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Morazé

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Re-thinking Knowledge and Social Change in South Africa

Mala Singh

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The paper starts from the premise that twenty years after the transition to formal democracy in South Africa, the issue of the production and use of socially relevant knowledge and the role of progressive researchers in contributing to social change warrant renewed attention. The analysis centers on two issues. The first relates to different ways of interpreting the knowledge needs of the current conjuncture. The second concerns the relationship between knowledge, truth and truthfulness in the world of knowledge for policy. The paper argues for greater reflexivity about the current conditions for producing research for social change in a context increasing divided about what constitutes a good society.

Working Papers Series

Re-thinking Knowledge and Social Change in South Africa

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November 2014

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In 2014 Professor Mala Singh was awarded « The Prize Charles and Monique Morazé », established recently by the Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme, Paris, and granted in recognition of the innovative work on the issues of Science and society on the one hand, Education and society on the other hand.

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Abstract

The paper starts from the premise that twenty years after the transition to formal democracy in South Africa, the issue of the production and use of socially relevant knowledge and the role of progressive researchers in contributing to social change warrant renewed attention. The analysis centers on two issues. The first relates to different ways of interpreting the knowledge needs of the current conjuncture. The second concerns the relationship between knowledge, truth and truthfulness in the world of knowledge for policy. The paper argues for greater reflexivity about the current conditions for producing research for social change in a context increasing divided about what constitutes a good society.

Keywords

social change in South Africa, knowledge society, knowledge for policy, truthfulness, means and ends

Savoir et changement social : une relation à repenser. A propos de l’Afrique du Sud

Résumé

Le point de départ de ce papier est le suivant. La transition vers une démocratie formelle date de vingt ans en Afrique du Sud. Cela porte à réfléchir sur la production et l’usage de savoirs socialement pertinents, et sur la contribution au changement de chercheurs progressistes. L’analyse se concentre sur deux points. Le premier concerne différentes façons d’interpréter le besoin de connaissances du moment. Le second concerne la relation entre savoir, vérité et véracité dans l’espace d’une recherche mise au service de politiques. Notre papier plaide pour plus de réflexivité sur les conditions actuelles de production de travaux visant le changement social, dans un contexte aujourd’hui de plus en plus divisé sur ce qui fait qu’une société est « bonne ».

Mots-clefs

changement social, Afrique du Sud, société de la connaissance, connaissance de la société, savoir engagé, véracité, moyens et fins

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The idea that knowledge or truth is a useable, even emancipatory resource in contributing to social change has long held attraction for both knowledge producers and political decision-makers in different historical ages and settings. It has been the subject of prodigious philosophical and sociological analysis, often signaling the ambitions for influence of knowledge producers themselves. It also expresses the expectations of those who hope, in the spirit of the Enlightenment (despite its uncertain claims) for societal progress through a politics informed by reason. Scholars have diversely theorized about societal roles for knowledge, have provided knowledge for social use, have sought more activist forms of social engagement, and exhibited deep scepticism about the very possibilities of knowledge as well its political innocence in social change. Plato argued that only philosophers have the requisite cognitive and moral legitimacy to be rulers. (2000) But he also set out from Athens to become adviser to Dionysus of Syracuse, no doubt hoping to influence the world of political practice through his philosophical insights. Nietzsche (1979) and Foucault (1980) challenged the very possibility of emancipatory truths which are not implicated in particular regimes of power, seeking to expose the hollow pretensions of universalized truth claims as bases for political or ethical action.

In the current globally over-rehearsed discourse of the knowledge society and knowledge economy, the familiar policy argument about knowledge and its socio-economic roles and uses is now firmly ensconced in many policy settings as a self-evident and almost unchallengeable 'truth'. But this policy argument has also grown somewhat formulaic, often obscuring complex contextual realities that encapsulate a variety of forms, purposes, uses and effects of knowledge in those different socio-political settings and the many contestations around them.

Twenty years after the transition to formal democracy in South Africa, the issue of the production and use of socially relevant knowledge and the role of progressive researchers in contributing to social change in South Africa warrant renewed attention. This is in a context where, both outside¹ and within government,² there has been

much reflective assessment and debate on what has become of the ambitious project of political and socio-economic transformation adopted in 1994, and especially on questions of what to build on and what to change amid a growing sense of social crisis. Progressive scholars provided expert knowledge for social use during the period of resistance to apartheid and in the heady early days of social policy development under the new post-apartheid government. Two decades later, it is an apt moment to reflect on how the relationship between progressive researchers and the knowledge needs of the conjuncture is being re-framed, especially in relation to policy development, and how the social and political purposes to which such scholarship is orienting itself being conceptualized.

The 20th anniversary moment has stimulated a great deal of often-quantitative accounting of achievements and shortcomings in creating a more equitable and just society. The post-apartheid social change agenda upheld an ambitious normative vision for democratic transformation and social justice. The country has seen much change on many fronts. In its vision, however, for a radical social transformation that would strengthen democratic values and make substantial inroads into inequality, its achievements have been at best partial and ambivalent both materially and morally. Even official assessments of what has been achieved to date are critical of the pace and direction of change. (National Planning Commission 2011 <http://www.npconline.co.za>) The statistics about improvements in social provision (housing, sanitation, water and electricity supply, etc.) and an expanding budget for social grants to provide a minimal safety net for the most vulnerable are not facts in contention.³ However, levels of inequality have grown alarmingly despite a raft of well-intended post-1994 social policies. The country has grown into one of the most unequal societies in the world. (OECD 2013:18) Judgments about progress beyond the formalities of constitutional democracy towards the goals of accountable government, a democratically engaged citizenry, tolerance for critique and dissent, and towards a more rationally and

Presidency at <http://www.thepresidency-dpme.gov.za/news/Pages/20-Year-Review.aspx>

3. See the 20 year review from the Presidency as well as information from Stats South Africa <http://www.statssa.gov.za>

1. See, for example, Vale and Prinsloo (2014); *The State of the Nation Review 1994-2014*, HSRC Press.

2. See the 20 year review report from the South African

normatively planned polity remain contested.⁴ In a context of growing dissension not only about the means for radical social change but also its ends, how and where should progressive scholarship position itself in seeking to provide socially useful knowledge?

