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# 'Social Exclusion' Discourse and Chronic Poverty: A South African Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

This article questions the export of 'social exclusion' discourse to the field of development and poverty studies. It considers the findings of ongoing research into chronic poverty in the Western Cape district of Ceres, one of the centres of the South African deciduous fruit export industry. It explores the links between the livelihood options of poor people and processes of global integration, agro-food restructuring and the modernization of paternalist farming styles. In this context the concept of 'social exclusion' is of only limited utility, and has significant disadvantages. Although it has the potential to focus attention on the disabling effects of poverty, its most common usage often fails to capture how poverty can flow not only from exclusion but also from processes of integration into broader economic and social networks. The author argues that these are better captured by the notion of 'adverse incorporation', and calls for a more cautious approach to the modernizing myths and moralizing narratives that shape policy debates.

## INTRODUCTION

This article examines the results of in-depth research into the dynamics of livelihoods on the farmed landscapes of the Western Cape in South Africa, and evaluates the utility in the field of development studies of the concept of 'social exclusion' as it has developed out of policy debates in the EU. It argues that there are serious problems with the idea that the use of this concept can be extended to the general analysis of poverty, especially in developing societies. Not only is it crippled by vagueness, but it also carries problematic ideological baggage. This article therefore calls for a move beyond the simple counter-positions of 'exclusion' and 'inclusion', and

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argues for the use of concepts that allow a much more sensitive analysis of the links between livelihood dynamics and the broader discursive, social and spatial formations of power.

The questions raised in the course of this study are wide-ranging and general. The difficulties with the notion of 'social exclusion' as identified below arise in a very specific South African analytical and policy context, but it is suggested that the implications ramify well beyond it. Teasing out these implications and exploring how similar problems arise in other contexts is a task that still remains. So is the project of developing a better critical understanding of the intellectual history of the notion of social exclusion in the field of development studies. The purpose of this contribution is not to develop definite answers in any of these areas, but to open a field of debate.

The article starts with a brief sketch of the expansion of 'social exclusion' talk to the field of development studies. This is followed by a discussion of one case study of the dynamics of chronic poverty in South Africa. This sets the scene for an exploration of how 'social exclusion' helps — and hinders — the understanding of chronic poverty. The article ends with a brief discussion of some of the implications for engaging with policy.

## **EXPORTING SOCIAL EXCLUSION TALK**

From its initial use in French discussions on social policies in the 1970s, the concept of social exclusion has become increasingly dominant in European and UK debates about poverty. It is reported to have increasingly replaced 'poverty' as an object of EU policy concern (Evans, 1998), and has become very closely linked to the institutionalization of official anti-poverty initiatives, such as in the creation in 1997 of an interdepartmental 'Social Exclusion Unit' by the British government (Percy-Smith, 2000).

Since the mid-1990s, increasing numbers of European scholars and commentators have asked whether the concept could be used to understand poverty and chronic poverty in Southern contexts. One important development in this debate was the launch by the International Institute for Labour Studies (IILS) and the UNDP of a series of literature studies on the 'patterns and causes of social exclusion' (Singer, 1997). This project tried to gauge whether the notion of exclusion could be introduced into debates about poverty eradication in developing countries. Some researchers urged caution (for instance, Yépez del Castillo, 1994): 'social exclusion', after all, attained its original currency in the context of discussions about the persistence of pockets of poverty in fairly homogeneous, wealthy countries. 'The excluded' were the 'mentally and physically handicapped, suicidal people, aged invalids, abused children, drug addicts, delinquents, single parents, multi-problem households, marginal, asocial persons' and others who were not protected by social insurance (Silver, 1994: 532). Their situation was

very different from that of poor people in the South, who usually comprised the majority of the population. Furthermore, the legal contexts of states and citizens in Africa differed fundamentally from those countries in which the discourse of exclusion had arisen (Gore, 1994). In addition, the context-specificity of the discourse on social exclusion meant that it could only have a loose and tangential relationship to the Latin American situation of poverty and deprivation (Faria, 1994).

At the same time, some interesting parallels were pointed out: with regard to sub-Saharan Africa, an extensive literature already existed exploring the relationships between social identity and entitlements to natural resources and social goods (Gore, 1994), and while the concept had not gained explicit currency in South Asia, some studies had at least implicitly linked it to processes that could be described as exclusionary (de Haan and Nayak, 1995).

By the end of the 1990s, confidence about using the concept in contexts very different from Northern welfare societies was growing. This was possible in part because its meaning had broadened significantly. For scholars such as de Haan, 'social exclusion' no longer functioned as a descriptive term for the situation of a narrow group of outsiders or misfits. It was now a catch-all term for a wide range of discriminatory and exclusionary social processes, all of which could be seen as contributing to 'deprivation'. Moreover, the focus on social exclusion, it was argued, resonated with other approaches that extended the study of poverty beyond a narrow monetary focus on income and expenditure, that highlighted the multi-dimensional nature of its implications and that focused attention on the longer-term social and institutional processes that shape it (de Haan, 1998). 'Social exclusion' talk and this 'new poverty thinking', they argued, overlapped 'almost completely' (de Haan and Maxwell, 1998: 5). Why not use it to understand poverty in developing societies?

This is the question tackled in this article. Like the concepts of 'social capital', 'vulnerability' and 'risk', the notion of 'social exclusion', freed from the context of its original currency, is taking on a role as an organizing concept in broader meta-narratives about poverty as such (see, for example, Ratcliffe, 1999: 1). In this guise it plays an increasingly important role in the way in which discourses about poverty work to make general sense — especially *policy* sense — of the complex, divergent and locally specific dynamics of deprivation, inequality and public decision-making in various contexts. Given the domination of social and development studies by the theory-mills of the industrialized North, its 'export . . . to the Third World' (Yépez del Castillo, 1994: 629) is all but inevitable. This is not in itself either good or bad: the value of any new discursive, theoretical or methodological product is, after all, determined not by where it comes from but by how it can be adopted, appropriated and bent to local purposes. Rather than being thoughtlessly accepted (or summarily rejected), it needs to be critically tested and evaluated.

