UNIVERSITY of the
WESTERN CAPE

INSTITUTE FOR POVERTY, LAND AND AGRARIAN STUDIES (PLAAS)

WORKING Paper **22**

The Trouble with Poverty

Reflections on South Africa's Post-Apartheid Anti-Poverty Consensus

29 September 2012

Andries du Toit

A place of quality,
a place to grow, from hope
to action through knowledge

Author: Andries du Toit, adutoit@plaas.org.za
Series Editor & Design: Rebecca Pointer
Copy Editor & Layout: Andrew Ennis

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the state of poverty discourse in South Africa since 1994: the ideological frameworks, narratives and assumptions that have shaped the construction of poverty as an object of academic knowledge, policy management and political concern. One of the distinctive characteristics of post-Apartheid South African politics is the existence of a broad consensus both on the importance of the need to reduce poverty and the means by which to do it. This consensus has a paradoxical and ambiguous character. On the one hand, 'poverty talk' plays a central role in posing and framing fundamental questions of social justice in South Africa: indeed, it is one of the main ways in which the issue of the moral and political legitimacy of the post-Apartheid social order is framed and debated. This has facilitated significant and broad social legitimacy for 'pro-poor' policies and the distribution of resources. But at the same time, the discursive frameworks that have underpinned this consensus also contain important limitations. Poverty is understood in ways that disconnect it from an understanding of inequality and social process, and which deny consequence or relevance to the causal relationship between the persistence of poverty and the formation and nature of South African capitalism. In this way 'poverty talk' trivialises poverty as a social issue and neutralises its political charge. The paper ends with an evaluation of the strengths and limits of South Africa's anti-poverty consensus and considers different responses to the impasses confronting poverty management

Keywords: Poverty, Discourse, Ideology, Inequality, South African Politics

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Few social facts in post-Apartheid South Africa are as socially portentous and as politically fateful as the persistence within our democracy of deeply entrenched poverty. Or as paradoxical, for one of the signal features of post-Apartheid politics and policy has been the nearly universal agreement that poverty is an important problem — and the willingness to do something about it. In policy making circles, in the public sphere and across almost the entire political spectrum from left to right, South Africans seem to agree that the existence of poverty poses a profound challenge for the country as a whole — and that the ability to eradicate it, to reduce it significantly or to offer those who suffer it credible hope of upward mobility and escape is one of the most important tests of the post-Apartheid political and economic order. Failure to address the problem of poverty, it is widely accepted, would severely undermine not only the long-term sustainability of the new democratic order but its very political and moral legitimacy.

As a result, to an extent that is unusual in many parts of the world, the political consensus — even within the political elite and among the upper socio-economic strata — is markedly pro-poor, granting significant legitimacy to redistributive expenditure and to the central importance of poverty reduction within economic policy. Billions of rands have been spent in infrastructure development, in the roll-out and provision of services, and in the provision of social welfare payments; the need to reduce poverty has figured centrally in uncounted conferences, indabas, workshops, summits, lekgotlas and policy initiatives launched in the name of poverty reduction, poverty eradication and pro-poor growth.

Yet this pro-poor consensus has not produced a pro-poor reality. Millions of South Africans still survive on marginalised and vulnerable livelihoods, economically disempowered, and with scant chances of upward mobility. As widely shared as the consensus against poverty, is the agreement that efforts to reduce poverty have not met with satisfactory results. What is the meaning of this disjuncture? How can it be explained and understood? And what are its implications?

This is one of two papers in which I try to explore the disjuncture between the consensus against poverty and the outcomes that have been achieved. In the companion paper to this one (Du Toit 2012), I try to show that part of the answer lies in the structural nature of poverty. I argue that until recently post-Apartheid social and economic policy has tended to avoid confronting the dynamics and processes that perpetuate and entrench poverty, and in some ways has even exacerbated it. In this paper, I argue that part of the problem also lies with the anti-poverty consensus itself and with the discourses that shape it. This paper, in other words, takes a discursive turn: it argues that important as it is to understand the causes of poverty, one should also pay critical attention to how 'poverty' is in turn itself understood, and subject to critical investigation of the underlying ideological frameworks, moral meta-narratives and assumptions that underpin political and policy discourses *about* poverty. They may appear to be transparent or neutral; or to embody a common sense concern about a pressing issue — but they should not be taken for granted. They can mystify or obscure more than they reveal, or frame problems in ways that limit or constrain debate and social action.