My analytical point of departure in this paper is rather specific to the South African social context though some of the issues raised may have a wider resonance. I examine the implications for research that seeks to be socially relevant of an evolving social change agenda and its policy basis. Within this focus, the paper does not engage with evidence about the successes and failures of the social policy trajectory in South Africa, nor pronounce on the influence (or lack thereof) of social research on policy choices and policy implementation in the period since 1994. In a context where the notion of social justice remains unsettled, my concern is to explore some elements of an interrogatory framework for thinking about the conditions of production and use of socially relevant knowledge in contemporary South Africa. What are the kinds of questions, epistemological and methodological, political and strategic, which constitute the terrain on which to think about socially useful knowledge in a changed conjuncture? To what extent does a re-consideration of socially useful knowledge in the present imply some measure of interrogation of prevailing conceptions of social change and its parameters?

My analysis centres on two sets of issues which could help to illuminate the re-framing of the 'knowledge for social change' problematic and the re-examination of the terms of intellectual engagement in social change. The first relates to how one interprets and represents the conjuncture in South Africa and what knowledge needs appear to make most sense within a particular reading. Is this an era of improved policy implementation or a period requiring a radical re-think of the assumptions of social change and social justice? The second set of issues concerns the relationship between knowledge, truth and truthfulness and its significance in the world of knowledge for policy. A reflexive scholarship (following Bourdieu) would entail a greater measure of engagement with the current conditions for producing research for social change. This could be a useful propaedeutic, politically and epistemologically,

4. See various Human Sciences Research Council State of the Nation Reviews www.hsrcpress.co.za

for undertaking socially relevant and policy usable research.⁵

Framing the Issues

The literature on the relationship between knowledge and society is vast, spreading over a variety of themes. The social responsibilities of intellectuals (Benda 1980; Gramsci 1973; Said 1994; Bauman 1987; Gouldner 1979); knowledge and power (Nietzsche 1954; Foucault 1980); social research for social problem solving (Lindblom and Cohen 1979); mode 2 knowledge (Gibbon et al 1994); knowledge society and knowledge economy (UNESCO 2005; Sorlin and Vessuri 2007); evidence based policy (Pawson 2001); innovation, knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange (OECD 1999); the role of universities in development (Bo Goransson et al 2009); disciplinarity and transdisciplinarity; and the public roles of the disciplines (www.ssr-cpublicsphere.org) are among the diverse thematic entry points into the debate. Many of these themes have featured in some version in South African debates on knowledge and its social roles and uses. (Muller and Cloete 1991; Kraak 2000; Marcus and Hofmaenner 2006; Jacklin and Vale 2009; du Toit 2013)

The models proposed to give effect to the knowledge-society connection have also varied, ranging across Plato's philosopher rulers and Francis Bacon's scientists in his *New Atlantis*, to more recent examples of science policy advisors to government, think tanks, national commissions, independent and university based research centres, individual consultants, and trans-institutional and transnational consortia and networks of researchers focusing on social problems. There is also the model of the scholar activists, some of whose scholarly work and socio-political engagement were closely and organically connected (Frantz Fanon, Neville Alexander) and others who saw little or no connection between their scholarship and their activism (Bertrand Russell

5. In 1992 there was an attempt to address this kind of reflexive concern about what it means to do social research for social transformation. A symposium organized by the journal *Transformation* saw a number of South African researchers and activists, and scholars from other African countries coming together to debate the challenges, possibilities and dangers of research oriented to social transformation. (*Transformation* 18/19, 1992.) See also Gumede and Dikeni (2009) who ask about the role of intellectuals and ideas in the life of South African democracy in their book *The Poverty of Ideas*.

and Noam Chomsky). What this diversity shows is the continuing reframing of the issue in response to prevailing socio-political imperatives and interests, with differences in approach between a clearly political framing (seen in themes such as the responsibilities of intellectuals, knowledge and power) and a more pragmatic or technocratic approach. (themes such as knowledge for problem-solving, knowledge transfer)

In the case of South Africa, the «knowledge for social development» theme has been a focus both in the apartheid and post-apartheid eras, the former reminding us that research can be made to serve social purposes that are defined as nationally strategic but are not necessarily emancipatory. The research that was encouraged and taken up in the strategic priorities of the apartheid state came not only from the social sciences but also from the natural sciences. Bawa and Mouton point to the role of South African science and scientists in 'the development of an indigenous nuclear research industry that was able to build atom bombs' and the ways in which the 'needs of the military-industrial complex' impacted on science and research at the time. (2004:196) In the social sciences, the state drew on the work of academics from the Afrikaans-speaking universities and researchers from statutory research organisations such as the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and the Human Sciences Research Council. (Padayachee 1996)

From the seventies onwards, the opposition to apartheid saw a number of academics and researchers become involved in the work of political movements, trade unions and civil society organisations (Bird 1992; Ngoasheng 1992; Webster 1992; Padayachee 2006)⁶ providing analyses to support resistance, and in the period of the early nineties to support the liberation movement in the period of negotiations with the apartheid government. The immediate post-1994 period saw an accelerated involvement of researchers (local and international) in the policy development work of the first post-apartheid government. Right up to the present, researchers continue to make inputs into policy and planning support to government at national and provincial levels and to other non-government constituencies in a variety of

6. Bird (1992) provides an instructive glimpse into the difficulties and tensions in managing the relationship between intellectual experts and the organizational structures and role-players in the political and civil society organisations.

models, many of which draw on university based expertise.⁷

Frameworks for science policy after 1994 and strategies to stimulate and support research and innovation as well as increase scientific expertise in the country have all invoked the idea of knowledge as crucial to the development and positioning of South Africa, both for the social and economic development agenda as well as for international scientific competitiveness.⁸ The state has sought to steer knowledge production towards socially relevant research through large investments⁹ in support of strategic and thematic research and research training¹⁰ through a variety

