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Making Sense of 'Evidence'

Notes on the Discursive Politics of
Research and Pro-Poor Policy Making

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PLAAS Working Paper 21: Making Sense of 'Evidence': Notes on the discursive politics of research and pro-poor policy making

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the assumptions underlying 'evidence based' approaches to poverty reduction impact assessment. It argues that the discourse of Evidence-Based Policy (EBP) offers poor guidance to those who seek to ensure that social policy making is informed by the findings of social science. EBP discourse relies on a technocratic, linear understanding of the policy making process and on a naïve empiricist understanding of the role of evidence. This renders it unable to engage with the role of the underlying discursive frameworks and paradigms that render evidence meaningful and invest it with consequence: EBP discourse does not help us understand either how policy changes, or what is at stake in dialogue across the 'research-policy divide'. Rather than simply focusing on evidence, approaches to policy change need to focus on how evidence is used in the politically loaded and ideologically compelling 'policy narratives' that contest rival policy frameworks. The paper considers an example from the South African context – the shift to the 'two economies' framework and the policy interventions associated with ASGISA – and explores the implications for approaches to research more attuned to the realities of the policymaking process. It concludes with a discussion of the implications for social researchers and policy makers.

Keywords: Evidence-Based Policy; poverty reduction; impact assessment; ideology and discourse analysis

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ACRONYMS

ANC	African National Congress
ASGISA	Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa
DfID	Department for International Development
EBP	Evidence-Based Policy
GEAR	Growth, Employment and Redistribution
NDP	National Development Plan
PSPPD	Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNPDF	United Nations Partnership for Development Framework
USA	United States of America

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... it was hard to argue the evidence, displayed here on the cliffside like a classroom diagram. Graham would have very much liked to take his first thesis advisor by the scruff of the neck and haul him to this very point and shove his face into such a display ... See that! He would have said. How can you deny the facts! But of course it was not actually a cliff of facts, but of stone.

Kim Stanley Robinson, Antarctica

1. INTRODUCTION¹

Discussions of poverty reduction impact assessment tend to involve a very particular mix of abstract theory and practical concern. On the one hand, discussions very often devolve into arcane theoretical considerations about the nature of poverty, the indicators and measures by which it can be assessed, and what this means for methodology and research design. On the other hand, this theoretical abstraction is usually yoked to a set of practical, action-oriented, real-world concerns: how can we make sure that policies and interventions aimed at poverty reduction are really working? What kind of evidence constitutes reliable indications of the impact of pro-poor programmes? And how can we ensure that this evidence is actually used by policymakers, and that it informs the process of making, implementing, and revising policy?

This paper takes a different tack. It is not concerned with the theory of poverty measurement. Neither is it concerned with the 'how to' of 'getting' or 'communicating' the 'evidence'. Rather, it seeks to look critically at some of the assumptions informing these concerns. The paper is part of a broader engagement with the politics of knowledge production in policy-oriented social science research. This engagement is based on a desire to better understand the relationship between two different worlds of practice — that of social science research and scholarship on the one hand, and that of social action, intervention and policymaking on the other. Against this background, this paper focuses on the habits of thought and agendas associated with the currently dominant way of thinking about these relationships — the discourse of 'Evidence-Based Policymaking' (EBP).

It is important to stress the uniqueness and distinctiveness of EBP discourse. Present day discussions about social policy and research tend to default almost automatically into EBP-speak, as if the desire to ensure that research informs policy must necessarily lead to the concern with 'getting' and 'presenting' the 'evidence'. EBP-speak is, however, only one way of approaching this issue. While the articulation of technocratic policymaking with systematic scientific social knowledge has existed in its present form at least since the middle of the nineteenth century (Foucault 1979), the prominence and spread of EBP discourse is a relatively new phenomenon. Originally strongly associated with the rise of new Labour in Britain (Greenhalgh & Russell 2009), it has since entered the field of development and poverty studies and spread further afield, largely transmitted through the vector of the UK Department for International Development (DfID).