I begin by clarifying what is involved in a focus on poverty discourse, and how it differs from the concern with poverty 'concepts' that is standard in texts about poverty research and policymaking. This is followed by a short discussion of the political significance of poverty discourse and its key role in contesting social legitimacy and social resource allocation. I then briefly recapitulate the nature of the dominant traditions of 'poverty talk' in South Africa, and characterise the specific nature of the 'discursive formation' around poverty that took shape in South Africa after 1994. In particular, I describe some of the blind spots and silences produced

by this discursive regime. The paper closes with a discussion of whether it is possible to reframe poverty discourse in ways that allow a more constructive and productive engagement with the dynamics that entrench poverty and with the resources that can be mobilised for social transformation.

It should be stressed that this paper is very much a think-piece: its purpose is to frame questions and problems and to advance some interpretive hypotheses. With some notable exceptions (O'Connor 2002; Olsen 2010; Green 2005), the analysis of discourse and ideology is not something that often forms part of the field of poverty research, and in many ways the topic is under-researched in South Africa. Much more work needs to be done on the empirical complexity and the institutional ramifications of the terrain I try to describe here. I hope that this paper is useful in opening up the question and enables more careful attention to discourse in the South African political and policy debate on poverty and inequality.

2. POVERTY DISCOURSE

A concern with poverty *discourse* is not quite the same as a concern with poverty *concepts* and *definitions*. Discussions of poverty concepts — e.g. of 'absolute' versus 'relative' poverty; of definitions of poverty focusing on 'capacities' rather than monetary resources, of 'multidimensional' poverty and 'consensual definitions' — are of course part of the stock-in-trade of modern day poverty research and policy making (e.g. Alcock 2006). Such conceptual issues are of course important, and some of the problems with poverty discourse in South Africa are indeed related to debates around poverty concepts and definitions. This paper is however concerned with something broader: the political and ideological discourses by which poverty is constructed as an issue of social and political concern in the first place. Poverty in some form or another exists in many places and times, but the ways in which people make political sense of it, the consequences with which it is invested, and the way in which judgements and statements about poverty are linked to resource mobilisation and allocation, differ greatly from context to context. The nature of 'poverty talk' and the ideological frameworks that guide it can play a very important role in shaping what kinds of collective social and political action is taken in response to it. This issue somewhat precedes and underpins the more specific conceptual and technical matters.

A key feature of poverty discourse is that poverty judgements — assertions about the existence of poverty in society, and about who is and who is not poor — are invested with consequence. Obligations, rights and duties are held to arise from them; and they are often linked to arguments about resource allocation resources. This means that the debates and contestations about what poverty is and what it means are usually charged with political significance. By this I do not simply mean that poverty is an 'essentially contested term' (Gallie 1956) — though it is that too. Rather, it also seems often to be a term *of* contestation — poverty talk is a vehicle *for* making and debating political and moral claims. In modern societies in general, and certainly in South Africa in particular, poverty discourse and poverty judgements play a central role in political and ideological struggles around the resource distribution and allocation, about the claims and obligations between citizens and the state, and about the moral and political legitimacy of the social and economic order. In South Africa, for example, the assertion of the intention to do away with poverty — or the invocation of its continued existence — is central to the contestation of the liberatory credentials of the ANC government.

Furthermore, these judgements depend on the cultural and ideological traditions within which they exist. They cannot be understood in isolation from very specific — and very divergent — underlying ideological assumptions and assertions about: the nature of society; the nature of suffering and lack; the value and meaning of human life; and the obligations of citizenship, community membership and solidarity. These traditions draw on and are informed by a wide

range of diverse and sometimes contradictory religious, ideological, historical and cultural traditions about civic duty, social obligation, social solidarity and moral community (see e.g. Iliffe 1987).