## POVERTY, MARGINALITY AND INEQUALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

*Prima facie*, there seems to be some indication that focusing on social exclusion does indeed highlight important aspects of poverty and chronic poverty in South Africa. Recent scholarship (May, 2000; Natrass and Seekings, 2001) suggests that poverty in South Africa is particularly concentrated in two large groups — the marginal working class and an ‘other’ class made of the dispossessed jobless — that are unable to participate fully in the formal economy. Natrass and Seekings (2001) show that in 1993, while the wealthiest 12 per cent of households controlled 45 per cent of the total household income in South Africa, these two impoverished groups, which together comprised some 41 per cent of South African society, only managed to secure 10 per cent of its total income (see Table 1). Analyses based on the 1996 Census and the October Household Surveys and Income Expenditure Surveys conducted by Statistics South Africa have updated Natrass’s and Seekings’s picture somewhat: they suggest increasing inequality since 1993, with inter-racial inequality decreasing, intra-racial inequality increasing, a decline in the income share of the poorest 40 per cent of the population, and a rise in the poverty headcount (Meth and Dias, 2004; Seekings, 2003a; Seekings, Natrass and Leibbrandt, 2003; Whiteford and Seventer, 2000). If anything, the gap between those ‘inside’ the economy and those on its margins has widened.

How should the situation of these large, marginalized groupings be understood? Seekings (2003b) has asked whether they constitute an under-class, and both he and Terreblanche (2003) have explored in general terms the self-reinforcing dynamics that entrench poverty at the margins of the South African economy. Although Terreblanche has tended to use the concept of exclusion fairly confidently, Seekings has articulated some doubts about its utility for comparative, empirical research and analysis (Seekings, 2003b: 42). Be that as it may, Seekings, Natrass and Leibbrandt’s analysis of the structure of South African society raises important and

*Table 1. South Africa’s Class Structure and Income Inequality*

	Mean Household Income R/month 1993	Households in each class as a % of all households	Income in each class as a % of total income
Upper class	7 020	12	45
Semi-professional class	3 264	5	8
Intermediate class	2 257	19	22
Core Working class	1 187	19	11
Petty Traders	1 442	5	4
Marginal Working class	618	12	4
Other	413	29	6
Total		100	100

Source: Natrass and Seekings (2001).

suggestive policy issues. Their various papers are interesting in part because their stratification does not simply focus on income levels but attempts to develop a class analysis, and because they put such a strong emphasis on the divergent interests of, on the one hand, the core working and semi-professional classes and, on the other hand, those at the margins of the economy. In addition they claim to explain why democracy has not led to a more egalitarian distribution of income. The governing African National Congress has its power base in the urban areas. It is particularly sensitive, not to the concerns of the vast underclass of the rural poor and the landless unemployed, but to those of the urbanized working class and business (Natrass and Seekings, 2001). Democracy has politically empowered not the poorest of the poor, but the almost poor, the all-but-poor, and the not-so-poor. The marginalized working class and landless unemployed, they suggest, are poor not only because of their relative exclusion from the formal economy, but also by virtue of their political marginality.

These analyses raise important questions about the policies that are necessary to address the needs of the long-term poor. If the interests and needs of the marginal working class and the landless unemployed are indeed distinctive, what policies and interventions are required in order to address those needs? If the situation of the poorest sections of South African society is defined by their marginality, how can this be reversed? If social exclusion is indeed the best description of the problem, does that mean inclusion is necessarily the cure? And if we jettison social exclusion as an analytical concept, what do we put in its place?

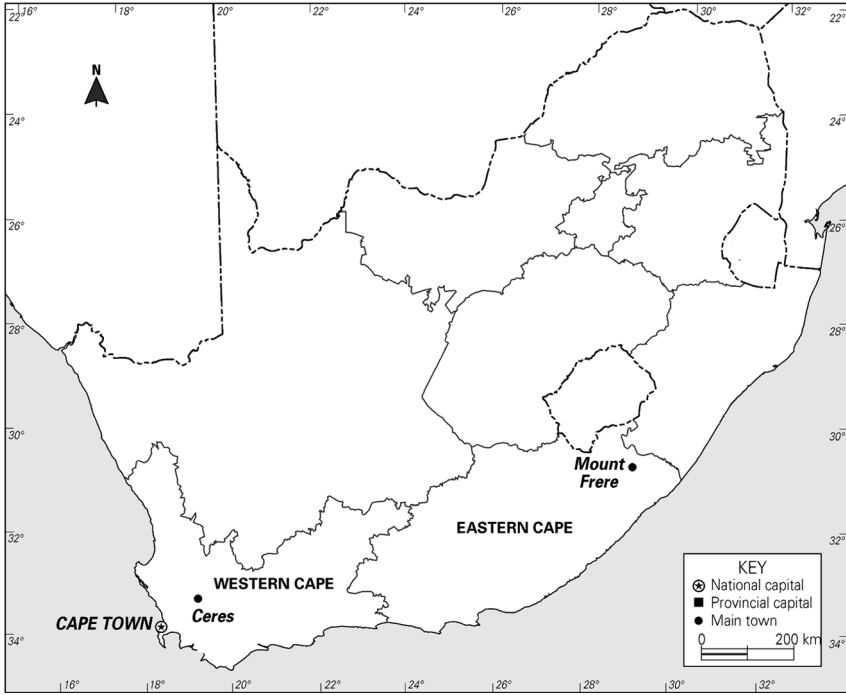
Answering these questions will require a look at the conceptual logic of the notion of social exclusion itself; it will be necessary to make explicit some of its core assumptions and meanings, and those of the broader political and policy narratives of which it forms a part. However, this study will not remain strictly at the abstract level: it will also explore some of the empirical complexity of chronic poverty at one particular site and consider the implications for the concept of social exclusion as a way of making policy sense out of these facts.

