

Bringing politics back into poverty analysis:
Why understanding social relations
matters more for policy on chronic poverty
than measurement

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Abstract

Mainstream poverty research – even after experts had generally accepted the need for a multidimensional view of poverty that goes beyond income/consumption measures to take account of holdings of assets and hence of longer run security (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 has provided ever more detailed profiles of poverty in different countries and regions. This research has also produced a number of studies of ‘poverty dynamics’ that show the implications, for example, of the distribution of assets in a society or of access to human capital. One such study is by the World Bank entitled ‘Why some people escape from poverty and others don’t’ (Grootaert et al 1995). In general this research tends to converge around much the same 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.

Lately these studies have been extended to take account into social relationships through the concept of social capital. But it is perhaps still the case – as exemplified by Guatemala (Ibanez et al. 2002) – that it is the better educated, relatively wealthy, middle-aged men who enjoy most of the social capital. Being very poor, on the other hand, seriously constrains people’s abilities to invest in social capital, even within the family (Cleaver 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 the earlier research aims to address the questions of how and why. Why it is that the factors under consideration are distributed through a society in the manner that they are? These questions refer to the political economy of contemporary capitalism, and to cultural politics. The fact that they are largely ignored shows that poverty research plays a role in depoliticizing what are in essence political problems. It is a part of what James Ferguson (1990) memorably describes 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, according to O’Connor, ‘has long been an article of faith in American liberalism’ (2001: 3). If 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 the contemporary debates over poverty trends in India in the 1990s so clearly show (Deaton and Kozel 2004). The problem is that even in the most sophisticated poverty measurements, long chains of assumptions are necessarily made so that these are always open to question. And the assumptions specialists most readily accept depend on value judgements. As O’Connor argues, poverty research, dominated 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 recognized in recent years at the centre of poverty knowledge, the World Bank, in its celebrated study, *Voices of the Poor*. But that study, which argues for a different model of knowledge as the basis for poverty action, has been ignored. Poverty research seems to indicate that the social sciences should not try to emulate the natural sciences (Flyvberg 2001). They are more effective in generating the kind of knowledge that develops from familiarity with practice in particular contexts, helping people to question relationships of knowledge and power, such as those giving rise to poverty, and subsequently to work to produce change. Such a view has quite profound implications for the design of poverty research.

Key words: agrarian relations, asset-based approach, poverty definition, poverty measurement, poverty dynamics

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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

1. Re-conceptualizing poverty: the story so far

My first epigraph comes from a paper written by Robert Chambers in Delhi twenty years ago, with the title 'Poverty in India: concepts, research and reality' (Chambers 1988, 1992). Although this paper was not responsible on its own for bringing about the re-thinking on the concept and the nature of poverty in the 1990s (apparent 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 – or have not – changed since his study.

Chambers argues that there are two possible starting points for understanding poverty and reducing it: with the perceptions of professionals (i.e. social scientists and development practitioners) or with the perceptions of poor people themselves. He 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 been concerned with those aspects of deprivation that are most readily measured – flows of income or consumption. A huge amount of intellectual energy and resources have gone into poverty research 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 attempted to define:

...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 the conventional poverty measurement, and it was Chambers who argues that poverty has come to be equated with what can most readily be measured. 'Conceptually', he suggests, 'professionals are caught in their own poverty trap' (1988: 6). And when it comes to action as well, he notes that 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' perspective of poverty with the concepts of the poor themselves. He is 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 shows that poverty, based on the conventional measurement, had increased. Yet, according to almost all of the numerous ways in which the village people themselves conceptualize changes in their wellbeing, they were better off. 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.

Based on Jodha's findings, and those of several other 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 wellbeing. He sums up by arguing that we should examine poverty in terms of different dimensions that are all relevant to the poor themselves. Incomes and consumption do matter (he labels this dimension 'survival'), but so do net assets and security¹ ('security'). Even beyond security there is the dimension of independence and self-respect ('self-respect').