As I have argued elsewhere (Du Toit 2010) this diverse and contested history gives the concept of poverty a protean diversity and breadth of meaning, and imparts to it a certain inherent messiness. As it occurs 'in the wild', poverty is a broad and sprawling concept. It has no single, clear 'core' meaning; rather it functions in a *field* of meaning that includes objective material lack; experienced want; indignity; suffering; social standing; the nature of social expectation; social contracts and obligations; and moral desert — often in no particular order and related in no systematic manner. This messiness is not necessarily a bad thing; indeed it is arguably one of the more important and valuable aspects of the notion of poverty as it has circulated in popular discourse in modernity. It is this open-textured, ambiguous character that gives the notion of poverty its valence and its ability to play such a central role in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic social struggles. The notion of poverty is available for mobilisation in a wide range of different contexts and in the service of a multitude of agendas. Its flexibility means that discussions about what poverty is and what it is not play a key role in highlighting (or in hiding) all manner of contentious social problems, and in legitimating (or delegitimating) various political and economic arrangements.

3. POVERTY DISCOURSES IN SOUTH AFRICA[1]

In present–day South Africa, this complex legacy is available for public discourse in very particular ways. It seems that mainstream debates and discussions about poverty in South Africa are shaped by at least three dominant underlying traditions of poverty talk: firstly, a *moral* tradition that focuses on desert and obligation; a *technical* discourse concerned with objectively measurable material lack; and an explicitly political discourse that approaches poverty essentially as a symptom. These traditions are of course not neatly separable, and they tend to be combined or linked in practice; but they involve quite distinct ways of framing or approaching poverty.

Poverty, solidarity and desert

Firstly, much popular poverty discourse focuses on poverty essentially in *moral* terms. The focus is not on *why* people are poor, nor on exactly *how* poor they are; indeed, in contrast to scientific and managerial discourses about poverty, there is not very much conscious concern about the basis upon which poverty judgements are made. Instead, there is a sense that poverty is existentially or intuitively obvious ('you know it when you see it'); other than vague and often (in the eyes of 'experts') quite poorly informed talk about 'breadlines,' poverty is most commonly unpacked in terms of fairly general and un-theorised references to hunger, want, need, lack, indignity and social justice broadly conceived; and to a range of stereotyped signifiers (hunger, lack of shoes, begging at traffic lights, and so on). The most familiar examples of this way of approaching poverty has roots in Victorian discourses about charity and indigency, but it can also draw heavily on other existing religious and social traditions. As Jeremy Seekings has pointed out, in South Africa such notions are for example commonly present in discussions about 'desert', i.e. about who should and who should not, benefit from social welfare (Seekings 2005); for an overview of these arguments in the development of poverty studies in Britain, see (Alcock 2006)). But although these notions of poverty may base their moral framework on notions of poverty that are drawn from religious discourse, they are not exclusively faith-based. When South African journalists, for example draw attention to the persistence of poverty in post-Apartheid South Africa, and refer to poor people 'patiently waiting' for their lives to improve with changing political times, or to nuclear families threatened with dissolution by the depredations of unemployment, they are, just like Victorian writers on the 'deserving poor,' also

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drawing on an essentially moral framework for understanding what poverty is, what the presence of poverty obliges 'society' to do, and what is expected from poor people themselves if they are to benefit from social solidarity. What they have in common is that they are not so much concerned with precise judgements as to who is or is not poor, or with how poor they are, as they are with the nature of the claims and obligations arising from it. A focus on the *depth* or *level* of poverty takes second place to a concern with the *ethical standing* of the people involved, and with the nature of the moral, social and political obligations faced both by 'poor' people themselves and society more generally.