## **CERES: A CASE STUDY OF POVERTY ON THE COMMERCIAL FARMLANDS**

### **Poverty and Wealth in a Centre of Industrial Agriculture**

The town of Ceres, situated some 160 km northeast of Cape Town (see Figure 1), may seem an unlikely site for the study of the dynamics of long-term poverty. It is part of a landscape whose abundant natural resources and successful commercial activity would lead to the expectation of decent livelihoods for those who work and live there. For decades it has been one of the epicentres of the deciduous fruit industry, one of the most profitable sectors of South African agriculture. More than 11,000 ha is planted to orchards, and the

Figure 1. Ceres in the Context of the Western Cape



district produces almost 60 per cent of South Africa’s entire export pear crop (Ceres Development Consultants, 2000; Smuts and Alberts, 1988). At the same time, however, there is significant poverty. The workers who pick the fruit and plant the trees have lived for decades in grim conditions, doing back-breaking work for low wages. Fully half of the households in Ceres surveyed in the 1996 census earned less than R 18,000 per annum, and in a third of rural enumerator areas, household incomes were below R 1,000 per month.<sup>1</sup>

**Modernizing Chronic Poverty**

The persistence and modernization of poverty on the farmed landscapes of the Western Cape is a complex issue: its dynamics are intricate and differ from valley to valley. In summary, however, four key themes are crucial.

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1. Exchange rates are volatile; at the time of writing €1 is about R 8.60. At the time of the Census it was R 5.70.

Firstly, an important role has been played by *the paternalist legacy of slavery and colonialism*. Social relations in the rural Western Cape have been shaped by the development of a small, powerful, white landed settler elite initially dependent on the labour of black<sup>2</sup> slaves and indentured servants (see, for example, Rayner, 1986; Ross, 1986; Watson, 1990). This dependence shaped the identities both of white landowners and of black workers (Crais, 1992; Trapido, 1994). On settler farms, it led to the development and persistence — until long after emancipation — of paternalist, patriarchal, racialized and hierarchical institutions and practices that kept farm workers bound to the service of white masters and that subjected them to those masters' authority without access to independent rights (Crais, 1992; Dooling, 1992; Marincowitz, 1985; Scully, 1987, 1989, 1997). Paternalism shaped many of the key institutions of farm life, most notably through the system of tied housing and, more infamously, through the persistence of the 'tot' system — the part payment of workers in cheap alcohol (Du Toit, 1993; Ewert and Hamman, 1999; Nasson, 1984; Schärff, 1984; Waldman, 1993).

A key dimension of farm paternalism was its socially ambiguous character. Part of its power lay in its role as a legitimizing discourse. Although farmers and workers disagreed about the details, its key precepts commanded at least partial assent from both sides, and it was little queried except through the offstage stratagems of the 'weapons of the weak' (Du Toit, 1995; see Scott, 1985). While it played a role in cementing farm owners' power it also set limits to their expectations and made them responsible for the provision of basic services such as housing, energy, water and sometimes transport (Du Toit, 1993, 1994, 1995; Kritzinger et al., 1995; Waldman, 1993). Ultimately, however, it institutionalized profoundly unequal and hierarchical racial power relations and militated against any conception that black farm dwellers could also be citizens with rights equal to that of the farm owner.

Secondly, the authoritarian, inegalitarian and racist nature of paternalist practice meant that, from the early 1990s, it was subject to a far-ranging process of *modernizing policy and legal reform*. In South African farm labour policy debates, paternalism was almost universally seen as atavistic and backward. There was a strong consensus on the need for modernizing reform, variously conceived as being achieved through free market competition, adversarial and industrial-style trade unionism or the modernization of labour law (Ball, 1990; Ewert and Hamman, 1996; Krikler, 1987; Lipton, 1993). Despite the tensions between these approaches and the divergent

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2. 'Black' here is used in its political sense, and refers to the identities of all those excluded from 'whiteness' by the discourses and practices of segregation and Apartheid. Most black South Africans who identify as indigenous (e.g. Xhosa, Zulu) are referred to as 'African'. 'Coloured' is a contested, creolized and racialized *cultural* identity; it is commonly used to refer to those who are descended from slaves or indentured Khoi servants.

political frameworks informing them, political conditions allowed the construction of a consensus on desirable change across a surprisingly wide political spectrum. Commercial agriculture in South Africa has thus since the early 1990s seen a complex mix of both *de*-regulation, through the dismantling of the regulatory framework that contained competition in the agricultural sector, and *re*-regulation, through the strengthening and deepening of social and labour rights (Bayley, 2000; McKenna, 2000; National Department of Agriculture, 1998).

Thirdly, these policy reforms happened simultaneously with '*globalization*' and *international agro-food restructuring*. At the same time that deregulation was opening up wine and fruit production to new competitive pressures, African export agro-commodity systems became increasingly buyer-driven (Gibbon, 2001; Raikes and Gibbon, 2000). These shifts have increased the opportunities for value-addition for some, but have also led to higher barriers to entry, stiffer competition and greater risk. Supermarkets are able to exercise much higher levels of control down the commodity chain. In the period before 2002, the fruit and wine sector felt the force of these mounting pressures, while simultaneously experiencing the increased direct and indirect costs caused by greater labour and social regulation (Du Toit and Ewert, 2002; NAMC, 2000). Between September 2001 and late 2002, Rand depreciation helped relieve these pressures for a time but the underlying power inequalities have remained.