In South Africa, for instance, the Programme for Pro-poor Policy-Development inside the Presidency explicitly sees its task as 'building' EBP (Monitoring and Learning Facility 2012). More recently, in the USA, the Obama administration has also given significant emphasis to EBP

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(Haskins & Baron 2011). At the time of writing, EBP plays a central role in shaping research and poverty studies in sub-Saharan Africa and the 'developing world.' Increasingly, these initiatives are linked to a specific push for rigorous, 'scientific' approaches to evidence, e.g. in proselytising for systematic reviews and the resurgence of randomised control testing of social policy initiatives (Wallace *et al* 2004; Barrett & Carter 2010; Shaffer 2011).

On the face of it, the push in government circles to ensure that the design of pro-poor initiatives is based on good scientific evidence should be a welcome trend. Surely no-one could argue that evidence does not matter! And surely social scientists can and should play a key role in ensuring that policymakers get, and use, the best evidence available! But this apparent common-sense appeal belies underlying complexities. This paper argues that while the desire to ensure that policy making is informed by social science may be laudable, the assumptions underlying these assertions about the role of evidence and science turn out to be dubious, and provide a poor guide to the challenges involved.

2. A POLICY ABOUT POLICIES

Firstly, it is important to make the simple point that EBP is a *normative* discourse. Discussions about EBP often involve general statements about the relationship between evidence and policy. One may, in the literature, find some descriptive accounts of the ways in which research findings are actually used, but for the most part, EBP discourse is about what *should be*: about the *desirable* relationships between evidence and policy; about what constitutes *appropriate* conduct for researchers and for policymakers. In other words, EBP is a meta-political project; a policy *about* policy. And as such it has its own politics, seeking to define how policy should be made, who should make it, whose authority shall count, what shall count as 'evidence', how it is to be interpreted, and how these conclusions should be communicated.

Secondly, EBP is shaped by its roots and genesis as a project of New Labour. A central part of the new Labour government that swept into power in 1997 was the *Manifesto for a New Public Management*, which insisted that policy decisions should not be based simply on political sentiment and ideological priors, but rather on the sober assessment of scientific evidence (Cabinet Office 1999; Powell 2000). This was, in part, a reaction against Thatcherite anti-intellectualism and a Tory government that had been actively hostile to university-based social science (Posner 2002). (It was also quite probably shaped by the need to create clear blue water between 'new labour' and the ideological arguments of 'old labour' and the socialist left.)

These ideological and political roots are closely linked with the distinctively technocratic nature of EBP discourse. Firstly, policy making is seen as being concerned purely with instrumental rationality (Sanderson 2002) — the famous 'policy is about what works'. Policy makers are expected to avoid value-laden or ideological adjudication between ends; instead, it is assumed that given an agreed upon and non-contentious set of ends, it is their job to find the most practical or efficient way of achieving them. Note that this involves the ancillary assumption that in relation to any policy question, there *is* a right answer: that 'best practices' exist or can be found that are incontrovertibly or measurably preferable to the alternatives. Secondly, it is assumed that adjudication between policy alternatives can and should be based on an impartial, objective, and rational assessment of 'evidence' about their impacts and their results. A corollary of this is the assumption that the quality of policy decisions depends ultimately on making sure that decision makers have access to the 'best' or 'right' evidence, assessed and interpreted in a rigorous way. It is also assumed that such evidence exists, or that it can be generated (or found) through appropriately designed research. Thirdly, it is assumed that 'experts' — including but not limited to professional scientists and university based researchers — can and should play a central role in the process of 'getting the evidence,' analysing it and communicating its implications to policy makers.