These arguments contributed to understanding the importance of the multidimensional character of poverty, and that it should not be considered simply in terms of easily measured flows. They also helped to bring into sharper focus the importance of taking account of the perceptions and understanding of the poor themselves. In the following decade, this recognition led to the major participatory research programme of the World Bank which ultimately gave rise to the celebrated publications: *Voices of the Poor*. These adumbrated parts of Chambers' original argument are reflected in the chapters that discuss the ten dimensions of powerlessness and ill-being that emerged from the study. They also sum up the '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 recalls Chambers' earlier listing of different dimensions of deprivation or poverty rather closely, even though it was derived from large numbers of interviews in 23 countries. The interview results noted 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 employed, and of the universalizing drive of science similar to that underlying the 'voices' research as much as it does econometric cross-country research. Certainly the results of the research exhibit the same elements that characterize 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 believed to define poverty.

This is also the principal limitation of Chambers' analysis of the conceptualization of poverty, and of poverty research. In Chambers' account, 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, he does show that 'poverty' is a construct, and that it is construed in different ways by different actors. He also recognizes that these constructions are profoundly political. This is evidenced in his passing remark about the perception of poverty that perhaps suits the interests of the elite. And there is the suggestion that conventional poverty analysis rests on a mistaken view of 'science' that elevates measurement and disregards contextualization. I will return to this last point later in the paper. The other points raised here have been taken up by several other

¹ At about the same time of Chambers' writings, analyses of the ways in which people respond to the stress of drought and famine showed 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).

writers in recent literature of poverty, perhaps notably by Green and Hulme (Green 2005; Green and Hulme 2005). The core of their arguments is that poverty becomes a tangible entity through its conceptualization in mainstream poverty research. It is 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 identify and act upon in the social world. Notably, the way in which poverty is conceptualized over time separates it from the social processes of the accumulation and distribution of wealth, depoliticizing it. And depoliticization is, of course, a profoundly political intellectual act. The result is that a continuity may exist between the analyses of poverty and the prejudices of social elites against the poor. Poverty is the outcome of the behaviour by those who are affected by it, and they may be judged adversely because of it, and thus it has to be eliminated to maintain social functionality.² Poverty is a kind of a social aberration rather than an aspect of how the modern state and a market society function.

What has been going on in mainstream poverty research since Chambers' seminal critique? How much has research been affected by the innovative ideas that Chambers' paper exemplifies? In practice, despite further exploration of alternative approaches, as in some of the work of the CPRC, a great deal of intellectual effort is expended on poverty measurement, and on the related analysis of 'poverty dynamics' by comparing the characteristics of those who have remained poor over time (below the conventionally defined poverty line), or those who have moved in 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 standardization 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 the needs of governments 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 on risk and vulnerability, and aspects of social exclusion, but this 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 the World Bank is the asset-based approach developed by Barrett, Carter and associates (2006). This is based on 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 (discussed later), has come up with impressive results. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative longitudinal data,³ it has

² An example of how the prejudices of the elites influence understandings of poverty – and in this case how poverty has been sought to be eliminated in a quite literal way – is given in Gooptu's work (1996).

³ The way in which this work has sought very deliberately to build links between quantitative and qualitative research in the manner suggested by Bardhan (1989) is very welcome, although in some instances, qualitative case-studies are used only to provide descriptive support to arguments based on quantitative analysis.

identified the factors influencing movements into and out of poverty and highlighted 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 episodes of ill-health, as is often shown to be of particular significance (also reflecting 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 debatable 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 (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 but now turn to examine two country cases – Vietnam and India. A lot of effort has gone into poverty analysis in these countries along the lines suggested by the World Bank poverty research programme. I aim to point out the difficulties caused by the model of knowledge that underlies the poverty research industry.