7. The following are some examples. The Gauteng City Region Observatory (GCRO) established in 2008 is a partnership between the Gauteng provincial government and two universities- WITS University and the University of Johannesburg. 'The primary purpose of the GCRO is to provide a strategic and applied research capacity to monitor the progress of the Gauteng City Region in terms of a variety of social, economic and developmental indicators. The GCRO will therefore act as an independent repository of relevant knowledge....' <http://www.gcro.ac.za>

The Development Policy Research Unit (DPRU) operating since the mid-eighties is located at the University of Cape Town and aims 'to inform economic and social policy with rigorous research into labour market challenges such as education, regulation, poverty and inequality.' <https://www.facebook.com/DevelopmentPolicyResearchUnit/info>

The National Labour and Economic Development Institute (NALEDI) established in 1993 'carries out labour and economic research. NALEDI's mission is to conduct policy-relevant research aimed at building the capacity of the labour movement to effectively engage with the challenges of the new South African society.' <http://www.naledi.org.za/about-us>

8. The idea of knowledge for social change, of science for society is deeply embedded in research policy in South Africa. The latest official blueprint for social change, the National Development Plan sees science and technology as crucial to social and economic development; the Department of Science and Technology's 10 year Innovation Plan includes 'grand challenges' among others relating to bio-economy and energy security as well a special focus on research on chronic poverty; the DST's future plan includes a 10 year 'innovation roadmap' on inclusive development as well as providing for a pilot 'knowledge brokerage' project to 'facilitate the increased use of research outputs and science evidence in decision-making.' (DST Annual Report 2013-2014: 20.)

9. Funding for research has however not reached the government target of contributing 1% of GDP by 2008 and stands at 0.76% (for 2011-2012) <http://www.bdlive.co.za/national/science/2014/04/09/sas-spending-on-research-and-development-to-improve>.

10. I have not addressed the huge and continuing challenge of the race and gender profile of knowledge producers 20 years hence. Despite several interventions at national and university level, there is a small base of research expertise

of initiatives.¹¹ The science system, as in other countries, has sought to maintain a balancing act between basic and applied research, between the socio-economic and reputational benefits of research, and also sending the right policy signals about the importance of humanities research, which has grown more vulnerable in a technology-focused innovation regime.

Research policy, research funding, a range of policy oriented initiatives, and official discourses about knowledge for society have all created an environment supportive and inviting of research that is oriented towards developmental problem solving.¹² There is training for civil servants in evidence-based policymaking.¹³ There are state funded research organizations like the Human Sciences Research Council that (before 1994 for the apartheid government and after 1994 for the post-apartheid government) produced research that has fed into government planning and policymaking. Even the Academy of Science for South Africa (ASSAF) as a body of scholars has signaled its intent to 'generate evidence-based solutions to national problems.' (<http://www.assaf.za>)¹⁴ In the worlds of higher education and science policy, organizations like the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and ASSAF have the formal function of providing advice to the relevant Ministers, and their investigations into different

themes of national concern have included substantial academic research input.¹⁵

The above are some examples of multiple and varied official arrangements for substantial research input into processes of policy thinking and policy development. For many progressive researchers, intellectual involvement in the post-apartheid social transformation project can now be officially pursued, drawing on state funding and seeking to contribute aspirationally to the moral economy while satisfying the demands of and benefitting from the reputational economy at the same time. Despite this enabling environment, much greater investigation and analysis is needed to uncover the 'thick' and 'thin' ways in which knowledge has exerted social influence beyond the ritualization of policy rhetoric about an evidence informed politics. More importantly, there is a need to understand what kinds of knowledge are privileged, over-represented or weakly represented within official or statutory arrangements for the production of socially useful knowledge.

Interpreting the Conjecture and its Knowledge Needs

Analysts looking at the nature of the influence of research on policy have often stressed the weight of contextual conditions, especially the power of the prevailing political climate over and above issues relating to the rigour or credibility of the research. 'How and when research has an influence on policy seems to depend largely on the political agenda and ideology of the government of the day rather than 'the nature of the evidence, no matter how compelling.' (Weiss et al, 2008:33) A similar sentiment is expressed by Cherns: 'The validity of the ideas can be of less importance than the state of receptiveness of the politician or administrator, whose receptiveness is influenced by his (sic) particular current preoccupations as much as by longer-term ideological considerations.' (1972:xxvii) It may be a truism that particular confluences of historical and ideological factors pose opportunities for or limits to the utilization of knowledge for policy and politics. But an analysis of knowledge for social

that continues to be insufficiently diverse in race and gender terms. The NRF 2014 statistics on SARCHI are telling in this regard. After 20 years, the profile of chair-holders remains predominantly white (71%) and male (76%).

11. See for example the National Innovation Fund, the South African Research Chairs Initiative and the Centres of Excellence programme. It is interesting to note that a number of SARCHI chair-holders have signaled an intention to produce policy relevant research despite the fact that the award, which is one of the most prestigious and well-supported research awards in the system, is not prescriptive in this regard,

12. See the call by the National Planning Commission in the Presidency inviting researchers to apply for funding in its Programme for Pro-Poor Policy Development. (www.pspdp.org.za).

13. See the work of the Centre for the Analysis of South African Social Policy Oxford University <http://www.casasp.ox.ac.uk>.

14. The 2014 presidential report of the ASSAF signals that the 'Academy continues energetically to fulfill its mandate of providing evidence-based science advice in support of policy development on issues of national significance to government and beyond.' The Academy is described as 'being able to call on a substantial pool of experts able to provide advice that is free of vested interests. (sic)' (2014:1)

15. See the CHE 2008 Report on Higher Education, Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom <http://www.che.ac.za> and the ASSAF 2011 Report on the State of the Humanities in South Africa www.assaf.co.za

change in those conjunctures may be instructive for understanding whether and how researchers who seek to be policy responsive may be buying into or transgressing policymaker notions of what kinds of knowledge are potentially useful and useable at a given moment.