3. SOCIAL CHANGE AND POLICY MAKING

Some objections to this project are political, and relate to the social context of EBP as a meta-political intervention. One obvious objection, for example is that EBP discourse can be anti-democratic in its implications, particularly if it is used in ways that make key matters of social significance the prerogative of unaccountable elites, unelected experts and technocratic managers (Davies 2005; Young 2011). Another concern relates to the problems involved in 'exporting' EBP beyond the context of its genesis. This is a key issue for South Africa: it is one thing to roll out an EBP programme in the context of a highly capacitated, Weberian bureaucracy staffed by a professional corps of policymakers with significant capacity for understanding and engaging with evidence, research and social science; it is another thing entirely in the context of South Africa, where the state is weak and vulnerable, where a commitment to Weberian, technocratic efficiency and meritocracy exists alongside and in contradiction with a powerful and important *nationalist* project within the state (Von Holdt 2010), and where public servants with an interest in and a capacity for engaging with social science and research are few and far between. These are important concerns, and there is a need for searching reflection on the challenges created for the policy-making process by the particular political and institutional conditions to be found in the South African state. If subjecting poverty reduction initiatives to scientific evaluation and randomised control testing eludes policymakers and researchers in contexts like the United Kingdom, what hope is there of doing it in South Africa?

Concerns about political implications and institutional location aside, objections also exist to some of the underlying assumptions of the project. The first set of concerns relates to the model of social change that seems to animate approaches to poverty reduction and impact assessment. This model focuses on identifying very specific, narrowly defined outcomes to be achieved, and then looks for evidence that can allow clear and unambiguous attribution of these outcomes to distinct and clearly identifiable interventions. This is a tall order. This understanding of change relies on highly linear approaches to process management. This works well when many or most of the variables that experimenters' control can be controlled, the systems involved are closed or relatively simple, or the processes at stake are simple and susceptible to input/output-outcome analysis (Nelson 2012). But unfortunately, poverty reduction does not conform to any of these preconditions. Pro-poor policy interventions take place in complex, dynamic, open social systems: not only are many of the key variables not easily controllable; but many of the relationships and dynamics are non-linear, dynamic and unpredictable. More pertinently, poverty levels and the specific indicators associated with them co-vary in a social system with many other kinds of change.

This is so particularly in contexts such as South Africa, where poverty is systemic and structural, produced and reproduced by the dominant systems and processes at the heart of the normal functioning of the core economy. In such contexts, any significant attempt to address poverty is not a matter of marginal tinkering; it requires and involves a more general process of social change, in which a number of interlocking systems and processes (e.g. employment policies, industrial practices, migration flows, political dynamics, legal conditions and livelihood patterns) have to change *together*. Isolating one particular chain of intervention and impact in such a situation is an almost impossible task.

A second series of concerns relate to how EBP discourse conceptualises the policy making process itself. The problem is that EBP offers a poor guide to what policymaking is about, and what questions policy makers must decide. Although it is clearly the case that sometimes there *will* be contexts in which significant policy decisions involve simply assessing 'what works' and what doesn't, these occasions are not at all typical. Some of the most important policy debates and decisions, particularly in a deeply divided, multicultural society like South Africa, involve decisions not only about means but also about *ends*. Even when these have been resolved, the question of technical efficacy and clear impact is very rarely decisive. As the rather gruesome

metaphor has it, there are many ways to skin a cat; any particular policy goal can most often be achieved by a wide number of arguably workable but politically very different approaches (Sanderson 2003). The question of what 'works' well (or less well) may not have a clear, decisive, unequivocal or useful answer. And even if 'outcomes' are clear, the implications often are not: we may know that an intervention worked (or did not work), but working out why it did or did not is usually a complex and contested issue.

4. THINKING ABOUT 'EVIDENCE'

The most fundamental difficulties relate, however, to the conceptualisation of the role and nature of evidence, and how it informs social understanding in the first place. EBP appeals ultimately to an understanding of evidence that can perhaps best be described as naïve empiricism. It assumes that understanding social reality is in the first place a matter of understanding *the evidence*; that the clarity, adequacy and accuracy of this understanding depends primarily on having enough (or the right) evidence; that the more evidence you have, the better; that valid findings are primarily guaranteed by objective, value free analysis; that natural science is the best model of the kind of objectivity and rigour needed; and that informing social policy is ultimately a matter of scientists (or intermediaries who understand the science) presenting and communicating what the evidence 'says' as clearly, simply and unambiguously as possible.