2. Questioning the mainstream model of poverty knowledge

Vietnam is widely regarded as a success story of liberalization and economic globalization (see, for instance, *The Economist*, 5-11 August 2006). Economic reform and integration into the global economy are held to have brought about remarkably pro-poor the economic growth (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, an achievement that scarcely seems credible. The Vietnam story is based on the analysis of the Vietnam Living Standards Surveys (VLSS) of 1992-93 and 1997-98, and then of the two rounds of the VHLSS. Despite changes in sample designs and sample sizes in these surveys, they are considered to provide comparable results and are widely used and respected. Yet Pincus and Sender (2006) have recently shown that there are serious problems with the design of these surveys and that they are likely to have under-estimated the number of the very poor in Vietnam. The authors do not deny that rapid growth in Vietnam has improved living standards for many, but suggest that there are strong grounds for believing that there are more very poor people than those represented in the surveys. Particularly those who migrate for wage work 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 urbanizing 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 officially registered households in Vietnam's communes and urban wards, in which a resident must have lived for at least six months. The problem is compounded by the fact that these lists are often outdated. This exclusion of the mobile people reflects their precarious legal position in Vietnam. The *ho khau* household registration system, designed to control migration to cities, makes it difficult for people to migrate legally. By comparing the VHLSS data with surveys conducted by the Statistics Office of Ho Chi Minh City, the authors show that the former excludes a large number of young migrants, and that VHLSS population estimates and census figures do not match, especially in the age bracket 20-29 years. Yet, in an experimental survey in rural areas of Hanoi and four neighbouring provinces, Pincus and Sender were easily able to identify a relatively large number of 'illegal' migrants, despite blocking tactics by local administrators in some instances. They also note that such migrants – not all of whom are poor, by any means - have very diverse characteristics. Still, the survey clearly indicates 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). Furthermore, Pincus and Sender make the point that it is difficult to justify the claims of the living standards surveys regarding the rapid decrease in the incidence of income poverty with anthropometric data or with data on child malnutrition.

The analysis of the 'determinants' of poverty in Vietnam that is based on the living standards surveys – which, instead, is the analysis of the characteristics of those still considered as being poor – highlights geographical factors⁴ and those of household size, ethnicity and educational attainment (the 'usual suspects'). This analysis has led to the policy recommendations outlined in the *Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy*, which is Vietnam's PRSP. Poverty reduction in the future is expected to be driven by private sector development, especially of household enterprises. This development can be assisted by better targeting to ensure that poor people have access to basic services, by providing infrastructure to poor and remote communes, and by giving ethnic minorities greater voice in the design of anti-poverty programmes. Pincus and Sender argue that the striking feature about these 'standard policy recommendations' is what has been 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.⁵ 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).

As Pincus and Sender observe, it is very odd indeed that in a country like Vietnam where so much emphasis is placed on urbanization 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 been recognized earlier⁶ and these 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). This is the reason why they see deliberate *intent* on the part of poverty analysts in the World Bank and the government to effect a particular picture of poverty reduction in the country. This statement may be going too far, but it is easy to understand how one report of improvement, attractive to those persuaded by theoretical arguments in favour of particular policies, becomes the driving force in the construction and interpretation of data. Vietnam's conversion into a 'successful globalizer' may not be quite as blatant as the manner in which Lesotho was constructed by development professionals as an 'underdeveloped economy' in the 1970s (Ferguson 1990), but the process is the same. Narratives, some of them almost myths, drive the collection and interpretation of data, as Roe (1991) and others have analysed, 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 highlighted 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 liberalizing economic reforms, initiated in 1991, on the incidence of poverty. Different perceptions have become highly politicized. The gap in terms of the average consumption as derived from the national accounts on the one hand, and from the results of the regular household income and expenditure surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), on the other, has grown wider, and the reporting periods used in the sample surveys for the different consumption

⁴ Klump and Bonschab (2004), for example, refer to emerging regional imbalances in Vietnam.

⁵ The argument is presented 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 the waged employment in the rural non-farm sector rather than self-employment that has been associated with poverty reduction (Sen et al. 2004).