This political and ideological legacy, of course, is politically ambiguous. On the one hand Victorian 'deserving poor' arguments and their present-day descendants can embody conservative or indeed patronising assumptions about poor people. At the same time, it can be argued that some kind of discourse about 'desert', however constructed, is essential for any project that tries to justify pro-poor interventions through some kind of broader discourse of social solidarity or humanitarian concern. As Jeremy Seekings has shown, South Africa's current welfare system would not draw the support it has — a support that, incidentally, cuts across racial lines — without being able to rely on often fairly moralising discourses around 'desert' (Seekings 2005).

Poverty as objective lack

A second important and distinct discursive tradition is often found in approaches that frame poverty in *technical*, *managerial* or *economistic* terms. Again, this is a heterogeneous tradition with a complex and internally contested history. One important strand in this tradition is the attempt to create a ground on which judgements about poverty can be held to be value-free, neutral, objective or scientific. Historically this has taken many forms, ranging from Rowntree's pathbreaking surveys (Alcock 2006), through the desire of the Save the Children Fund, the oldest of present-day relief organisations, to 'elevate charity into an exact science' (Iliffe,1987:199). It also animates the present-day tendency to frame poverty and related concepts in biomedical terms — for example, the definition of food insecurity through reference to calorie requirements and the like (e.g. FAO 2000).

A key issue characteristic of this strand is the tendency to frame poverty as a state that can essentially be defined in terms of some *concretely specifiable degree of objective and measurable lack*. This, incidentally, is the case for *both* 'absolute' *and* 'relative' poverty; this approach is present both when poverty is defined in terms of supposedly invariant human needs, *and* when it is defined in terms of a 'moving' threshold defined with reference to the distribution of resources in a particular society. Attempts to define poverty in terms of monetary poverty lines are only the most obvious example of this approach: 'multidimensional' and 'capability' approaches to poverty — often thought of as challenges to monetary definitions — often operate in very similar ways, especially when they too are reduced to questions of measurement, or of the absence or presence of one 'poverty indicator' or other (Du Toit 2009).

Again, this tradition has an ambiguous political character. Its concern with objectively verifiable measures and indicators means that it is an important component of attempts to frame responses to poverty in ways that go beyond *ad hoc* reactivity and clientelistic or paternalistic relations. This enables poverty policy to be linked to projects of modernity and citizenship that can have an empowering dimension. As a strategy of power–knowledge, the operationalization of poverty through measures and indicators available to a wide range of different poverty concepts, from narrow monetary ones to broad 'capability' poverty approaches that stress the links between poverty and curtailing social and economic agency (e.g. Sen 1985).

At the same time, as I have argued elsewhere (Du Toit 2009), this tradition is also linked to very problematic features. Sometimes the appeal to the need for 'objective' indicators can have a

mystificatory impact. The notion that biomedical indicators of poverty are more 'scientific' can serve to aid the imposition of conservative starvation-linked definitions of poverty. By reifying poverty as a property of individuals and households, this approach can delink the study of poverty from that of social relations. All too often, one of the key effects of this discourse is to give the poverty discourse an entirely spurious scientificity, to give the false impression that it can be put beyond the realm of politics, and to render the knowledge of poverty and policy a matter for specialised technical experts.

Poverty as symptom

Though discourses about poverty and desert, and about poverty as objective lack, are the dominant strains of poverty discourse in South Africa, they are not the only ones. Another important thread, which is in many ways analytically distinct, is a much more explicitly political discourse which primarily focuses on poverty as a *symptom*. It is like the discourse about poverty and desert in two ways: firstly it is not particularly concerned with objectively establishing exactly how poor particular people or individuals are, and tends to base judgements about the presence or absence of poverty on intuitive grounds; secondly it is greatly concerned with the moral consequences and implications of the presence of poverty. But here, the concern is not with the obligations, duties and rights vested in individuals, *vis-à-vis* broader society: rather, poverty is taken as a sign or a symptom of a broader social malaise. Again, this discursive tradition can take a number of political inflections: it is a central component of Marxist, socialist or populist approaches. Even academic Marxist approaches are often characterised by the fact that while the existence of poverty is centrally important to the analytical argument, specifying or defining poverty itself is not seen as an analytically useful or important issue. Taking poverty as a symptom, however, is not the sole prerogative of the political left; it can play as important a role in liberal or even nationalist discourses.