Fourthly, in response to these pressures, agriculture in the Western Cape has undergone an uneven process of *labour market restructuring*. Fruit and wine farmers, although exposed to increasing pressures, were still largely able to choose how to respond. Contrary to expectations, paternalist practice did not wither away; rather, it mutated and adapted (Du Toit, 1998). For many, this meant the restructuring of their businesses to reduce their exposure to the risks, costs and administrative burden of employing permanent labour. Agriculture has here mirrored the trends proposed by Natrass and Seekings for industry more generally. Evidence exists of an uneven but significant job-shedding trend (Simbi and Aliber, 2000). Since fruit and, to a lesser degree, wine farming is resistant to thorough mechanization, the trend is towards casualization and externalization (the reliance on contract labour provided by third parties). A survey of seventy-seven farms in six farming districts in the Western Cape in 2000 (Du Toit and Ally, 2004) showed that 58 per cent of farms had reduced numbers of permanent workers in the previous three years, and that 47 per cent planned to do so or continue doing so in future. Indications were that temporary and seasonal workers were supplanting permanent workers, and large numbers of farmers (more than half, in Du Toit and Ally's study) were opting to use third-party labour contractors. In addition, there was a significant move away from the provision of tied housing to farm workers: a third of respondents to that study indicated an intention to abandon the traditional employer's role as supplier of housing. These shifts have significant 'race' and gender implications:



while the permanent labour force of Western Cape farms has been mostly male and coloured, the vulnerable and easily exploited off-farm labour force is much more predominantly female and African (Barrientos, 2000, 2001; Du Toit and Ally, 2004).

### **Dimensions of Chronic Poverty**

What are the consequences for those who used to depend on industrialized agriculture for their livelihoods, who are no longer covered by the ambiguous implicit contracts of paternalism, and who have joined the ranks of the underemployed and landless? Scholarship on farm labour in the Western Cape has tended to neglect this sector. Although policy and advocacy work in South Africa includes an awareness of the concerns and problems of farm workers, research on poverty and social conditions among commercial farm workers has tended to focus heavily on permanent and on-farm workers and has tended to be concerned fairly narrowly on labour conditions (wages, conditions of employment, implementation of legislation) rather than livelihoods (Du Toit, 1993; Kritzinger et al., 1995; Sunde and Kleinbooi, 1999). Seasonal and 'casual' off-farm workers are almost invisible in the debate (for an important exception, see Barrientos, 2001).

The Chronic Poverty Research Centre's work in South Africa has partly attempted to redress this imbalance. Besides investigating chronic poverty in the remote Eastern Cape and urban Cape Town, the project included an in-depth survey of livelihoods and poverty dynamics among 540 households in three poor neighbourhoods in the district of Ceres. The 'sustainable livelihood framework' and its operationalization as a development tool (see Department for International Development, 1999) shaped the survey instruments used by the project for the quantitative exploration of livelihood profiles, but the project has also been sensitive to criticisms of this framework for its tendency to underemphasize inter- and intra-household antagonisms, conflicts and power relationships, and the dynamics of race, class, gender and other aspects of social identity (Murray, 2001). In Ceres, the findings of survey work were interpreted in the light of previous long-term research on the dynamics of agro-food restructuring in the region (Du Toit, 1998, 2000, 2002) and were also followed up by in-depth qualitative work aimed at exploring racial, gender and power relations in more detail. This work is ongoing, and the results of further qualitative work will be explored in subsequent papers. Even at these early stages, however, qualitative and quantitative research can be combined to develop a detailed picture of the nature and determinants of chronic poverty in this area.<sup>3</sup>

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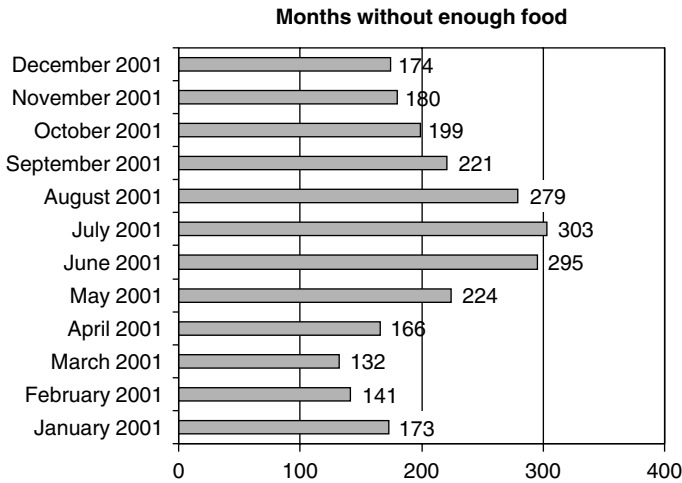
3. The account in the following pages is based on a more detailed presentation in Du Toit (2003).