All these assumptions are highly debatable. The view of the nature and role of evidence that one finds in the documentation for EBP programmes does not conform to the workings *either* of science *or* of socially informed policymaking. The main reason, of course, is that 'evidence' never speaks for itself. A cliff of stone, as Kim Stanley Robinson's geologist reminds us in the epigraph to this paper, is not a cliff of facts. Between the simple, mute materiality of the geological dig, and the scientific papers that are built on them stands a complex web of argument and enterprise that 'lets the stones speak' and allows observations to be *turned* into scientific facts. An important role is therefore played in science *and* policymaking by the discursive practices that imbue particular findings, observations, experiences, events or records with significance and consequence, allowing them to function as evidence (Latour & Woolgar 1979). Importantly, these same practices and institutions also allow other records, data, givens and observations to be dismissed as irrelevant, inconsequential, wrongly interpreted, or simply as noise.

Perhaps the most well-known argument about how this works in the world of science has been made by Thomas Kuhn, who has emphasised the role in scientific progress of the underlying paradigms that determine what kinds of questions scientists ask. What is to be counted as evidence, how one adjudicates between explanatory accounts and how that evidence is to be interpreted (Kuhn 1996). What makes scientific revolutions possible is not simply the discovery of new evidence, but new *theoretical* approaches and explanatory frameworks (Kuhn's famous 'paradigm shifts') that allow the evidence to be re-framed and re-interpreted. In a similar way, policy makers also rely on underlying interpretive paradigms. Policy debates and battles pivot on the construction of powerful 'policy narratives': ideologically and politically compelling stories about what needs to be done, and about why one course of action makes sense while others do not (Hajer 1993). The most important issue in these debates is not simply the facts themselves, but how the facts are framed; and what assent to particular facts is taken to imply.

Crucially, this is so *even* in contexts where policy makers seek to be 'rational' and to base their recommendations on scientific understanding of what happens in the social world (Stevens 2011). For such policy makers, evidence and appeals to facts may matter greatly, but what is decisive is not simply the evidence on its own but the frameworks of assumptions and the underlying narratives which render particular pieces of evidence salient and imbue them with consequence while other considerations are excluded, marginalised, left out of view or

considered irrelevant. In other words, the problem with EBP discourse's narrow focus on evidence is not simply that in the real world, cynical policy makers ignore evidence and base policies instead on political expediency, ideology, or the demands of patronage; rather, it is that evidence itself — what it is, and what it means — is often a complex and politically contested matter.

One important consequence of this, both in the world of science and in the world of policy making is the extraordinary persistence of dominant paradigms or narratives in the face of observations and experiences which *don't* fit neatly into their accounts of reality. The history of science as well as that of social policy making is replete with examples of explanatory accounts and programmes of action which survived in spite of apparently countervailing evidence or unwanted results. This is to be expected. The world, after all, always exceeds the sense we make of it; any account of reality necessarily needs to leave many things out or unexplained; and even the best account of social or natural reality is always just the best we have *so far*, so that unexplained or unaccountable observations do not always simply invalidate them but sometimes have to be ignored for the time being or left for later investigation (or until a better account of reality or narrative comes along that offers a more coherent, more compelling account). What matters in these shifts of understanding is not simply the brute weight of accumulated contrary evidence, but also the development of new interpretive frameworks, research projects or accounts of reality that imbue previously disregarded evidence with new significance, and which allow old facts to make sense in new ways.

Hermeneutically speaking, then, both scientists and policy makers engage in sense-making practices in which evidence plays a crucial if contested role. Concretely speaking, however, the purposes and functions of these sense-making practices diverge sharply on the different sides of the research-policy divide. Policy makers and scientists live in different worlds, where different things matter (Choi *et al* 2005; Nelson 2012). One important difference is that 'policy stories' are never simply narratives about what is the case, but also about what should be done. While the argument for any given course of action may involve arguments about the empirical nature of society, poverty, social change or outcomes, such arguments also need to consider other relevant issues: concerns about resources or appropriateness; about the link or overlap with other initiatives or conflicting departmental prerogatives; about political marketability and impact on political reputations; or about alignment with ruling ideologies or common sense, and so on.