⁶ It is discussed, for instance, by Klump and Bonschab (2004).

categories have been changed. One set of changes in the reporting periods of an NSSO experiment increased estimates of per capita incomes by 15-18 percent, thus halving the number of the poor. Those supporting economic reforms prefer one interpretation of inconsistent datasets, while reform critics prefer another. Deaton and others have attempted a reconciliation of the data, but the debate as a whole shows just how sensitive poverty measures 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 without the particular technical problems resulting from the changes in the design of the sample surveys in the 1990s that made the comparison of successive NSS rounds difficult, the measurement of poverty-incidence trends remains highly sensitive to judgements based on numerous assumptions.

Many observers of development in India are puzzled by the economic processes that could have brought about the magnitude of reduction in income poverty that is claimed by some. How can poverty have declined as much as is maintained, particularly when, as is widely recognized, India has experienced high growth rates but without the creation of many regular jobs – described as 'jobless growth' – and when its agricultural economy in much of the country is understood to be in a crisis? The problem is examined in studies of employment and poverty trends in the city of Ahmedabad, once known as 'the Manchester of India'. In the last two decades of the century, 100,000 'good jobs' were lost in the cotton textile industry, and as has happened widely, there has been extensive casualization of employment. Ethnographic research shows that in these circumstances households often become more dependent on female labour for survival, the 'global feminization' of labour (see, for example, Castells 1997). This has posed a serious threat to the dignity and the self-esteem of men, possibly with harmful social and political consequences (an important theme that I cannot pursue here). Some scholars, however, argue that the evidence from Ahmedabad shows that the policy of flexible labour markets, which leads to casualization 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. These favourable conclusions from the analysis of National Sample Survey data (by the Deshpandes, by Dutta and Batley and by Kundu, all cited in Breman 2001) conflict with those from the ethnographic research by Breman (2001). According to Breman, the increased vulnerability of households has led to the greater involvement of dependent family members, both women and children, in work. 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 of 'formal sector' employment. Breman further points out that underemployment and low pay are extensive and that the percentage of the population living in slum areas has almost doubled between 1981 and 1996-97. These conflicting observations of Ahmedabad's development accurately reflect the point made by Kanbur in connection to the radical differences that exist in perceptions of Ghana's poverty trends (2002). Both the 'optimists' and the 'pessimists' may, 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 vulnerability has increased in the lives of more people, doesn't this imply a deterioration in level of wellbeing, even if real wages have risen? Does it not mean that they are more likely to enter into relations of dependence with particular patrons, adversely affecting their self-respect and psychological wellbeing?

3. Going against 'normal science' and making social science matter

These examples of the difficulties that arise in poverty measurement – difficulties that are ontological as well as practical methodological issues – point to the underlying problem with the entire model of knowledge on which conventional poverty analysis is based. It is the model of what we may call 'normal science' which aims to develop explanatory and predictive theory for universal application, based on generalization from empirical observation. This

model has worked well in the natural sciences that are characterized by the cumulation of knowledge as well as by shifting paradigms. I believe that social sciences have not been nearly as successful as the natural sciences in developing explanatory and predictive theory for universal application (only a few law-like generalizations can be made about human behaviour). Neither have they done very well in cumulating knowledge, as they are characterized not so much by paradigm shifts as by style changes. As Flyvberg (2001: 30) puts it, '... it is not a case of evolution [in the social sciences] but more of fashion'. And there are powerful reasons for this difference which essentially concerns the nature of the phenomena, i.e. the actions/behaviour of self-reflecting human beings, whereas the background elements of 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 it has been shown that there is no radical distinction between natural and social sciences,⁷ and hermeneutics is now recognized as applying to natural science as well. Nevertheless, it can still be demonstrated that the natural sciences are relatively cumulative and predictive, and the social sciences are not.⁸ This has been a source of considerable concern for many social scientists, also reflected in my own experience with regard to poverty research in the 'conversations between anthropologists and economists' set up by Bardhan (1989). Some argue tenaciously that it must be possible to establish 'the facts' about poverty and to develop predictive theory for universal application, whereas others (not all of them anthropologists) maintain that the knowledge of poverty must always be context-dependent. Now many social scientists are worried about a descent into relativism, which the currents of post-modernism over the last two decades have served to intensify.