1. Asset poverty and cash dependency. One of the most striking underlying determinants of chronic poverty was the high rates of asset poverty, particularly among those recently evicted from farms. Respondents reported very little direct access to the resources necessary for food production or independent entrepreneurial activity. Almost all food had to be bought (households spent on average 40 per cent of their income on food); which meant that food security depended to a very large extent on members' access to paying jobs: on average, 80 per cent of reported income was from waged work. Employment was insecure: more than a third of respondents indicated that they had suffered 'general unemployment' in the past year, 25 per cent reported the loss of work by a breadwinner in the previous year, and 35 per cent reported the loss of a permanent job during the last five years. The jobs that were available were predominantly in the agricultural sector: more than 30 per cent of those with jobs identified farm work on a commercial farm as their most important source of paid employment, with 16 per cent relying on work in the food processing sector – which in Ceres means the food and vegetable packing concerns that run during the summer months. All in all, more than 50 per cent of households in Ceres were directly dependent on the formal agricultural sector for all or part of their income.
2. Risk and seasonality. In this context, an important problem is that the agricultural labour market is not sufficient to sustain adequate livelihoods. Agricultural incomes are very low: at the time of the survey daily wages for seasonal workers varied between R 25 (€2.5) and R 35 (€3.5) per day.<sup>4</sup> More than four-fifths of respondents in the sample (82 per cent) reported household incomes below a poverty line of about R 560 per adult-equivalent per month. Not only are incomes low, however; jobs are also seasonal. In more than 25 per cent of responses, all working adults depended on seasonal jobs, and almost a third (31 per cent) of respondents reported that their households were at least partly dependent on seasonal labour. Average aggregated reported income levels fluctuated by 23 per cent between winter and summer. Some 70 per cent of respondents reported experiencing a period of insufficient food during the previous year, and a month by month breakdown shows that more than twice as many reported not having enough food during the winter months than for the peak of the harvest season in March (see Figure 2). Even within the top income quintile, almost 40 per cent of respondents reported at least one hungry month', while half of the respondents in the sample reported going hungry for half the year or more.

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4. Figures are based on the mid-2002 Euro value of approximately R 10 to €1.

Figure 2. 'Hungry Months'



Source: Du Toit (2003).

3. 'Social capital' and patron-client relationships. Against this background, the cultural formations and bodies of practice usually (and rather uncritically) referred to under the heading of 'social capital' played an ambiguous and double-edged role. Social and associational life was markedly thin: outside churches and school organizations there was little formal associational life; and membership of organizations explicitly aimed at mutual aid (*stokvels*, credit and savings associations and other co-operatives) averaged less than 1 per cent. Respondents indicated that they relied almost exclusively on claims based on blood relationship for their day-to-day survival. While these networks of affiliation and kinship played an important (and often unrecorded) role in enabling household survival, they also had an oppressive and exploitative dimension. The burden of household reproduction and the labour of working the informal inter-household support networks that made daily survival possible was borne almost exclusively by women (see Table 2); though their activities played a key role as a 'coping' mechanism these gender roles also function powerfully to hem in and constrain choices. The 'household', though perforce an important unit of analysis for the purpose of the survey, was not necessarily a community of interest, and could include serious internal disparities in entitlements and power. Further qualitative work is necessary to explore this. Patron-client relationships were another example. Contrary to 'modernizing' expectations, the move off-farm did not end paternalist practices. Rather, these survived in different 'externalized' forms, and were joined and supplemented by a wide range of other clientelist

Table 2. Reported Activities for More than One Hour a Day, by Gender

Activity	Men	Women
Self-employed (non food)	68.57%	31.43%
Fetching wood	67.00%	33.00%
Food gardening	61.26%	38.74%
Other	56.90%	43.10%
Studying	50.91%	49.09%
Employment (agro-food)	48.75%	51.25%
Looking for work	43.53%	56.47%
Self-employed (agro-food)	40.00%	60.00%
Shopping	26.62%	73.38%
Homework/domestic work	26.16%	73.84%
Fetching water	25.00%	75.00%
Caring for children	21.93%	78.07%
Caring for aged	21.62%	78.38%
Caring for sick	20.00%	80.00%
Caring for disabled	15.38%	84.62%

relationships. For the poor in Ceres, survival depended crucially on their ability to form alliances with more powerful protectors — churches, officials, local gangsters or employers — upon whom they could make claims. This helped make life liveable, but it also locked them into potentially disadvantageous obligations and dependencies. They could become indebted to local crime lords, to white farmers, to furniture and food businesses in town.

These issues will be explored in more depth in subsequent publications (meanwhile, see Du Toit, 2003, 2004). In the interim, it should already be clear that the ‘asset pentagon’ beloved of proponents of livelihood analysis has its dark and shadowy sides. A key form of ‘human capital’ shaping the life chances of people in these impoverished communities is, after all, the ability to use and manipulate violence, while one of the most important forms of ‘social capital’ is that commanded by gangsters and organized criminals. The poor prey on the poor. In Ceres, a local debt extortion gang, the Red Devils, was reputed also to be one of the biggest purveyors of contract labour to white farmers, and allegedly partly paid their workers in illegal alcohol — a bizarre ‘externalized’ mutation of the outlawed *tot* system (Du Toit, 2003). ‘Gatekeepers’ within local government reportedly controlled access to subsidized municipal services. Power and patronage was still linked to ‘racial’ identity: whites still controlled the economy, coloured people occupied more or less privileged places within the ranks of clients, while African people were constructed as outsiders and often failed to find a patron in the first place (Arnall, 2002). Although people formally and theoretically had significant social rights, their materially vulnerable position and their need to be able to play the accommodative games of patron–client relationships rendered them politically passive and averse to confrontation. Rather than acting collectively to address the underlying causes of poverty

and vulnerability, poor people in Ceres relied on informal networks — family, friends and employers — to tide them over when times were hard.

## **POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

### **Approaches to Social Exclusion**

Can 'social exclusion' help us make sense of these dynamics? A key problem here is the vagueness and multiplicity of meanings of the term, so that the answer to the question depends somewhat on the meaning chosen. Numerous overlapping approaches exist (see Farrington, 2002). At the same time, some important common themes emerge.

In general, perhaps the most important positive aspect of the concept lies in the way some of the key definitions focus on the limitation of effective or full participation in society. This is an important emphasis, for although poverty does not rob people of agency, it certainly leads to a massive circumscription of the forms of agency that are available to them. The concept of social exclusion could help researchers and policy-makers focus on the complex empirical and conceptual connections between poverty, power and agency. They could conceive social exclusion as one moment or component in complex and multi-levelled processes of deprivation. One could focus, for example, on how deprivation creates forms of political disempowerment which again cement and entrench deprivation, interrupting and undermining attempts to address it.