These considerations weigh heavily when there are contending policy narratives. A successful policy narrative is one that manages not only to make the case for a particular course of action, but does so in a way that shows where this particular policy initiative will fit into the broader context, and manages to reconcile any particular initiative or aim with a vast array of other considerations. The most successful policy narratives often depend on slippages of meaning, carefully constructed areas of ambiguity, artful redefinition and judicious silences that allow trade-offs to be hidden, divergent interests to be reconciled, and so on.

Another important difference is that one of the main functions of policy narratives is to create *certainty*. Decisions have to be taken in an uncertain and mostly unknowable world; despite that (or perhaps precisely because of that!) the narratives in terms of which decisions are justified need to downplay uncertainty and doubt in order to make a compelling case for moving in one direction rather than another (Stevens 2011). Evidence matters in these arguments, but both the style of presentation and the nature of the evidence itself are fundamentally different from the usage in science; what matters is not the careful and meticulous description of one particular aspect of reality, but rather using evidence *rhetorically* to buttress arguments.

This imparts an important tension to the project of 'evidence-based' policy advice. For the reality is that even the 'best' evidence only rarely delivers clear and unambiguous policy implications: indeed, 'comprehensive reviews', far from shoring up the foundations for decision making, may

leave things even more inconclusive than before (Boaz & Pawson 2005). In fact the problem policy makers often face is not a dearth of evidence but a surfeit of it, much of it pointing in different directions. Scholarly research is usually conservative in nature, and is better at making cautious judgements and hedging bets than at delivering certainty.

If this disjuncture is not recognised, the implications can be damaging. Policymakers tend to ask academic researchers for clarity they can't provide; and donors may expect that researchers eschew 'unnecessary complexity' and provide clear and unambiguous 'take home advice'. Academics who are eager to please policy 'users' may be tempted to oversimplify their findings, or to overstate the certainty and scope of their conclusions in ways that their scholarship, strictly speaking, cannot justify. The result is a state of affairs that serves neither academic research nor good policymaking, as policymakers seek to evade their political decision-making responsibility, while academic discourse is dumbed down and oversimplified, and researchers transform themselves into snake-oil merchants, peddling certainties that are not theirs to sell.

5. HOW POLICY CHANGES

This view of the political nature of evidence also has consequences for our understanding of policy change. Policy change, of course, constitutes in some way a distinct and unusual process. In fact, moments of genuine and decisive policy change are few and far between. Much more is at stake than in situations when one is merely assessing the impact of a policy, or using data to check or disconfirm one or other of the assumptions of a particular policy intervention. When policies change, there are important institutional and personal consequences; even more contentiously, positions and investments previously defended as the only rational or reasonable ones may now have to be quietly abandoned. Under such conditions, when the political stakes are high, the power of ideologically compelling policy narratives is even more important than usual. In accounts of how policies change and how policymakers adjudicate between rival approaches, one needs to look not simply at whether or not they were influenced by any particular body of evidence but also at the role played by the political narratives through which change is contested and legitimised. This is not to say that research findings do not matter in the policy process; indeed, appeals to 'evidence' may play a key role. If, however, we are to understand the role of evidence we need to look at how policy narratives work with it; how it is used; and how it is alternately marginalised or seized on, ignored or imbued with significance.

Consider, for example, the role played in the evolution of policy making *and* research on poverty in South Africa by the articulation within the South African Presidency of the 'two economies' paradigm. One of the interesting aspects of this shift is the way in which this new framework involved both continuities and discontinuities with some of the policy narratives that had dominated mainstream political discourse in the ANC until that time. Set out for the first time in former President Thabo Mbeki's weekly 'Letter from the President' column in August 2003, the notion that poverty in South Africa was the result of the disjuncture between a globalised, well-functioning 'first world economy' and a moribund, stagnant 'third world economy' marked an important break with the 'trickle down' orthodoxy that had characterised mainstream South African thinking about economic growth and poverty reduction since the adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy (GEAR). It provided a significantly different account of the nature and causes of social inequality from that which had dominated ANC political discourse in the period since Mbeki's rise to power in 1999 (Du Toit & Neves 2007). It played much the same role in Mbeki's discourse that the notion of the 'two nations' had played in his accounts of South African reality in earlier years; but while the 'two nations' metaphor emphasised the salience of enduring white *racial* privilege, the 'two economies' paradigm embodied an explicit recognition of the development of class and intra-racial inequality. Even more importantly, it was a framework that highlighted the possibility that inequality could be a

result of the nature and structure of South Africa's economic growth path itself, and not merely a legacy of the past or a result of continuing race privilege.