Flyvberg's argument in *Making Social Science Matter* (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'. This refers essentially to the ability of human beings to make judgements, and to alter their thinking and behaviour. Human skills go well beyond following rules; they are context-dependent. On the other hand, the kind of theory developed in 'normal science' depends on freedom from context and the existence of rules (see Flyvberg 2001: 47). The social sciences, however, have distinctive strengths in areas where the natural sciences are weak, in dealing precisely with reflexive analysis and discussion of values and interests. Such analysis is necessarily context-dependent, but recognizing 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 may not be a radically different ambition from that of the poverty measurers, for example, who seek to pursue social-science-as-normal-science. But the latter analysts work with a model of knowledge which implies that scientific analysis could be able to establish whether or not policy changes in India in the 1990s, for example, led to a reduction in poverty, and that policymaking can be an exercise in rational problem-solving. However, in Flyvberg's view, the possible knowledge about people and societies is interpretative and dialogical. In social-science-as-normal-science, the key task is taken to be the deduction process and the identification of general principles across large samples. Detailed case-study research is often regarded as unproductive, as it was by some of the

⁷ This is articulated eloquently in Gould's history of geology (1987), which shows how archetypal differences in terms of conceptions of time and history among scholars led to very diverse theories on the 'facts' of geology.

⁸ There are fascinating studies of the sociology of science in the development literature like the book by Thompson et al. (1986) which shows just how uncertain the physical facts about land degradation are. But still, as Thompson points out, water does almost invariably flow downhill. There are established physical facts.

economists at the 'Conversations' conference to which I referred earlier. If we recognize 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 considered to be 'more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals' (Flyvberg 2001: 72). Interestingly, a very similar conclusion is reached 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). 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 advocated by Flyvberg, therefore, is to address real-world problems of particular societies, possibly with a case-study methodology, in an interactive and engaged way (not to be equated, however, with 'action research') and to be ready to adopt 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? I will come back to this approach later when I outline an approach to poverty research different from the currently prevalent fashion.

4. 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 analysed by Alice O'Connor (2001). 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 observation 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 also 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),⁹ it was diverted rather soon from these political economy issues. Lately it has been associated with the influence of the research foundations and government agencies, which have provided large amounts of funding for poverty research, and have been able to set the agenda, stipulating that research should be 'policy relevant', 'scientific' and free from ideology. But in all the work they have financed, poverty has never been defined as anything other than an *individual* condition. Poverty knowledge rests on the ethos of scientific neutrality, but it is very clearly distinguished by what it is not:

... contemporary 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

⁹ Note the similarity with Pincus and Sender's (2006) arguments about contemporary Vietnam.

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 has by now built up an accurate statistical portrait of poverty in America. However, the interaction between politicians and policymakers, research foundations and researchers has ensured 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).

Poverty knowledge in the international context is also characterized by similar features. Here too early studies of poverty¹⁰ were concerned with the structural conditions that caused the effects of poverty. In the 1970s, the poverty research industry became focused primarily on the analysis of the characteristics of the poor and of the correlates of poverty. Studies of the causes of poverty, or lately of 'poverty dynamics', establish correlations between the characteristics of individuals and households and poverty, generally understood in terms of consumption flows. These studies have tended to highlight much the same broad range of factors: household characteristics (high dependency ratios; female headship; ill-health of members); assets (holding few productive assets); education (illiteracy); occupational status (lack of regular waged employment amongst household members whether resident or working elsewhere). At times, factors relating to ethnicity and/or geography (e.g. being a 'tribal'/indigenous person in a remote area) are included as well as the significance of crises or of other idiosyncratic factors which in turn highlight the general problem of the lack of insurance. International poverty research has *not* made much effort in the context of analysing the political economy of the locality and of the state to explain how and why these factors have the effects they do. Poverty research usually does not address the processes of accumulation in contemporary capitalism and evades the distortions in the distribution of economic resources and of political power, apparently offering technical solutions in a manner that does not threaten 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 in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals is only one, particularly egregious instance of how language matters. International poverty research also strives to be 'objective' and 'scientific' and, with the exception of Chambers' paper and the later 'Voices of the Poor' work, does not have much countenanced knowledge based on direct action or everyday experience. Just as it is striking that in the United States the problems of the poor have not been linked to rising inequality but have rather 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 fact that the industrializing, urbanizing economy draws in large numbers of migrant workers. A sampling frame that is drawn from lists of only registered households is likely to miss this group. As O'Connor says in the second epigraphs in 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 depoliticizing it. The poverty research industry constitutes a part of what Ferguson (1990) memorably describes as 'the anti-politics machine'.