4. GOVERNING POVERTY

These three styles of poverty talk are, as I have stressed, not mutually exclusive, and they do not correspond in any direct way to separate or distinct political traditions. Rather, they represent three important modalities or strategies by which poverty has been linked to judgements about poverty and to social consequences and implications. Each of these approaches can be given many different inflections. Understanding poverty discourse politically requires one to look in more detail at the particular discursive formations or regimes that arise at specific times: the concrete and historically distinct ways in which discourses, institutional formations and forms of scholarly and official practice come together when poverty is addressed politically and socially. When this happens, the field of poverty discourse becomes much less open-ended. Rather, it operates under the hegemony of one or other distinct ideological framework; resources and power end up being mobilised in much more distinct and consequential ways.

A detailed discussion of the history of the formations of poverty discourse in South Africa is well beyond the reach of this paper: suffice it to say that poverty discourse in South Africa has a long and complex history even before the end of Apartheid. My concern here is with the post-Apartheid era and the nature of the historically distinct discursive formations that have dominated the ways in which poverty has been invested with significance and consequence since 1994. To understand these formations, one needs to look not only at the content of 'poverty' talk and the nature of the concepts and conceptual logic that dominate it, but also at the ways in which these discourses are linked to action, how they are embedded in key institutions within and outside the state, and at the concrete and institutional ways in which poverty discourse is linked to the allocation of social resources.

Any generalisation about such a variegated assemblage of discourses, institutions and practices should of course be formulated and treated with caution. Whatever hypothesis or interpretation one makes of the 'logic' or nature of such formations is necessarily inductive. Discursive

formations are often messy, and are characterised at one and the same time by order and pattern as well as disorganisation, misalignment and contradiction. Furthermore, dominant discursive formations are often internally contested and subject to counter-hegemonic challenge. Yet at distinct moments in history, particular and distinct discursive formations can sometimes be seen to arise: times and contexts in which political and policy discourse are organised and shaped in quite distinct and predictable ways.

This is indeed the case in post-1994 South Africa. One of the reasons for this is that in this time, discourse about poverty attained a central *political* valency that it did not quite have in earlier times. There came to be a broad agreement that poverty should be seen as one of the most important and central issues of social concern, probably taking central place only to race and racial antagonism. These two issues have been seen as being deeply entangled, so that addressing 'racial tensions' and dealing with the legacy of poverty are commonly agreed to be two of the most important tasks of the post-Apartheid government. Furthermore, this challenge has been taken up as a coherent and workable project within and around the state — a project that can best be understood as the *government of poverty* (Du Toit 2011). Although political discourse since 1994 has often been characterised by redemptive images of social transformation and a rhetoric of poverty eradication, the central purpose of poverty policy has essentially been to ameliorate and contain its worst political and social effects, while stopping short of challenging the social processes and arrangements that perpetuate and entrench it.

The most important feature of this project, however, is its institutional and political form. As the name suggests, poverty is addressed in the first place as a question of *government* — in other words as a question of the rule and bureaucratic management of populations (Foucault 1979; Burchell *et al* 1991; Lemke 2004). Foucault has argued that the history of the institutions and discourses of modern government can usefully be considered from the vantage point looking at the political calculations whereby states and state-like organisations have approached the management of populations; the politics, as Tania Li has stressed, of 'making live' and 'letting die'. Governments can either decide to invest significant resources in the health, wellbeing and productivity of populations ('making live') — or particular groups may be essentially 'let die', abandoned to fend for themselves (Li 2009). Foucault's matrix also involves the possibilities of 'making die' and 'letting live', but those are not so relevant in this case. In this case, the post-Apartheid project of the government of poverty involved an enormous and expensive 'make live' project, pivoting on the distribution of significant amounts of resources (social goods and services, cash transfers, and so on) towards target populations.