Such an emphasis is crucial to understanding the situation of poor people in Ceres. The Chronic Poverty Research Centre's study shows how poor people's lack of the basic assets necessary for food production or entrepreneurial activity rendered them marginal in the very landscape in which they played such an economically central role. This marginality took many forms. Most obviously, asset depletion and cash poverty denied poor people the ability to participate fully in a society in which acts and practices of consumption are given increasing cultural and material centrality. The presence and hegemony of this culture certainly gave an extra edge to the experiences of shame, self-devaluation and deprivation that accompanied poverty and gave it its social meanings. Besides this, it reduced poor people to a dependent status in complex and unequal relationships of patronage, clientelism and exploitation, and robbed them of many of the resources and capabilities that they needed to be able to claim the rights and entitlements that were theoretically afforded them in democratic society. It narrowed the circle of their effective impact on their circumstances and their society. Whatever resources and capabilities they had at their disposal had to be used in the first place for the basic tasks of household reproduction and individual survival. In addition, their past and present political disempowerment meant they lacked the political resources and traditions that could be a

foundation for future engagement. This, in turn, rendered them less able to challenge the other social processes whereby they were marginalized on the national stage. Such an approach would focus attention on multi-dimensional links between poverty and powerlessness, the limited nature of poor people's agency in modern democratic society, and the ways in which these realities in turn perpetuate poverty.

Some proponents of social exclusion appear to be going in this direction, as when de Haan and Dubey (2003) focus on the political marginality of Orissa in their work on extreme deprivation in remote areas in India. For the most part, however, this is not the most common approach. Instead, a focus on the multiple links between poverty and the limitation of agency is often used at the same time as, and becomes conflated with, a very different focus, in which social exclusion in a much narrower sense is considered a fairly direct *cause* of poverty. Here, the attention is on the roots of poverty in the exclusion of a particular social group, *through* some specific discriminatory social mechanism, *from* some specific social good or other (Evans, 1998). This is one of the most prevalent ways in which the term is used in sociological literature. Here, the term functions essentially as a kind of shorthand, a general rubric under which a wide range of very divergent social processes and phenomena are conceptually unified, with the implication that it is their exclusionary aspect that links them as causes of poverty. In many cases, indeed, these links are not explicitly made: the mere identification of the presence of discrimination, racism and gender oppression is enough. The assumption seems to be that social (that is, non-economic) factors play a role, *ergo* we are in the presence of social exclusion. This is a much more problematic conception of social exclusion.

It is important to understand what is at issue here. It is not disputed that discrimination, racism, gender oppression — and many other processes and practices that link local history, culture, social identity and power — play a major role in entrenching poverty and inequality. In Ceres, for instance, the historical legacy of racism has played a key role in shaping the distribution of poverty and wealth among white, coloured and African 'racial' groups. The problem lies with the act of re-naming — the conceptual leap — involved in the assumption that these processes are all ultimately 'about exclusion'. This leap is usually almost entirely unexamined. While social exclusion talk often carries with it an air of self-evidence (Ratcliffe, 1999), this apparent transparency hides problematic underlying assumptions that can be imported unawares into sociological analysis.

### **Policy Talk and Political Baggage**

This is a key point. For the reality is of course that 'social exclusion' as it is used in development discourse today is not in the first place a sociological concept. It has been ideological and vague since the beginning (Silver, 1994).

It is a *policy* buzzword, a political slogan, not an analytical term. Researchers ignore this at their peril. Policy-making, as Gavin Williams has argued, is in a very real sense primarily a discursive activity:

It is framed by its own rules and shaped by its characteristic metaphors. Its language is drafted with an eye to the concerns of [local] and international powerful interests. Policies generally have to be specified in ways that embody common procedures, which can be applied generally, across whole countries, irrespective of local and regional differences. Its standardized forms are ill-equipped to manage diverse and complex situations. (Williams, 2000: 17)

For this reason, precision and analytical rigour cannot be expected from social exclusion talk; indeed, its success is related precisely to its vagueness and the way in which it is available for appropriation and re-interpretation by widely divergent political forces. Its key role lies not in sharpening or deepening social understanding, but in the construction of quasi-moral political and policy narratives — narratives that carry a fair amount of rather problematic ideological baggage.

One of the most obvious of these is the patronizing and normative assumption that we (whoever 'we' are) know in what the poor want (or ought to want) to be included. Mainstream society is conceived to be normal; exclusion from it is supposed to be the problem. Sometimes this excluded group may even be 'pathologized' and seen as deviant (Ratcliffe, 1999). This tendency, so obvious in early French characterizations of 'the excluded' quoted above, is still all too present. Consider, for instance, the European Commission's definition of social exclusion as referring to 'the multiple and changing factors resulting in people being excluded from the normal exchanges, practices and rights of modern society' (quoted in Percy-Smith, 2000: 3). Whose 'normal' are we talking about here? And what values and practices count as 'modern'? How can these ideas be used in multicultural contexts, where the central ideas that define national identity are essentially contested? Who is to be 'included' in what? And how are the costs of inclusion to be reckoned?

These are not merely theoretical questions. In South Africa, for instance, the simplistic assumption that development entails the rolling out to the marginalized poor of the infrastructures and systems that serve the wealthy urban elite has lately been recognized to be profoundly damaging, and significantly out of step with poor people's real needs (de Satgé, 2002). It cannot be assumed that integration, incorporation and inclusion are necessarily panaceas for chronic poverty. Exactly how they will affect poor people depends very largely on just what poor people are integrated or inserted into, and the exact ways in which economic and social power relations actually work. Facile and sweeping policy prescriptions can easily miss these details.