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:

¹⁰ For example, Naoroji (1901) seeks to explain endemic poverty in India in the context of the political economy of colonialism.

- i) Shifting from explanation of individual deprivation to explanation of inequalities in the distribution of power, wealth and opportunity;
- ii) Recognizing that studying poverty is not to be equated with 'studying the poor';
- iii) Getting away from the research industry model;
- iv) Challenging the privilege attached to hypothesis-testing models of enquiry; and
- v) Recognizing that the ideas of value-free social science and of finding scientific 'cures' for social problems are chimaeras.

The last three points correspond closely with Flyvberg's general critique of the attempt to establish social-science-as-normal-science, and all are relevant for international poverty research. Significant amounts of money and of intellectual resources continue to be poured into efforts 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 the reporting periods. To what end? They can never provide a definitive answer to a question such as, 'what has been the impact of liberalizing economic reforms on wellbeing/ill-being?', and they actually provide very little information on the causes of poverty. Insofar 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 household consumer durables, or 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 based on information on household income per capita (Filmier and Pritchett 1998; Shan and Stifle 2000; Stifle and Christiansen 2006, all cited in Pincus and Sender 2006). And how many more studies are needed to test hypotheses on poverty dynamics using data from living standards surveys? Such studies have often tended to confirm what Pincus and Sender reasonably describe as more or less 'standard' policy recommendations derived from demographic and geographic explanations that downplay the role of class formation and factors such as gender discrimination in the labour market.

5. Re-focusing poverty research

Instead of subjecting international poverty research to attempts to refine measurement¹¹ and to test hypotheses for establishing predictive theory, it will be more productive to redirect greater attention to the analysis of the social processes, structures and relationships that give rise to poverty, recognizing 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 the social practices in particular contexts¹² which hopefully will help the people themselves to question the relationship of knowledge and power that gives rise to poverty (although it is essential that this is done in a responsible manner so that the poor are not subjected to reprisals at the hands of the power holders).

Some of the most interesting work within the current poverty research concerns 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 assets¹³ and then identify thresholds, such as the 'asset

¹¹ Similarly to the manner that happened years before in poverty research in the United States.

¹² Hulme and Shepherd (2003) suggest this familiarity is likely to be necessary in analysing chronic/persistent poverty.

¹³ Exemplified by such asset indices 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)

poverty line' used by Adaptor, Carter and May (2006: 230), 'defined as the level of assets needed to generate an expected living standard equal to the poverty line'. This is similar to the procedure adopted by scholars who sought to study peasant differentiation.¹⁴ Encouraged by the development agencies, recent work 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; J. Harriss 1985; Bradbury et al. 1986). Indeed, the analysis of differentiation processes in rural societies went in some respects 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' insofar as they show how households move in and out of poverty. But their dynamic analysis remains quite descriptive. Although assets-based approaches are at times concerned with social relationships,¹⁵ they do not address questions related to political economy, nor link local patterns with the 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 by Bernstein and others shows how sites 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 subjected places them into a relationship 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]). This kind of work has at least some of the elements of the social science advocated by Flyvberg. It addresses 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. The analysis of the so-called 'semi-feudalism' in West Bengal has been concerned with the relationships that give rise to poverty rather than with measurement (although it also produced convenient measures for assets). This is an environment in which a 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. These landholders themselves are 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 (1973). He shows how relationships of dependence (and

¹⁴ See, for example, J. Harriss (1982) for an analysis that involved the construction of an index of 'livelihood units' to explain patterns of differentiation amongst rural people in northern Tamil Nadu in the 1970s.

