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The Political Economy of Agrarian Change: Dinosaur or Phoenix?

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A phoenix is a mythical and sacred bird, the only one of its kind. At the end of its life cycle it builds a nest that it then ignites. Both the nest and bird burn fiercely and are reduced to ashes. From these ashes, a new phoenix arises with renewed youth and vigour.²

In this paper I argue for the resurrection of the political economy of agrarian change (PEACH) in mainstream policy research in order to understand the deeper causes of poverty and its transformation in rural areas. I critically examine chronic poverty research and argue that in the wake of the devastating critique of PEACH theory, an unlikely combination of post-structural and methodologically individualist new development economics (NDE) theory became hegemonic in development studies throughout the 90s and shaped emergent chronic poverty methodology. As a consequence subsequent chronic poverty empirical research tended to produce results confirming post-PEACH theory – poverty caused by assets based vulnerability experience of poor people and by their exclusion from economies and societies. In order to address the possibility of poverty as a problem of inclusion into economies and societies, chronic poverty research advanced new social relational concepts in the intergenerational transmission of poverty literature (IGT) and in adverse incorporation and social exclusion research (AISE). These and other such critical oppositional thinkers endorse a dynamic, relational transformational approach, one which combines realist structural and interpretive thinking and which coheres with critical realist PEACH methodology. However, they hesitate in fully embracing PEACH concepts – such as capitalist accumulation, class relations and unfreedom – which can shed light on materialist processes of poverty. I argue that the difficulties this body of research confronts in addressing the deeper causes of poverty can be resolved by drawing on PEACH concepts together with critical realist PEACH methods, and that the pluralism that this entails enables much deeper explanations for processes of impoverishment and escape and a wider range of empowering policy responses.

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² The phoenix symbolises immortality (drawn from *Britannica Concise Dictionary, Oxford Dictionary, 1985:552*).

1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I discuss how the political economy of agrarian change (PEACH) might enhance research on the causes of chronic poverty and escapes therefrom.³

The Rise and Fall of PEACH in Mainstream Poverty Studies

From the mid-1960s through to the mid-1980s Judith Heyer was part of a general movement to understand rural poverty through a distinctly cross-disciplinary analysis of the political economy of agrarian change, which was firmly rooted in empirical research. In the early 1960s, growth based theories of agricultural development based on technical change were promoted as a solution to persistent rural poverty (e.g. Mellor, 1967). Yet local observers and village field researchers noted that rural development wasn't working – the numbers of poor grew and some non-poor smallholders, fisherman, and pastoralists became poor through loss of assets or common property resources. Bigger farmers appropriated the land of smaller farmers, rural labourers were displaced by machines, capitalist farming depleted scarce water resources and ruined soils, exploitation of the rural poor was intensified through linked credit, labour and commodity markets and foreign companies continued to extract mineral resources, cheap labour and cheaply made commodities (see contributions in Heyer *et al.* 1981, J. Harriss, 1983, *The Economic and Political Weekly* and *Journal of Peasant Studies*)

It was in this context that many researchers turned to Marxist political economy in order to understand the relationship between economic growth and poverty. Marxist research focussed on the ways classes accumulated by appropriating surplus from the less powerful. They were broadly concerned with the influence of productive forces (technical change) and commercialisation on transformations in modes of production (e.g. feudalism to capitalism), class struggles and associated transformations in rural class structure (based largely on the ideas of Lenin, 1899/1977 and Kautsky, 1899/1988).

Yet this body of theory did not stand on its own: it was iterated with the PEACH practice of 'muddy footed empiricism' through village studies (Harriss-White and Harriss, 2007) and with truly post-disciplinary intellectual approaches developed in comparative political economy seminars and workshops in which anthropologists, sociologists, historians, geographers and political scientists fresh from field research engaged in table thumping challenges addressed to political and liberal economists, and vice versa. This unique intellectual environment contributed to new cross-disciplinary theory (e.g. gender-capitalism linkages; commercial capitalisms), method (critical realism) and formed a fertile intellectual ground for the emergence of post-structural ideas in development. Yet just as PEACH began accelerating through its serious engagement with critical and feminist theory in the mid-1980s (see the early

³ The editors of the *Journal of Agrarian Change* suggest that agrarian change is 'agrarian political economy'; it is the interdisciplinary study of processes of change in agrarian production, property, social relations and power (Bernstein and Byres, 2001). Thus I have doubled up on concepts in the term 'the political economy of agrarian change', yet this appears to be more common, if technically incorrect label (see Harriss, 2007:11, Hickey and du Toit, draft 2006; Griffin, 1974/9 and Ellis, 2000:23).

research of Razavi, Jackson, Rogaly, and Kapadia for instance), PEACH in its entirety was criticised to destruction in mainstream development.