Three key points are worth stressing here. Firstly, this huge 'make live' project centrally depends on the ability to use the bureaucratic state and state-like organisations as a vehicle to make a range of social goods and services available to target populations. This ability is dependent on very particular forms of knowledge production. Measures need to be taken that allow the state to 'see' the poor population, and that allow decisions about the disbursement and distribution of services to be based on technical, managerial and juridical calculations (Scott 1998). This meant that poverty scholarship of a particular kind — poverty research that can generate the kinds of knowledge and information that a bureaucracy can act on — is absolutely central to the government of poverty (O'Connor 2002). The explosion of detailed quantitative and qualitative research about the conditions and wellbeing of South Africa's marginalised poor (Seekings 2001) is directly linked to this need.

Secondly, although the Foucauldian emphasis on the instrumentality of the calculations and choices involved may suggest a kind of functionalism, it is important to remember that these calculations are also part of a complex *political* contract, in which the fact that poor people are active political agents is a key and significant factor. The ability to provide significant social resources to a poor and economically marginalised population is thus a key component of the political sustainability of the post-Apartheid political formation.

Thirdly, although providing service delivery, social grants and so on is characterised by a complex politics, one of the most important aspects of the government of poverty is that it depends on (and is part of) a process of *depoliticising* poverty and disconnecting it from questions of social conflict, inequality and antagonism. This depoliticisation can be seen in four key ways:

1. A central role is played by the close association of the government of poverty with forms of knowledge about poverty that give pride of place to econometric approaches. These frame knowledge of poverty as being in the first place knowledge of the attributes and experiences of individuals or households. This is essential to the process of approaching poverty as an object of neutral and scientific knowledge and of technocratic and politically neutral management. But at the same time it tends to disconnect the knowledge of poverty from an understanding of the social and political context in which it comes about, so that the study of poverty is all too easily reduced to the study of the poor (Du Toit 2004).

2. This disconnection from social relations supports the perpetuation of misleading and mystificatory causal and explanatory accounts of poverty. Poverty is seen as resulting from economic inefficiency and from constraints upon growth, and the assumption is made that more economic growth, as such, would be enough to 'mop up' poverty. Structural accounts of poverty, which highlight the extent to which poverty in South Africa has been produced by the nature of South Africa's growth path, tend to be marginalised. This means that discussion of poverty is therefore also disconnected from a consideration of the ways in which addressing poverty may require existing vested interests to be challenged or restructured.

3. It is worth noting that this depoliticising trend means that poverty talk often has an uncomfortable and unclear relationship with discourse about race. Now obviously, though race is no longer the basis for inequality that it was under Apartheid (Seekings & Nattrass 2005), racial identity and racial antagonism still play a role in shaping how poverty is experienced, shape the way in which the impacts of inequality and exclusion are felt, and play a key role in the nature of the conflicts that arise around inequality and redistribution. Yet academic and official poverty discourse often tends to 'suspend' the effects and presence of race, so that the reality of race is often not acknowledged, or is acknowledged in indirect and euphemistic ways. This is of course closely linked to the deracialisation of the workings of the South African government. Yet it also means that central political dynamics of responses to poverty and inequality — racialised antagonisms and perceptions that are central and essential to the way in which people act — tend to be passed over or left aside. In addition, the enduring presence of racialised processes of exclusion in the lives of poor people is often not acknowledged.

4. These discourses are often characterised by a failure to acknowledge and recognise the agency of poor people, the complexity of their choices, and the diversity and complexity of the challenges they face. One example of this is the central place in official and academic poverty discourse of the category of 'the poor'. This is a very problematic notion. It is important to remember that this is not a category with any real, sociological analytic content; rather it is a statistical construct. Whoever is considered as belonging (or not belonging) to 'the poor' is not determined by any significant social differentiations, but rather by the assumptions informing the underlying measurement process and the indicators that are used for the purpose. Different population groups, with very divergent social, structural and situational characteristics are thus lumped into a single homogenous category. Another aspect of this problem is the tendency of popular discourse — on both the right and the left — to construct poor people as essentially passive (e.g. the discourse about 'welfare queens' and dependency on the right, as well as the construction in some species of left discourse of the poor and dispossessed essentially as 'bare life', excluded victims without political agency).

