spent on a singular consumption item, such as a mobile phone, which both indicates an image of having 'made it' in the 'modern' world, but as significantly can be relatively easily owned exclusively, rather than shared. Alternative purchases with a higher utility in terms of poverty reduction, such as seeds for an extended cropped area, would necessitate a shared distribution from the investment, indicating that the reward for the initial individual from income creation would be marginal.

Such conflicts between moral rights and claims are replete in the everyday life of chronically poor Zimbabweans, and in their relationship to better-resourced kin. In tradition culture there existed many social obligations of reciprocity and sharing which acted to reduce risk in times of scarcity. While a generalised frugality undoubtedly prevailed, few vulnerable people 'fell off the bottom' of the social structure. However, cultural values have changed in subtle but important ways since the advent of an urban-centred, modern, and cosmopolitan orientated middle class. Spacially separated from rural kin, and increasingly adopting nuclear family structures, as opposed to the traditional extended family homestead, such escapees can be reluctant to resource traditional claims from kin (Bourdillon, 1997). Additionally, in the recent economic crisis of the 2000-2002 period, many of this class's members have been the victims of retrenchment and the collapse of the urban manufacturing economy. While some have returned to the rural areas in search of food, others have stayed in urban areas unwilling to admit that there urban livelihoods have collapsed. Meanwhile, rural relatives are still making the journey to urban centres to attempt to access gifts and favours. Mufakose: neither party can resource the other.

Ferguson recounted a similar rural-urban livelihood complexity when he made his anthropological study of the decline of industry in the Zambian Copperbelt from the mid-1980s. Many ex-minors encouraged to 'go home' to the rural areas by the Community Services Division of the Zambian Consolidated Copper Mines in 1986, found that they could nor reintegrate, or were unwelcome (often related to their prior suspension of gift-giving tradition) (Ferguson, 1999: 123-165). My own experience of rural-urban kin relations in Zimbabwe suggest that similar patterns of distrust, suspicion and feelings of betrayal are quite widespread in the current crisis. "How do they think we are eating" is a common question from elderly rural women of their urban-based sons, while urbanites bemoan that the rural folk 'should dig deaper' and that 'they say they are hungry just because they have no sadza'.

Within this moral landscape of claims and moral obligations, there exists repertoires of the deserving and undeserving. A relative claiming his childern are hungry will fail to be gifted if his brother believes he has merely drunk his earnings, and that any donation would, on past experience, fail to reach the children anyway. Thus reciprocal kin obligations are not standardised but reflexive to the context of the people involved. This, generalised, creates the moral landscape of justification for distributive patterns of income and assets. Names, nicknames and labels are created as a shorthand to explain a derogation from a formal responsibility: he is (only) a 'totsi' (thief), or she is a 'bitch' (prostitute).

While these observations are not systematic, they do suggest that a way forward in understanding the patterns of poverty among the chronically poor is to allow 'high politics' to provide the background, while the politics of everyday life, or methods of political sociology and anthropology, explain the detail. As C Wright Mills observed in 1959,

> "It is the political task of the social scientist to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals. That is, to display "the sociological imagination" in one's work" (Wright Mills, 1959: 187).

This means that we need to understand the everyday claims, rituals, obligations and detractions that characterise inter-kin resource transfers. The conflict between the individual 'making it' in a commodified 'modern society', and his or her collective place and corresponding obligations would seem to be central to illuminating the poverty implications. Winter adds a subscript to this, that "everyday life is lived between the tensions of order and disorder" (Winter, 2002.

However, to merely assert that the contradiction between the individual and society as a whole is central to understanding non-market exchanges, would be to asset an untenable dualism. Many forms of individualism, particularly those related to consuming the new products of the age, (such as expensive cars, mobile phones, and DVDs), are seen by sociologists and pychologists as a means to regain what has been lost: to substitute for the loss of human community in the purchase of a product whose label denotes belonging. For example, Wachtel, asserts, here summarised by Winter, that

> "we try to buy community in the goods we purchase for ourselves and others; we try to gain status within the community through the goods we display. Goods are a substitute for social needs. The more we lose community, the more we seek to find it through goods" (Winter, 2002, 6: citing Wachtel, 1998: 56).

If such over-lapping aspiration is correct it implies that a romanticised idea of inter-kin exchange as a widespread redistributive mechanism must be discarded.

Instead, the conflict between the individual seeking inclusion in metropolitan society, and their vulnerable, often older rural kin, seems to require a system of neutral taxation and enforced redistribution to ensure both an inequality and poverty reducing aggregate outcome.

6.0   Conclusion

I began this paper by critically reviewing current research concerning the politics of poverty. I argued that a neo-classicist bias limited the understanding of poverty causation by assuming individuals had an equality of access to markets, and by extension, social opportunity. In this frame of reference, those who are poor, or the chronically poor among them, appear as an arbitrary by-product of accident or misfortune. They then become the passive recipients of palliative policy intervention. I then criticised the current orthodoxy of social exclusion from this perspective, proposing instead that adverse, differential incorporation was a more illuminating frame of reference with which to analyse chronic poverty.

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