A linked problem is that social exclusion talk, by problematizing only the processes by which certain groups of people are excluded from institutions, systems and networks, can serve to distract attention from overall and systemic dynamics of inequality, impoverishment, and conflict within those larger formations themselves. Shucksmith and Chapman, for instance,

define social exclusion as ‘a multi-dimensional dynamic concept which refers to a *breakdown* or *malfunctioning* of the major societal systems that *should* guarantee the social integration of the individual or household’ (Shucksmith and Chapman, 1998: 230, emphasis added). From this perspective, discrimination and other forms of social exclusion are seen as the result of extraneous social factors — racism, culture, ideology, policy or politics — that undermine ‘normal’ participation in the workings of an economy that is seen as value-free and intrinsically neutral.

Such analyses depend on naïve, counterfactual, normative and functionalist conceptions of social process. Participation and exclusion are conceived as mutually incompatible possibilities. Social interaction is conceived of as somehow occurring essentially outside the realm of social antagonism and power, separate from the broader social relations within which they are embedded. As Raymond Apthorpe has argued, this is crude economism: an approach ‘that assigns “distribution” only to “social” and “growth” only to “economic”, denoting “exclusion” as “social” only and then making just “social exclusion” responsible for poverty’ (Apthorpe, 1999: 542).

It may be much more analytically useful to consider the possibility that markets and economies are always to a large extent social in nature, ‘always already’ structured by tradition, ideology, antagonism, social identity, processes of struggle and by contingent and contestable discursive practices. To see these as ‘distorting’ markets and economies, leading to their ‘failure’ to fulfil their ‘function’ is to divorce analysis from reality — and to be in danger of becoming blind to the extent to which these markets’ and institutions’ existence and functioning are inextricably caught up in the realities of conflict, unequal power relations and historical legacies of violence and dispossession.

It is, for instance, not helpful to try to portray the off-farm poor in Ceres as excluded from the labour market, or to try to portray that market as having failed. Such an analysis would be so abstract as to have almost nothing to do with how that market actually works. For the white farmers who own most of the land and who use most of the labour in Ceres, the seasonal labour market is most assuredly not failing. It is working fairly well. It generally succeeds in providing them with the cheap labour they need when they need it, and helps them avoid some of the most important consequences of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the harvest season, principally by allowing them to externalize and pass on risks and costs. Closer integration into global economic systems and regulatory frameworks have intensified, not ameliorated, these dynamics. Poverty and under-employment are not accidental byproducts of economic life in Ceres, brought about by the incomplete inclusion of workers. They are its regular and systematic outcome — the unexceptional result of the way in which successful fruit farming business is done under conditions of increasing global competition and vertical integration.

More to the point, poverty results not from people’s *exclusion* from that market but from the ways they are *included*. This is true not only in Ceres



but in much of present-day South Africa. There is a close link between inequality and poverty on the one hand, and, on the other, the historical processes of dispossession that have worked to render people dependent on the labour market in the first place (May, 2000). It is tempting to argue, from this perspective, that what poor people dependent on insecure and poorly paid jobs may require is not more integration, but less — strategies and resources that may help them become more independent of systems and networks in which they have little power.

### **Beyond 'Exclusion' and 'Inclusion': Dimensions of Adverse Incorporation**

Such considerations have prompted some critics of dominant development discourses to prefer 'adverse' or 'passive' incorporation to the notion of 'social exclusion' (Bracking, 2003; Murray, 2001). While the term 'social exclusion' promises to focus attention on the general socially disabling effects of poverty, this promise is undermined by its failure to come to grips with the precise ways in which poor peoples are actually inserted within broader social and economic formations of power. Part of the problem here is the very simplicity and appeal of the language of social exclusion, and the assumption that it is possible to counterpose 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' in a simple way. What defines marginality is not exclusion (or even imperfect inclusion!) but the terms and conditions of incorporation.

Thinking in more detail about 'adverse incorporation' allows us to add some important dimensions to the models that have started to dominate the analysis of poverty in developing societies in recent years. In addition to a careful and detailed analysis of the various kinds of resources upon which individuals and households draw for their livelihoods there is a need for forms of analysis and theoretical accounts that can mediate between different arenas and levels of social process — that can link, for example, household and intrahousehold-level micro-analyses with accounts of global, national, regional and subregional processes (Murray, 2001).

This is a complex task. Attention has to be paid both to the vertical links — the commodity chains and supply chain systems that link local livelihoods 'upstream' and 'downstream' to distant and complex networks of economic production and exchange (Du Toit, 2002; Kaplinsky, 2000) — and to the horizontal ones — the ways in which the impact and nature of integration and inclusion into globalized systems are locally mediated (Goodman and Watts, 1994; Jarosz, 1996). The insertion of poor individuals and households into the commercial food system, privatization, and cost recovery for basic services are all part of this story (Barndt, 1999; MacDonald and Pape, 2002). So are other processes: the re-negotiation and reconfiguration of discourses on 'race', gender and identity; the persistence, adaptation and mutation of patron-client relationships and their existence alongside processes of modernization; the construction of poor

people as ‘citizens’ — and their reconceptualization as the passive objects of ‘delivery’; the continuities and discontinuities between the discourse of the ‘national democratic struggle’ and the increasingly hegemonic frameworks offered by the technical discourse of development; and the persistence of long-remembered and bitter local antagonisms and histories (Du Toit, 1998; Erasmus, 2002; Ferguson, 1990; Steinberg 2002).