Five things are particularly interesting about the 'two economies' paradigm: Firstly, a significant role was played by the institutional context in which it was articulated: It was announced from 'above' by a sitting president in an administration characterised by a high degree of presidential hegemony: a context in which the Office of the President to a great degree defined what was, and what was not up for discussion in policymaking circles. This probably accounts in great measure for its uptake and importance. Secondly, while this was a period of strong presidential hegemony, this hegemony existed in a political space that was assiduously and jealously contested by a large number of warring factions and tendencies (Marais 2011). This meant that meaning and interpretation of the 'two economies' metaphor soon became itself highly contested, with different role players and commentators seizing on it and 'spinning' it in ways that served different agendas. Thus 'two economies' discourse rapidly acquired several very different flavours. On the one side there was a 'neoliberal' interpretation which refused to problematise the functioning of the 'first world economy' and which enlisted a broadly dualist analysis of a South Africa that owed a lot to fairly traditional South African liberalism. On the other there was a more radical and critical interpretation that used the 'two economies' metaphor to advance an analysis of inequality and economic power that problematised high degrees of concentration and corporate control in the mainstream economy (Philip 2010).

Thirdly, these battles greatly broadened the scope of what could be legitimately proposed and debated in academic and policy debates on South African poverty. Before the rise to centrality of the 'two economies' debate, analyses and arguments that fingered the nature of South African capitalism as a key contributing cause of poverty tended to be confined to marginal positions on the left. Thabo Mbeki's explicit disavowal of 'trickle-down theory' allowed these critiques to be taken much more seriously in the policy mainstream. Crucially, it allowed a range of policymakers and researchers who were far more critical of the nature of South African capitalism to advance policy positions and social programmes that went some distance beyond what had been thinkable earlier. New interventions like the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA), innovations like the Community Works Programme, and many of the key issues canvassed in the National Development Plan (NDP), for instance, owe much to the way in which the rise of the 'two economies' paradigm allowed an engagement with key structural aspects of the core economy (Philip 2010).

Fourthly, within these battles 'evidence' and research played a crucial and complex role — but it was not a role which aligns neatly with how these things are portrayed in most accounts of 'evidence-based' policy making. The 'two economies' paradigm was not in any direct or simple way the result of Mbeki and his allies becoming aware of mounting 'evidence' about the persistence of social inequality. Those uncomfortable facts had been plentifully in evidence from the beginning. Rather, the significance of the new doctrine was that it allowed a re-valuation and re-framing of *existing* evidence. What mattered was not whether or not one accepted that poverty still persisted (clearly it did!), or that social inequality had worsened; what mattered was what this evidence was taken to *mean* and the political significance granted to it.

This had been a contested sore point in ANC politics (Marais 2011). One of the most striking aspects of pro-poor policy making in South Africa is how, until the mid-2000s, the dominant theories of change that seemed to be informing official discourse about poverty relied on an analysis that avoided confronting the structural nature of poverty in South Africa. Instead, official discourse was informed by a 'residualist' conception that saw poverty simply as a legacy of Apartheid, and that assumed that modernising growth by itself would be sufficient to eradicate it. This account of change ignored the ways in which key elements of the mainstream economy perpetuated and intensified the marginalisation of poor and landless people (Du Toit 2011). The evidence of this marginalisation was there, and policy makers were aware of it. While

policy debates were dominated by hegemonic narratives that seamlessly linked economic growth, poverty reduction, globalisation and modernisation, arguments that linked the perpetuation of poverty to specific features of post-Apartheid capitalism tended to be marginalised; evidence of the failure of trickle down was, as Thomas Mathiesen would put it, 'silently silenced' (Stevens 2011). Those who highlighted the ways in which 'growth' policies themselves were perpetuating poverty were seen as offering comfort to 'workerists' or the ANC's opponents on the left. As the authors of the 2003 United Nations Partnership for Development Framework (UNPD) *Human Development Report* found out very quickly, the South African government would quickly and angrily reject accounts of this evidence that framed it not simply as a legacy of the racist past, but also as a result of problems with post-liberation policies (Seekings 2006).