This depoliticisation has complex consequences and implications. On the one hand it is useful. The construction of poverty as an object of scientific knowledge and technocratic management allows a regular and systematic approach to decisions about allocating redistributive resources, and allows them to be legitimised through reference to notions about the objectivity and neutrality of scientific and managerial judgement. The divisive and politically charged issues that — in the 1970s and 1980s — served to polarise and dichotomise South African society could be reframed in new ways and constructed as simple practical issues of social policy. In addition this depoliticisation also plays an enormously important role in legitimising the post-Apartheid government's 'make live' project and the significant social expenditure it incurs.

On the other hand, it also has more problematic implications. While it allows the development of a broad social consensus around the need to address poverty, it does so in ways that mystify and misrepresent it. The policy narratives in terms of which pro-poor policy is justified tend to avoid or sidestep confronting the ways in which key features of post-Apartheid capitalism contribute to the perpetuation of poverty and inequality. This undermines the ability of poverty discourse to deal effectively with the limitations and shortcomings of the post-1994 pro-poor policies.

5. A FALTERING HEGEMONY

Evaluating the strengths and limitations of the project of the government of poverty is a complex task. Elsewhere (Du Toit 2012) I have considered what can be contributed to such an assessment by a considering its practical achievements. These have been both considerable and limited. On the one hand, the scale and extent of the resources that have been mobilised for redistribution and service delivery has been significant for a middle-ranking and middle-income country. The roll-out of basic services has made a significant positive contribution to the well-being of marginalised and poor people, while cash transfers have tended to be well-targeted and have significantly supported the health, nutritional status, agency and even economic activity of poor people (Bhorat *et al* 2007). In addition, poor people themselves have tended to respond effectively and resourcefully to the challenges of marginality and the opportunities for survival created by social protection and survivalist improvisation, constructing complex livelihood strategies, linking urban and agrarian, formal and informal, private and public resources (Neves & Du Toit *forthcoming*). This undermines the constructions of the poor as passive and excluded victims that exist on both the right and the left. Rather than welfare-dependent parasites or marginalised and excluded outsiders, poor people engage effectively and resourcefully on the adverse terrain of South Africa's centralised and corporatised economy.

On the other hand, post-Apartheid policy has tended to avoid confronting head-on the structural and systematic constraints that keep poor people marginalised. For ten years, policy was dominated by strong assumptions that economic growth as such, led by the initiatives and interests of big business, would trickle down to the poor. Policy frameworks failed to counter structural disadvantage and in many cases even perpetuated or exacerbated the processes and dynamics of marginalisation. Only in the last five to seven years has the mainstream policy debate begun to confront aspects of the structural drivers of segmentation and marginalisation (Du Toit & Neves 2007); but this recognition is still only piecemeal, and progress in shifting or challenging structural drivers of inequality is still fraught with difficulty.

But the project of the government of poverty needs to be evaluated by more than only looking at its effectiveness in ameliorating, reducing or even eradicating poverty. It also needs to be considered as a *political* discourse; as one of the dominant discursive frameworks within which key issues of social justice, inequality and moral and political legitimacy is framed and contested in South Africa today. What are its strengths and weaknesses as a hegemonic project? To what extent does it allow these politically charged and economically complex issues to be framed and conceptualised in effective ways?

To a large extent the answer seems to be that the depoliticising and decontextualising features of post-Apartheid discourse on poverty are subject to crisis and instability; firstly, as a framework for policy debate and decision-making it is undermined by the limited and inadequate theories of change on which it relies. This constrains the nature of the policy debate and obscures some of the most difficult policy choices. And this means that the anti-poverty consensus in South Africa is characterised by a central and very problematic ambiguity: on the one hand, the depoliticisation of poverty plays a key role in allowing the development of a temporary consensus and mobilising social support behind redistribution and 'make live' politics; on the other hand, this also means that these issues are framed in mystifying and misleading ways that give much poverty talk in South Africa an ungrounded character. While a moral consensus is forged, it is not rooted in a confrontation with the limitations and constraints on what social policy and economic growth can achieve, or with the real conflicts of interest that continue to characterise South African society.