As expected, the post-1994 period in South Africa saw an explosion of new policy development in all social sectors. It was a process that drew in several academics and researchers, including many who were involved before 1994 and who saw their work as a continuation of a progressive commitment to a new social order. Some joined government departments or new statutory bodies and others worked on government contracts for research from within universities and research organisations. Their contributions took the form of evaluations of existing policy arrangements, data gathering and analysis, sourcing and adaptation of comparative international information, the development of policy options, etc. The discourse of policymaking articulated an openness to expert knowledge on developing policy measures for social reform, combined with processes for consultation and public participation.¹⁶

It is difficult to generalize for all policy sectors on what this receptiveness of policymakers to research-based proposals for social change (which were both normative and technical) yielded by way of knowledge-informed and knowledge-influenced policy. Also playing a role were issues relating to how radical the larger political framing of the research was, factors of cost and feasibility, and the fit of the research content with the ideological and pragmatic concerns of those who had to make policy decisions. The fate of the work of the progressive economists who constituted the Macro-Economic Research Group (MERG) bears out the argument above that the acceptability of ideas depends on the political dispositions of policymakers and what they see as ideologically or pragmatically compelling at a given moment. (Padayachee 2006; Freund 2014) MERG was established in 1991 (responding to a brief by Mr. Mandela as ANC president at the time) to develop the elements of economic policy for the ANC to use during negotiations. Freund points out that the MERG Report with its more interventionist economic policy

proposals was 'dumped' (2014:531) as the ANC moved rightwards towards an economic position that sought to accommodate the needs of national and international capital.

In the case of higher education, the recommendations of the National Commission on Higher Education (established by then national president Mr. Mandela in 1995) drew on the research of local and international experts and significantly influenced subsequent legislation, policy and planning for the reform of higher education. It is possible that the greater policy acceptability of the NCHE proposals (apart from the equity-related recommendations for change) had to do with the fact that the research-based proposals were viewed as bringing international 'good practice' to the reform of higher education whose underpinning values were not incompatible with neo-liberal formulas for fiscal discipline, efficiency, quality and accountability.

In the period of resistance to apartheid, also in the period of political transition in the early nineties, and in the early days of policy development for the new government, the 'knowledge for social change' discourse was framed within a grand narrative of social transformation that was quite clearly politically and normatively charged. As the policy development phase settled into a period of consolidation and accelerated implementation, knowledge for policy shifted towards a concern with the strategies and instrumentalities of implementation. The question of policy ends and their underpinning vision and values were considered largely consensually settled through the electoral mandate of the ruling party and the public consultations from the mid-nineties to the end of the nineties. The government, however, has in the past two decades itself twice reconfigured its vision and socio-economic framework for fundamental change, moving from the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP 1994) to the Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme (GEAR 1996) to the National Development Plan (NDP 2012).

The latest NDP (<http://www.npconline.co.za>) has been signaled as government policy but its political status and its fit with other existing policy mandates and planning instruments is unclear at best. It has also been contested as a blueprint for a radical kick-start to a failing social and economic justice trajectory and has been the subject of sharp critiques of its neo-liberal underpinnings,

16. However, Lewin (1994:38.) reminds us of the ways in which the notion of participation was 'hijacked' as policy-making processes grew more top-down.

its low expectations in relation to tackling inequality and the absence of clear proposals to restructure the economy.¹⁷ Nevertheless, with a major focus on poverty and inequality, it has become a symbolic frame of reference for government but also for researchers who seek to provide relevant expertise to enable the effective realization of its goals.¹⁸ This raises the question of the nature and terms of involvement of progressive scholars in providing research support within the parameters of the NDP. Such involvement is underway in a context that is becoming increasingly polarized on the basis of contending premises about what constitutes a good society and the political and macro-economic policies that are necessary for its realization.

One familiar representation of the conjuncture in present day South Africa is that the fundamentals of major policy frameworks for social reform are in place. It is presumed that, although there is an agreed vision and set of goals for policy, there have been serious failures in policy implementation in many social sectors due to problems of capacity and resources. The 2011 Diagnostic Report of the National Planning Commission (<http://www.npconline.co.za>) identified a failure to implement policies and the absence of broad partnerships as the main reasons for slow progress in tackling inequality, poverty and unemployment and building a more inclusive democracy. In such a reading of the conjuncture, the political task could be represented as increasing policy effectiveness through improved implementation and monitoring. This might require knowledge that in the first instance would focus on evaluating the current mechanisms and proposing new techniques and approaches to increase policy effectiveness in implementation. The core of the work would not be about re-interrogating the ends of social policy or the macro-economic principles underpinning it.¹⁹

17. NUMSA Critique, http://www.numsa.org.za/admin/assets/articles/attachments/00119_the_ndp_mixed_bag_or_downright_neoliberal_proposals_for_south_africa1.pdf; SACP 2013 Discussion Document <http://www.sacp.org.za>; COSATU Discussion paper <http://www.cosatu.org.za/docs/discussion/2013/analysis.pdf>.