Mbeki's articulation of the two economies doctrine was a bold intervention that allowed the ANC to 'reframe' key social facts and made it possible for these facts to be read in a new way. It allowed important (if uneven) changes in the *politics* of evidence, redefining what could count as 'evidence' and how certain kinds of evidence could be used in policy debate. Evidence that previously had been awkward, dangerous, or not 'useful' in the discussion of possible policy changes could now be invoked, and valuable political space was created for formulating policies that sought to engage with the ways in which central processes and institutions in the core economy worked to marginalise poor and powerless people.

Finally, this ideological and political break was only partial, and may have been overtaken by subsequent events. Debates and contests about the direction of economic policy and inclusive growth in South Africa since the mid-2000s are best characterised as a war of position within the state, with small groups of relatively left-of-centre policy makers concentrated in particular ministries, in a context still dominated by predominantly 'neoliberal' and nationalist ideologies. Since 2009, this war of position has had inconclusive results. One of the great initial strengths of the 'two economies' doctrine – its close association with the person of then President Thabo Mbeki — swiftly became a disadvantage; but at the same time it remained an important element in most left-of-centre takes on Congress politics. This means that it has left an ambiguous legacy. For example, while the 2008 draft anti-poverty strategy contained a stringent analysis of the exclusionary and concentrated nature of South African capitalism and the negative implications for inclusive growth, the 2010 version of the same document abandoned this analysis. The anti-poverty strategy stressed the need to address the monopolistic, centralised structure of the South African core economy and proposed a list of strategies aimed at addressing the key pillars of structural poverty and inequality: by the 2010 version, this was replaced by proposals for a poorly conceptualised and impractical 'War on Poverty', a voluntarist programme that placed the emphasis of poverty reduction initiatives narrowly on the initiatives of poor households themselves. Even the NDP, while containing a strong emphasis on employment, placed much less emphasis on the ways in which the dynamics of marginalisation and inequality were being perpetuated by key features of the core economy.

6. CONCLUSION

Proponents for EBP argue that it is needed because it can take policy-making 'beyond ideology, politics and guesswork' (The Urban Institute 2003). This is an exaggerated claim and misrepresents the issues. EBP discourse involves a narrow and technicist understanding of what is involved in policy making; it has a naïve empiricist view of the role of evidence in social science; and it misunderstands the importance of politically and ideologically loaded 'policy narratives' in policy change, *even* in situations where these policy debates do involve appeals to 'evidence' and research findings. The result is a view of the role of social science research findings in the policy process that is in one sense too narrow and constricted and in another sense too optimistic and ambitious. It is too optimistic and ambitious because at its crudest EBP

discourse overstates the degree to which appeals to evidence can decide complex policy issues; at the same time it is too narrow and constricted because the technocratic concern with 'what works' ignores the wide range of other ways in which findings from social science research can inform, illustrate, enlighten, enrich and complicate policy discussions.

I have argued that a better understanding of the relationship between social science research and policy making requires, *inter alia*, a more adequate understanding of the role of 'evidence' in science and in the policy process. In particular, I have stressed the importance of understanding the underlying paradigms and forms of discursive practice that shape what counts as evidence and that imbue that evidence with meaning and significance. In particular, I have emphasised the importance of the politically and ideologically compelling 'policy narratives' in terms of which policies are debated, contested and legitimised. These narratives play a key part in the politics of evidence. Far from leading to a relativistic scepticism, this realisation can lead to a richer and more sophisticated approach to the task of ensuring that policy is informed by an understanding of social change and process: a focus on what Enrique Mendizabal (2011) has called the contending 'big ideas and arguments' at stake in policy debates and decision making.