All these processes and institutions can work to integrate poor people into the circuits and networks of ‘developed’ society in ways that marginalize them, undermining their ability to control and impact upon the systems into which they are locked. All of them are to some extent irreversibly and inextricably part of the social context in which policy has to be made. None of them can be easily discounted or swept aside. They can also be fiercely contested, and are potentially the subjects of complex struggles and negotiations. Above all, this list should illustrate why it is necessary to move beyond any simple conceptual opposition of ‘inclusion’ or ‘exclusion’. Neither a greater degree of inclusion in the South African job market, nor dreams of subsistence-based independence from it, capture the irreversibility of poor people’s incorporation in the broader monetized economy, the complexity of the power relations and institutions that support and undermine their strategies for survival and prosperity, or the dynamic nature of the processes of contestation and negotiation that shape the outcomes of particular interventions. Integration and incorporation are not necessarily empowering. Sometimes exclusion and separation can be valid strategies for the poor. Rather than bland, routine and patronizing social exclusion talk, understanding poverty requires fine-grained analyses, problem-oriented research and policy solutions that are suited to the realities of life in this intermediate terrain — policies that engage with, challenge and enlarge the space for poor people’s agency.

## **CONCLUSION: DEVELOPMENT STUDIES, POLICY AND IMPACTS ON POVERTY**

How important are these distinctions? Why not leave well alone? In the real world of policy-making, getting development economists and development practitioners in the major institutions to give ‘official recognition’ to the relevance of social process at all has been hard enough (Eyben, 2003). If social exclusion talk can indeed bring a focus on multidimensionality and social process onto phenomena that have previously been considered in narrowly economic terms, why throw out the baby with the bathwater? Seen from this perspective, the above reservations could be seen as cavilling about ‘mere words’, hair-splitting that is unlikely to impact on central debates (de Haan, pers. comm.).

It may of course be that international development agencies are unlikely to give legitimacy to arguments that link chronic poverty to processes of

integration and incorporation. But that is not an argument in defence of the concept of social exclusion — it is simply a decision not to engage in critical discussion. Such a decision has costs. The discourse of development, and the discipline of development studies to which it has been intimately related, draw at least a part of their intellectual authority from their construction of themselves as grounded in the social sciences and on the implicit claim that the conclusions and recommendations of practitioners are at least notionally rooted in impartial economic and social knowledge. This would require at least a pretence of critical rigour. The arguments around the difficulties with the concept of social exclusion do indeed pivot on nuances of meaning. But then, that is a condition of all scientific and critical thought. It may very well be that, as de Haan (1998) argues, there are some thematic resonances between the discourse on social exclusion and other intellectual threads in recent discussions on poverty. That does not mean that they 'overlap almost completely', much less that they can be conflated. This is particularly true if these differences involve significant long-term consequences.

In this article, I have argued that they do. The contribution of the notion of social exclusion to the understanding of poverty in developing societies is ambiguous. Although it aims to bring attention to the modes of relation between particular phenomena (groups, households, even spatial areas) and the larger networks, systems and circuits of economic, political and social power to which they are linked, social exclusion talk oversimplifies these links by constructing narratives that depend on a simplistic counter-position of 'inside' and 'outside', and suggests an unhelpfully monolithic and homogeneous conception of the nature of broader society. By doing so it undermines a responsive understanding of the consequences of the always specific and concrete ways in which people are included and excluded (and incorporated, integrated, inserted, contained, linked, and disconnected) from the social networks and institutions that shape their lives. The dominant ways in which the concept is being used — at least in the field of UK social policy and the broader field of development studies — links it to moralizing meta-narratives which pass too easily over the internally conflictual and heterogeneous character of social formations, the internally contested and ambiguous nature of processes of modernization and development, and the complexity and ambiguity of social power relations.

The concept of adverse incorporation is an attempt to address some of the same problems that social exclusion discourse is concerned with, without the same pitfalls. While valuing the emphasis on the multidimensional nature of poverty and the importance of social process, it is rooted in a very different conception of the relationship between modernity, growth, poverty and conflict. It tends to see poverty and inequality not as contingent remainders (the result of limitations or failure of growth) but rather as a regular and unexceptional by-product of processes of accumulation and social differentiation that accompany growth.

These considerations have key implications for debates around poverty policy in South Africa. Though the concept of social exclusion is far from hegemonic in South Africa, social exclusion talk shares important features with frameworks and approaches that are. Like social exclusion discourse, policy debates in South Africa are shaped by an uncritical acceptance of the assumption that the solution of problems depends on processes of modernizing reform, job-creation and increased global integration. In the debate on rural poverty this is evident, for instance, in the thrust to extend urban forms of labour regulation onto the farmlands, and through the emphasis on commercial farming in the new South African Land Reform programme. More broadly it is evident, for example, in the underlying neoliberal assumptions of South African Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) and the focus, in the New Economic Partnership for African Development, on 'genuine integration of all nations into the global economy and body politic' (NEPAD, 2001: 8; also Republic of South Africa, 1996). Finally, the recent 'two economies' debate — initiated by President Mbeki's argument that poverty in South Africa is the result of the persistence of a 'third world' economy, existing alongside but structurally disconnected from the 'first world' economy — is based on a very similar presupposition of a modernizing meta-narrative, and an assumption that the key need is for 'more linkages' (Hirsch, n.d.; Mbeki, 2003). This misses the possibility that one of the key obstacles to the growth of small and micro-enterprises may not be disconnection, but the very depth of penetration of monopoly and corporate capital.

These assumptions produce a risk of harmful and counterproductive policy-making. The danger in the uncritical and unreflective adoption of optimistic modernizing narratives is that, in passing over the complexities of the dynamics that keep poor people trapped in poverty, they make the targeting of poverty policy much more difficult. These dynamics go well beyond the labour market policies that Natrass and Seekings blame for the lack of labour intensive growth. To be sure, economic frameworks that stimulate broad-based growth in the economy as a whole are essential. But not all forms of growth are equal — and when and if growth happens, it will not necessarily address the needs of people caught in chronic poverty. For those needs to be addressed, poverty policy needs to avoid the temptation of turning a blind eye to the way in which dynamics of exploitation, racialized power relations, gendered conflict and processes of impoverishment can exist alongside, and indeed be exacerbated by, the production and accumulation of wealth.

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