18. See, for example, the Carnegie 3 Think Tank Concept Document and Terms of Reference.

19. The South African Communist Party, one of the alliance partners of the ruling party, has in fact criticized this view. See the 2013 Discussion Document of the SACP. <http://www.sacp.org.za>

In order to explore the issue of different ways of reading the knowledge needs of the current conjuncture, I will draw on Gouldner's characterization (1975) of the different roles played by a 'technical intelligentsia' and a 'revolutionary intelligentsia' (which difference he based on Thomas Kuhn's distinction between normal science and revolutionary science.) Kuhn had argued that 'Under normal conditions the research scientist is not an innovator but a solver of puzzles, and the puzzles upon which he (sic) concentrates are just those which he believes can be both stated and solved within the existing scientific tradition.' (2006)²⁰ Gouldner sees the work of the technical intelligentsia as operating within a Kuhnian version of normal science which is puzzle solving activity within the dominant paradigm and which respects and remains within the boundaries of that paradigm. (1975:23-24) Intellectuals on the other hand are likely to use critical enquiry to challenge and transcend boundaries. 'Scholars and scientists are intellectuals insofar as they adopt the standpoint of 'critique' to the *paradigms*.... of their respective domains of scholarship and science.' (1975:22)

The issue of policy relevant knowledge understood as a matter of policy means or policy ends, as technocratic or critical, can be usefully correlated with the question that emerges in the Kuhn/Gouldner perspective above. This is about whether science and scholarship is firmly ensconced within an accepted interpretative framework at a given moment or is involved in shaping alternative interpretative frameworks, and whether the pursuit of knowledge is boundary respecting or boundary transgressing. In the case of research for policy, the dominant 'paradigm' in question could refer not only to the science that informs the scholarly work for policy use. It could more crucially refer to the political and macro-economic premises that underpin the world of social policy in which the scholar seeks to intervene. For the purposes of my analysis I will concentrate on the latter issue of the political paradigm that forms the frame of reference for thinking about policy and policy research. In a conjuncture whose stability is vulnerable to growing cleavages in social vision and policy expectation, the researcher who seeks to produce knowledge that

20. Earlier than Kuhn, Polyani had asserted that 'Major discoveries change our interpretative framework.' (Cited by Jouvenal, 1972:11)

is policy relevant cannot avoid traversing questions about whether the research is oriented to the improvement of policy means or the critical unsettling of policy ends or some uneasy mix of the two.

When policymakers express their openness to knowledge for policy in such a conjuncture, it is not clear that this is an open-ness primarily to knowledge about policy means or an invitation to robust scholarly scrutiny of political ends as well. What kind of role is there for critical policy scholarship within an official conception of useful knowledge?²¹ The idea of 'evidence-based policy-making' as a general approach of government to policy development (well-known from its advocacy by the New Labour government in the late nineties) has now become a policy-making mantra in many countries, including South Africa.²² This is despite critiques of the notion, especially of its political assumptions and its methodological coherence. (Rip 2001, du Toit 2013) The government's commitment to an 'evidence based' approach to policymaking does not settle the question of the nature and parameters of what evidence is acceptable (both in terms of the scholarship as well as the politics) or of the role of critique in challenging and even strengthening preferred bodies of evidence.

The question of critique in policy scholarship has been, predictably, an issue from the early days of researcher involvement in policy support. Analyses of the nature and terms of scholarly involvement in social policy development in that early period are instructive for thinking about the 'knowledge for policy' challenge two decades later. A brief look at those early debates indicates three sets of concerns relating to research engagement in policy support. The first issue is a caution about the absorption of scholarly expertise into an exclusively statist agenda for social change premised on development from above, and ignoring the 'question of popular struggle.' (Mamdani 1992:194) This is a pattern similar to trends in

other post-independence African countries.²³ The second concern relates to a predominant turn to technocratic modes of research involvement. (Morris 1992, 1996; Padayachee 2006) And the third is about a muting of critique in the research undertaken for reconstructive policy. Padayachee points to the decline in a critically engaged progressive scholarship as the policy development process unfolded after 1994. 'Some of the country's leading progressive economists adjusted... their ideological views to stay close to where they perceived power to lie.' (2006:16). No doubt a combination of proximity to power and ambitions to influence power (Padayachee 2006), the seduction of involvement in the reconstructive moment, new sources of income from government contracts and consultancies, and an absorption into providing much-needed technical resources for policy development in an environment of growing policy pragmatism and compromise all resulted in a weakening of a critical intellectual lens through which to view, contribute to and judge the emerging policy regime. These are cautionary tales, important to note for the present scholarly engagement with policy.

Any contemporary re-framing of the nature and terms of intellectual engagement in policy support two decades after the transition in South Africa cannot avoid a consideration of these concerns as three potential danger points for academic integrity and independence as much as for a democratic politics. Critical scholarship is not in itself opposed to a reconstructive policy development process and by no means a dispensable virtue in seeking to influence policy through research. It would however be cheaply polemical to maintain that the early post-1994 policy research and current engagement in knowledge for policy was/is all uncritical, hand-maidenly and politically accommodationist. Merod usefully points out that critique comes in many varieties and is not all inherently disruptive or 'antagonistic to vested..... interests.' (1987:45) Asserting the value of critique in policy research is absolutely necessary but it requires an accompanying deconstruction of whether critique is of a kind that is also 'willing to state unwelcome truths'

21. In a recent address by the Minister of Science and Technology to a gathering of humanities and social science scholars (June 2014), the invitation issued to researchers was to become constructively involved in the social development agenda of the country (as encapsulated in the NDP) rather than being fixated on a favourite (sometimes self-serving) intellectual self-description of 'speaking truth to power.' (Author's notes)

22. See Presidency documents at <http://www.pspdp.org.za>; the ASSAF 2014 Presidential Report.

23. See also Mkandawire 2005 for debates about intellectuals too close to and uncritical of nation building and developmental projects in many post-independent African countries, accepting the injunction from state authorities: 'Silence, we are developing' Ki-Zerbo cited by Mkandawire (2005:2)

(Hammersley 1995:21) and is founded on the 'ideal of solidarity' (Walzer citing Raymond Williams 1988:53).