Secondly, politics does not go away. Discourses of evidence-based policymaking seek to ring-fence policy decisions as the prerogative of technocrats and experts; this laundering operation can, in South Africa, only be partly successful. While, within official discourse, it might be possible to conceptualise poverty as something that can be known through objective indicators and disconnected from social relationships and inequality, other voices are speaking too. The politically loaded and charged nature of social inequalities and their entanglement with race and social identity cannot be entirely neutralised. In particular, the presence and visibility of high degrees of social inequality in South Africa, accompanied by popular experiences of marginalisation and social immobility, mean that poverty government as a hegemonic project — a project of containing or managing the political consequences of structural inequality — is subject to heavy strains. The political gains that proceed from rolling out social services and grants are diminished by the context of deeply entrenched inequality in which they are received. The traditions and discourses of 1980s-style popular mobilisation are still strongly embedded in political culture; as the increasing incidence of 'service delivery protests' and wildcat strikes show, these traditions are still relevant and effective as a political vocabulary. The logic of these protests is of course very different: they are not part of a broad popular mobilisation against a common enemy; rather, the symbols and language of popular struggle are used to legitimise and make specific and local claims (Von Holdt *et al* 2011). For all that, they mean that the ability to use 'make live' policies to buy political stability is limited.

6. POVERTY TALK AT THE CROSSROADS

This has important consequences for the anti-poverty consensus in South Africa. Most obviously, one consequence is the increasing disjuncture between the hopes and intentions embodied in this consensus on one hand, and what has actually been achieved on the other. Important as the real achievements of service delivery and social protection policy have been, these achievements are broadly agreed to be inadequate. There is a real danger that South Africa's pro-poor consensus can succumb to discouragement and even cynicism. One danger is that it becomes increasingly symbolic and rhetorical in nature, divorced from social reality — or that it splinters altogether, and that poverty eradication or reduction moves slowly off the centre of the political agenda, giving way to other, less inclusive definitions of the national project. Another danger is that the discourse around poverty is increasingly characterised by an ever-deepening disconnection between popular and policy discourses; between the spaces of technocratic policy making and the embodied language of violence, confrontation and repression on South Africa's streets (Aliber 2010).

In this context, it seems that South Africa's post-apartheid consensus against poverty is at a crossroads. Different responses are possible to the increasingly evident limitations of the existing project, and to the dynamics of civil unrest that accompany it. On the one hand, there is already significant evidence — internationally as well as in South Africa — of the 'securitisation'

of the discourse on poverty. This involves the development of a policy discourse that frames hunger, poverty, inequality and marginality as *security* risks (Naylor 2011). This evokes the possibility that the discourse of development and the government of poverty becomes increasingly a politics of *containment*, defending and protecting privileged and wealthier populations of the 'security societies' of the industrial north *against* the marginalised and impoverished South (Duffield 2008).

This however is not the only response. The discourse on poverty can also be developed in ways that draw on other strands. In particular, discourses of social justice and social solidarity can play an important role in forging frameworks for understanding and dealing with poverty that are not so depoliticised and limited. Internationally, a wide range of differing initiatives on the left draw on these resources, ranging from the radicalisation of 'make live' politics to the social movements around basic citizens' grants (Hanlon *et al* 2010) and solidarity among informal sector workers to the high profile interventions of the 'Occupy' movement. The strength of South African cultures of 'giving' (Habib & Maharaj 2008) and popular concern about inequality and social injustice indicates that these traditions may have significant and as yet untapped political potential. Certainly, such discourses can link notions of 'desert' and mutual social obligations that are not entirely depoliticised; but the extent to which they can support and invigorate a more realistic, more grounded 'pro-poor' consensus remains still to be seen.

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