To begin with, it allows one to reconceptualise the task itself. All too often, discussions of EBP seem to approach the task as if the problem is that policy-makers have not had access to enough good scientific evidence. An example is the PSPPD in the office of the South African Presidency, which says on its website that it 'aims to increase the use of scientific research and other evidence in the policy-making process' (Monitoring and Learning Facility 2012). But this is an odd definition of the problem. The most important weakness of pro-poor policymaking in South Africa, particularly before the shift to the 'two economies' paradigm was not so much the lack of evidence but the lack of an adequate *analysis*. The key issue here was the domination of the policy debate by hegemonic narratives that ignored the structural nature of poverty and refused to address the ways in which key features of post-Apartheid capitalism itself marginalised and disempowered poor people. Ensuring more appropriate policies, attuned to the economic and social realities requires not only that policy makers 'get the evidence' but that they *make sense* of it — and this is always a politically and ideologically contested issue.

If the task is not simply about 'providing evidence' but rather developing coherent and adequate analyses of social process and social reality — and ensuring that these analyses inform policy design and intervention — a number of things follow: Firstly, it broadens the scope of policy-oriented social science. Social science research is not only needed to provide evidence about what works and what does not; research findings can be used in a wide range of ways: from monitoring changes in society and documenting the outcomes of programmes to exploring the dynamics of social process and interrogating the implicit theories of change that inform policy design. At the same time, these thoughts about the politics of evidence also provide grounds for caution. Interpretations and analyses of change are always political and contestable. We have to abandon the notion that social science can provide a neutral space beyond politics, where issues can be decided in a value-free way. Furthermore, understanding change in open, dynamic, complex systems means that findings are often quite local; results are not easily generalisable, and programmes that work in one context may not work in another. Most importantly, social scientists have to give up the claim that their work can provide a privileged and incontestable ground for policymaking, situated beyond the messiness of 'guesswork and ideology'.

Secondly, this has implications for how one thinks about the process whereby the findings and understandings generated by research come to inform the design and revision of policies. EBP's emphasis on the clear communication of good evidence misses many of the most important issues. What shall count as evidence, what this evidence means, who gets to be part of the conversation, and how it is communicated are all political issues. Arguments for and against change (even those that contain copious reference to the 'evidence' and research findings), can

influence policy only if they engage effectively with the ideological and political policy narratives in terms of which policy change is legitimised and evidence is imbued with consequence.

A wide range of ways exist to think about these struggles, from Gramsci's 'war of position' and the contestation of hegemony inside the state, to notions of 'social learning' and explorations of the 'habitus' and life-world of 'street level bureaucrats'. Whichever framework one uses, changing how bureaucracies and official institutions understand and engage with reality is not a simple process. The terrain is shifting and unpredictable; windows for real policy change are few and far between; and gains are partial and contested. This means, inter alia, that effective use of social science research findings probably requires good knowledge brokers: intermediaries, translators, activists and 'organic intellectuals' who can work strategically across the divide between policymaking and research, helping to shape both research questions and how these inform political and policy decisions.

Most importantly: this is political terrain. Rather than a neat alignment between the interests of socially concerned researchers and rational, evidence-oriented planners, we find a complex process of struggle. In this struggle politicians and policymakers (even well-intentioned, responsible ones) will often seek to use the *symbolic* authority of 'scholarship' and 'science' to impart a spurious legitimacy which well exceeds the real degree of certainty and clarity scholarship can properly claim; while researchers and scientists also need to take political responsibility for their role in the policymaking process. In this context, it is important to defend the critical independence of academic research, and not to allow a situation in which the need for 'user uptake' can cause researchers to abandon their integrity and independence, so that 'evidence-based policymaking' starts turning into 'policy-based evidence making'. It is also important to recognise that designing 'good' pro-poor policy is not something that can be guaranteed by focusing on generic, technical 'best practice' skills: rather, it requires a clear focus on the substantive issues at hand, and the concrete institutional, fragile and contested political nature of the South African state.

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