In South Africa currently, there already exists more radical readings of the conjuncture and its knowledge needs and addressees. These readings do not accept that the present is an era for improved implementation and increased effectiveness of the state's social policy or that the necessary changes can be pursued within the same interpretative framework for social development. Such readings are more in line with processes of political realignments to the left of the ruling party. They are impelled by arguments about systemic political and policy inability to address the structural factors leading to the 'triple crisis of poverty, unemployment and inequality' (NUMSA 2013:2) and failures of government accountability in addressing the deepening social crisis in the country. In such a reading, a state driven development agenda is a dead end and is in fact seen to be beyond rehabilitation. It has to be replaced by mobilization for change from below. Where should progressive intellectual labour position itself in such a scenario? Pithouse, for instance, argues that the place of progressive researchers is with the 'organised politics of the poor' rather than with the state or middle class civil society. (2009:141)²⁴ Drawing on Fanon's view of 'honest' intellectuals Pithouse maintains that the 'ground of reason has shifted towards the life world and struggles of the oppressed and that this has become the ground of collaborative reason.' (2009: 162) Eagleton drawing on Chomsky articulates another version of a similar sentiment. '... it is not power but its victims who need the truth most urgently... power does not need to be told the truth because it is in some ways irrelevant to it.' (2005:277)

In a context where research policy for policy useful research is enabling from a regulatory and financial point of view, where spaces for 'free thought and action' (Pithouse 2009:161) are available, no matter how unevenly and imperfectly, in universities and in science and research systems more generally, and where debates about the policy conjuncture are beginning to reflect different and contesting images of a good society, the pressing question for progressive researchers

is how to frame their engagement in undertaking research that is intended to serve emancipatory social change. What interpretative framework/s constitutes the political and normative backdrop for their scholarship, especially those working on future determining themes like poverty and inequality? On the assumption that radical social change is possible within the current socio-economic policy regime, is policy scholarship most usefully focused on producing strategies and options for improving current policy effectiveness? Alternatively, on the assumption that the conjuncture reflects a serious challenge to the legitimacy of the current policy vision, the call on scholars and scholarship might be to 'clarify the body of knowledge that determines the public perception ofgovernment and its decisions' (Merod 1987: 43) as well as to produce knowledge for policy whose political and normative horizon is not framed narrowly by official policy conceptions.

Knowledge, Truth and Truthfulness

The ubiquitous notions of the knowledge society and the knowledge economy, and the postulation of knowledge as the primary driver of socio-economic development have permeated policy discourses in many developing countries. Post-1994 discourses on social reform and restructuring frameworks in South Africa have not been immune from the seductive promise of knowledge society ideas and arguments about a shift to mode 2 knowledge (Gibbons et al, 1994). Such ideas emphasizing the importance of knowledge as a social resource were appealing to both policymakers and social researchers because of the potential of their applicability within a radical reform agenda. Early post-1994 policy proposals for higher education restructuring, for example, drew heavily on mode 2 models of knowledge (NCHE 1996). Despite critiques of such notions (Muller 2000) they were clearly compelling in a society faced with the mammoth task of democratizing access to high-level education and skills development and harnessing all available intellectual resources to produce socially useful knowledge for an ambitious vision of social reconstruction. (Kraak 2000)

In a society opening up to the global environment after decades of isolation, such notions were also the internationally familiar buzzwords

24. In 1996 Pityana had argued that it is 'axiomatic... that they [black intellectuals] should at all times be on the side of the oppressed'. (1996:14)

for innovative social development and economic growth. A humanistic vision of the knowledge society would have held great appeal for a country dealing with racial exclusion and socio-economic inequality: a knowledge society is one that should be able to 'integrate all its members and promote new forms of solidarity'(UNESCO 2005:18) as well as providing a 'new approach to development in countries of the South.' (2005:19) The notion of the knowledge society continues to frame official government positions on social development and research utilization.²⁵

As indicated earlier, national discourses are replete with encouragement and resources for the production of knowledge that is relevant for policy and decision-making. But what kind/s of knowledge are envisaged as necessary to advance the social change agenda? There have been some attempts to clarify what is understood by knowledge and the diverse forms that it could take in early UNESCO debates on knowledge societies. One argument in the UNESCO debate was that knowledge was not reducible to information, especially the deluge emerging from the ICT revolution. 'While information is a knowledge-generating tool, it is not knowledge itself.' (2005:19). Knowledge also includes critical judgment, analysis, classification and choice in constructing information into a knowledge base. There was also the attempt to characterize what constituted useful knowledge beyond its economic value. 'Useful knowledge is not simply knowledge that can be immediately turned into profit in a knowledge economy – "humanist" and "scientific" knowledge each obey different knowledge-use strategies.' (2005: 19).

On this particularly capacious reading of knowledge in the knowledge society, the role of 'knowledge for society' could be understood to straddle a spectrum of knowledge types, be diverse in intention and effect, and encapsulate the legitimation of policy but also its de-legitimation through evaluation and critique. Such a large conception of knowledge could direct itself to a clarification of the relationships and interactions among knowledge, power and interests in the policy world, help strengthen and improve policy effectiveness, feed into public discourses and debates about policy, and play a clear role

in strengthening organized stakeholder capability to engage the state around policy choices and strategies. However, in many renderings of why knowledge matters in a knowledge society, this range of knowledge types and roles (which is occasionally acknowledged in policy rhetoric) has often in practice been reduced to valorizing knowledge for innovation and technology development and occasionally knowledge for social cohesion.

Debates on knowledge for policy have also addressed the question as to whether such knowledge is mainly about technical and technocratic expertise or is infused with moral and political assumptions about what a good society is. This goes to the heart of the question in South Africa about how to think about socially relevant knowledge in the current context. Post-1994 social reconstruction was cast as a grand political and moral narrative but it was also premised on a set of tasks requiring technical expertise to plan and manage a new bureaucratic system. Twenty years hence, policy and planning frameworks have been established in all key areas of social provision even though their implementation functionality may be uneven and inconsistent. Some current research-policy interface arrangements give us a good idea of the kinds of knowledge needed and supplied for planning for social change and development: knowledge to drive innovation (both technologically and in society), data gathering and analysis, indicators and benchmarks to measure progress, information derived from monitoring and evaluation, identification and interpretation of national and international trends, etc.²⁶ However, there is no reason why any of the above types of policy useful information and knowledge, despite their technocratic character, could not, within a different interpretative framework, be used to interrogate existing policy goals more radically than might be expected in a narrow problem-solving frame of reference. Whether those who undertake policy research consider it necessary or helpful to their work to embed their knowledge support in a moral and political framing of their brief or whether they see this as the responsibility of policymakers or organized social constituencies is a moot point.