¹⁵ As is the case in the work on social capital and social exclusion by Adato, Carter and May (2006).

the 'compulsive involvement' in markets, or 'forced commerce' that it entails)¹⁶ ensure that the class of larger landholders comes to control most of the region's product through rents from share-cropping and interest on loans for subsistence and for production, thus earning speculative profits from the rice trade. He then sought to show, more controversially, how in these circumstances the larger landholders would have no incentive to invest in productivity-raising technology, because this could relax the dependence upon them of the small producers. In the present context the significance of this work lies in the way it shows how accumulation processes bring about the reoccurrence of poverty. The wealth of some is causally linked to the crushing poverty of others.¹⁷ Some years later I showed how, in spite of changes in the rural economy following the modest land reforms introduced by the then-recently elected Left Front government of West Bengal, the reproduction of households depended upon the same mechanisms (J. Harriss 1982a[2006]). This analysis also shows 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 (or, according to the more recent terminology, 'livelihoods analysis'). Work by Barbara Harriss(-White) on the paddy and rice trade (1983), conducted at the same time in the early 1980s, shows 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, therefore, were made with wider process of capitalist accumulation, and the whole body of literature and the ensuing analysis show 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 mobilization of agricultural labour, have been instrumental in relaxing the conditions of 'semi-feudalism' and – with the development of rural capitalism – in bringing about higher levels of agricultural productivity and the reduction of income poverty.¹⁸ The widely attested relative success of West Bengal in reducing poverty (see Besley, Burgess and Esteve-Volart 2004) has been achieved through structural reforms and innovations rather than through programmes focussed on 'the poor'.

Considerations of space preclude further examples of research that show how relationships arising in the context of the development of capitalism influence the reoccurrence of poverty. The above commentary regarding the work of Pincus and Sender on Vietnam refers to their emphasis on labour markets and how these function. Another research study that traces the links between the operations of labour markets and poverty is by Hart (1986) for Indonesia, and later by Pincus (1996). In all of this, it is important to bring gender relations into the analysis, as, for instance, Whitehead shows in relation to West African societies (e.g. 1981), and Bina Agarwal with respect to South Asia (e.g. 1994).

6. Conclusion

I have argued here that mainstream research on poverty in international development suffers from the same flaws as those that O'Connor brings out in her 'poverty knowledge' analysis with regard to the United States – and for similar reasons. O'Connor refers to the role of research-funding agencies in encouraging the 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.

¹⁶ I refer here to the comparable arguments of Bharadwaj (1985) on 'compulsive involvement' in markets, and of Bhaduri (1986a) on 'forced commerce'. Both are concerned with the implications of the ways in which the commercialization of rural economies takes place, in circumstances in which there are big disparities in entitlements.

¹⁷ As Mackintosh (1990: 50) puts 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'.

¹⁸ See J. Harriss (2006) for a short review of literature.

She then highlights how this type of poverty knowledge has suited conservative interests. The same conclusions can be drawn with respect to international development – and they substantially explain the persisting dominance of ‘measurement approaches’ in spite of the critique of more than twenty years ago by researchers like Chambers. Poverty knowledge exemplifies the kind of social science that is strongly criticized by Flyvberg, and there is reason to take seriously his arguments about building ‘social science that matters’. These arguments converge with O’Connor’s on the reconstruction of knowledge about poverty, and they are worth recalling here:

- shifting from explanation of individual deprivation to explanation of inequalities in the distribution of power, wealth and opportunity;
- recognizing that studying poverty is not to be equated with ‘studying the poor’;
- moving away from the research industry model;
- challenging the privilege attached to hypothesis-testing models of enquiry; and
- recognizing that the ideas of value-free social science and of finding scientific ‘cures’ for social problems are chimaeras.

In recent literature, the ‘assets-approach’ has brought some advances, but it too fails to examine the social and political-economic relationships that trigger 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 which is so strikingly missing in mainstream research on poverty in international development. True, it is a literature that is very concerned with the ‘process’ rather than ‘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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