25. See the NDP 2011; also a speech by the former Minister of Science and Technology on the launch of SARCHI, March 2014.

26. See the GCRO website www.gcro.ac.za for an account of the types of knowledge made available for regional planning for instance.

From the above, it is clear that there are numerous dimensions to knowledge in the world of policy. It is not unexpected that the official demands of the policy conjuncture call up and privilege certain kinds of knowledge (like data) and resists others (like critique) depending on what is at stake.²⁷ But if policy relevant knowledge is diverse in form and function, and moves ambiguously across a political landscape of contending interests, what is the relationship between such knowledge and truth? Is producing knowledge for policy an exercise in truth-seeking and truth-telling? Furedi argues that in a 'knowledge society' frame of reference, where knowledge has become a marketable package and brand, the link between truth and knowledge has been severed with destructive consequences for knowledge. '... without a relationship to Truth, knowledge has no intrinsic meaning.' (2004: 7). Brock makes a different point about the fundamentally disparate worlds of policy relevant knowledge and truth. 'Truth is the central virtue of scholarly work. Scholars are taught to follow arguments and evidence where they lead without regard for the social consequences of doing so. Whether the results are unpopular or in conflict with conventional or authoritative views, determining the truth to the best of one's abilities is the goal.' (1987:786.) In the world of public policy-making, in sharp contrast, concerns about what knowledge can serve policy purposes, and what consequences might flow from how policies are packaged shifts the emphasis from a pursuit of the truth to an exercise in persuasion around preferred political choices. (Rizman 2006 :95)

The literature on social research for policymaking reminds us of the many qualified ways in which both 'knowledge' and 'truth' have been represented, an issue which highlights the fragility of the connection between knowledge/truth and policy-making. Weiss speaks of the 'haphazard connection' between social science and public policy (1995). Dahrendorf calls the expectation that social science research will impact on society

and the economy a 'risky promise.'(1995:15) Rizman speaks of an 'uncertain path' between truth and politics. (2006) Lindblom and Cohen invoke the idea of "usable knowledge" in talking about the contribution of social science to social problem solving. (1979). Jasanoff's notion of a 'serviceable truth' (1990) makes a strong claim to straddle the world of science (and its truth claims and validation mechanisms) and the world of evidence informed policymaking (and its understandings and usages of evidence) in contrast to Brock's view of a fundamental and unbridgeable difference between these two worlds. This is a notion that brings up two different concerns—one relates to the ways in which the researcher's "truth" might be stretched in order to become serviceable to policy, the other relates to how one decides and who decides on what a serviceable truth is in particular contexts of acute policy contention. The term 'serviceable' is likely to remain as troubling as the notion of 'truth.

It is unsurprising that the question about truth in the world of policy relevant research requires such tenacious analytical effort to connect scholarly and political imperatives in planning for social change. In relation to truth, there are general philosophical doubts about claims to truth (especially those incarnated as universal Truths) Whether truth corresponds to objective realities and states of affairs 'out there', whether it is socially constructed, whether it is the outcome of social consensus or authoritarian pronouncement, whether it is what proves to work in practice are all contending positions when assertions of truth are made. Establishing a foundational basis for truth claims in general, quite apart from their status and meaning in the policy world, remains as an unresolved metaphysical and methodological challenge. Despite these difficulties in defining and deriving truth non-controversially, the question about truth in the policy world is an indispensable one to pose. It enables us to frame research for social change within a bigger picture, longer-term normative horizon for social policy beyond what appears to be immediately and pragmatically compelling at given moments in the policy world. It also prevents a total suspension of truth as an imperative central to the integrity of scientific research when researchers enter the world of policy and policy-relevant knowledge.

Having tried to understand the 'uncertain connection' between knowledge and truth, and the

27. Speaking of the Blair era Leys says 'The result is a new attitude towards evidence. Evidence needed for policy-making relating to global market forces—statistical evidence on production, trade and finance, for example, —is taken seriously. Evidence relating to socio-cultural adjustment policies is another matter... Evidence that looks supportive of ideas to which the government is committed tends to be accepted uncritically. Contrary evidence tends to be dismissed.' (2005:15)

controversies around what constitutes truth, I want to move next to examine what I consider to be an important yardstick to judge the permeability of the policy world to knowledge or evidence of different types, as well as the veracity of policy interest in truths that are not only convenient but also 'inconvenient.' (Weber 1946) This is the idea of truthfulness. Here, I draw on Bernard Williams' exploration of the connection and tension in modern thought between truth and truthfulness. (2002) Williams' analysis of the values of truth and truthfulness is of general philosophical importance in its reflections on the role and meaning of both notions in human life. It is in addition hugely instructive in helping to clarify the normative horizon for the conduct of policy relevant research within the current policy trajectory in South Africa. My assumption here is that socially relevant research, even in its technocratic forms, is informed by some broad, perhaps fuzzy, notion of a good society, and it is this normative horizon which needs to become clearer to researchers themselves and more visible to the ostensible beneficiaries of expert knowledge.

Although in danger of over-simplifying Williams' wide-ranging, erudite and nuanced analysis of truth and truthfulness, let me briefly summarise what I think are the key insights from his account, which are useful for the purposes of examining research for policy. Truth and truthfulness, according to Williams, are values that are connected to one another but are not necessarily co-existent. In fact, there is a tension between our 'devotion to truthfulness and the suspicion directed to the idea of truth.' (2002:1) Human beings have an 'intense commitment to truthfulness' (2002:1) This means that they want to get to the 'real structures and motives' (2002:1) that lie behind appearances, have 'respect for the truth' (2002:11), do not wish to be deceived or engage in self-deception, would judge falsehood and breaking of promises negatively, would want to know the truth and seek it out, and would want to have truth as the basis of a shared world. (2002:72). It is not difficult to see the connection between truthfulness and the idea of trust in human interaction, which Williams describes as a 'necessary condition of co-operative activity...where this involves the willingness of one party to rely on another to act in certain ways.' (2002:88)

The notion of truth is an infinitely trickier thing than truthfulness. Williams cites text from Nietzsche that has greatly influenced post-modernist

scepticism about truth. 'Truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions, they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force...' (2002:17) Although Williams points out that Nietzsche moved to a less dismissive view of truth, this early formulation (Brezeale 1979) is a good reminder of the difficulties and contestations around making claims to truth. This is not simply because of unsettled epistemological debates about the correspondence between 'truth' and 'reality', nor because of post-modernist challenges to the very coherence of a truth claim. In a policy world whose underpinning vision of a good society is increasingly under challenge, differing claims to policy truth could be read as adversarial political choices. Given the philosophical and political contestations around the notion of truth on the one hand and the impulsion to truthfulness on the other, it is the latter which could be a more interesting yardstick for the policy domain than truth. Montefiore in privileging truthfulness over truth puts it as follows: 'the fact that our constitutive responsibility to truthfulness is not one to an absolute truth does not absolve us from the recognition that the responsibility itself is absolute.' (1990:227)

What does all of this mean for a reflection on the contemporary conditions for undertaking socially relevant and policy useful research in South Africa? Research activity could be argued to operate within a commitment to truthfulness as a methodological imperative in the domain of scientific work. Inherent in the scientific ethos is the striving to seek out continually the most coherent, most comprehensive, most accurate findings. The commitment to truthfulness does not mean that 'truths' yielded in the scientific process are not contestable or replaceable by other versions or iterations. One assumes then that science and research is impelled and underpinned by the value of truth seeking and truth telling, irrespective of whether a scientific finding can legitimately claim or be demonstrated to be a truth. Is the world of public policymaking impelled by a similar commitment to truth seeking, to a truthfulness that is habitual rather than strategic or opportunistic? This is a question that has become quite murky in South Africa in a context where the issue of trust between politicians and the citizenry has become increasingly strained.

Even if one has a fairly qualified Machiavellian view of the world of policy and politics, powerful ideological interests, resource constraints, and

contending claims about policy goals and benefits can reduce radical policy ambitions to a morally and politically troubling pragmatism amid a weakening or disregarded commitment to truthfulness in the body politic. Montefiore insists nevertheless that truthfulness is a political virtue because the 'nature and degree of truthfulness within a community is a major determinant of the nature of the public or political space in which the community conducts and contests its affairs.' (1990:228) This raises the question of agency and responsibility in holding the polity to account for acceptable levels of truthfulness within which to pursue a set of common interests. Organised social forces in society have a large role to play in this regard. Progressive researchers who deal in 'truth' to improve policy for social change will have to weigh up the prospects for 'truthfulness' as openness to the question of where the best evidence leads within the policy domains in which they work. They will have to confront two questions—one relates to the veracity not so much of individual policy bureaucrats and decision-makers as of the overall policy project. The other is about their responsibility to uphold and strengthen the value of truthfulness in the policy domain through their scholarship and their critical intellectual engagement with policy.

Conclusion

My focus in this paper has been on exploring an interrogative framework for re-thinking knowledge for social change in the face of evolving conceptualisations of the social change and social justice agenda in South Africa. In my analysis, I have operated with certain assumptions about the nexus between knowledge and societal influence. One assumption is that the influence of knowledge on policy is likely to be indirect, serendipitous, by slow diffusion, on the technicalities rather than on goals, and mediated by non-cognitive imperatives relating to power and interest. (Weiss 1995) The knowledge provided by researchers is processed and mediated by numerous interlocutors across different levels of decision-making in the policy process. This allows only for a very 'thin' claim about the power of knowledge, evidence and truth in shaping policy directions and policy shifts.²⁸ Another assumption is that the role of political

28. In an important reminder, Elster points out that the 'main political reforms of the last century havebeen carried out by social movements anchored in a conception of social justice.' (1983:134)

mobilization and of public sentiment is a powerful factor in intervening in and influencing policy processes. Expert knowledge about the relevant policy issues is likely to be only one contributing factor in such processes (Rip 2001), reminding us about the limits of knowledge in the policy world. A third assumption is that a normative emancipatory interest is not alien to the world of policymaking (and hence to the knowledge that orients itself to policy) even though the prevailing balance of forces determines what space it holds within the policy world. These large caveats do not, however, exempt researchers who respond to the knowledge needs of policy, from a careful examination of the political and normative conditions of their work. Such reflexivity would require an engagement with questions about the types of knowledge provided, the addressees of their work, and the means of insertion of their work into public processes of debate to avoid the dangers of a perceived collusive relationship between intellectual and political elites.²⁹

Reflexivity can strengthen scholarship intended for policy through clarifying its premises and assumptions. It can also lead to paralysis, scepticism and even cynicism, and an abstentionist 'clean hands' approach in contemplating knowledge for the socio-political world. It is mistaken to assume that reflexivity is especially required for researchers who respond to the knowledge needs of government policy frameworks and less so for scholarship that positions itself outside a state driven social change agenda. The distinctions between knowledge that is directed to improving means or to interrogating ends, between knowledge that is technocratic and knowledge that is critical, and between being handmaidenly or adversarial towards policymakers are perhaps too tidy for negotiating the messy world of research for policy. They could, nevertheless, have heuristic value as reminders, both of the politics of context as well as of the particular responsibilities of scholars in the policy world. In his sonnet *Words*, W.H. Auden writes 'A sentence uttered makes a world appear'³⁰ What worlds are imagined or reproduced in creating knowledge for social change?

29. In his 2009 Reith Lectures on A New Citizenship, Michael Sandel argued that intellectuals should not be backroom experts but should bring their ideas into the public domain where fellow citizens can engage them. www.bbc.co.uk

30. Cited by Bernard Williams (2002:66)

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