Younger researchers in mainstream development studies today either neglect this very fertile period of thought altogether, or refer to this approach and its research as the 'old' political economy of agrarian change. This disregard emerges from the devastating attack on PEACH research, particularly its Marxist variant, in the mid-1980s (see Booth, 1985 and section 3 below). In development studies this attack took the shape of a broad methodological critique of structuralist accounts which could:

- Mask individual/household mobility (see Shanin, 1972), especially the upward mobility of the poor, as it seemed to challenge the teleology of inevitable proletarianisation (e.g. Cain, 1981, Attwood, 1979; Harriss, 1986, Walker and Ryan, 1990),
- Obscure poor people's agency, strategies, narratives, identity and thus empowerment (see participatory approach of Chambers, 1997; subaltern studies e.g. Guha and Spivak, 1988 and critical theory),
- Hide endogenous explanations for agrarian institutions – such as sharecropping, tied labour – explained in terms of a risk, asymmetric information and transactions costs logic built on the notion of agency in rational choice theory (see New Development Economics, henceforth NDE, of Stiglitz, 1986 and Bardhan, 1989; 2000).

Certainly there were examples of deterministic and mechanistic political economy research especially before the 1980s but these studies sat alongside richer, non-teleological historical and cross-disciplinary approaches to PEACH. The latter were substantially more varied, nuanced and self-critical than its 'functionalist, economic, reductionist' caricature which survives in mainstream development thinking today. Whilst PEACH fell out of favour in the development mainstream it positively flourished outside it, in more scholarly niches (such as *The Journal of Peasant Studies* and *Journal of Agrarian Change*).

The story of the squeeze on agrarian political economy in mainstream development thinking is inextricably linked to the story of the broader squeeze on political economy within economics and along with it on a debate over method within economics. Classical economics and political economy, hegemonic in the 1950s, were forced into heterodoxy, by Walrasian monetarism, followed later by the NDE (Byres, 2006). Political economy was then forced into the other social sciences where it was squeezed from the other side by post-modernism - which also had had enough of economics as a subject matter, focusing instead on culture and consumption (Fine, 2001). At the same time, the new classical (development) economics colonised the other social sciences and labelled itself the 'new political economy' (e.g., Bates, 1989).⁴ As a consequence,

⁴ NPE shares an interest in the political and legal basis of economic institutions with Marx and classic critical political economy and also shares a desire to explain the emergence, persistence and transformations of particular agrarian and other institutions. However, there the similarities end. 'New Institutionalists - from Coase to North and Bates - and the new, new Institutionalists or NDE (such as Stiglitz, 1986; Bardhan, 1989; 2000 – who sometimes also prefer the label 'information theoretic' school) use principally modified neo-classical tools but which centre on risk, information asymmetries and transactions costs logic based on rational expectations/rational choice assumptions (see Byres, 2006 for a discussion of the methodological differences between classical PEACH and NDE). This

classical political economy had been squeezed within economics and outside, losing its subjects, its subject matter (Fine, 2001) its appellation and being re-prefixed 'the old'. This squeeze on political economy coincided with a major decline in teaching of the history of economic development and of economic thought (Bagchi, 2006: 230).

Chronic Poverty

Recent chronic poverty research is firmly situated in the policy mainstream. It is concerned with long-term processes of poverty creation or, more recently, the causes of sustained escapes from poverty. This small school born out of the mobility measurement school (e.g. Baulch and Hoddinott, 2000) identified a group of the population in various developing countries trapped below the poverty line for 5 plus years and sought to understand chronic or 'structural' poverty (i.e. not transient or stochastic poverty) with a strong focus on assets (see Carter and Barrett, 2006). They pursued explanations for poverty through cross-disciplinary, qual-quant (Q^2) research. The latter combines the econometric analysis of panel data together with qualitative data on livelihood strategies (e.g. Ellis, 2000) gathered through participatory techniques (Chambers, 1997). The concerns of chronic poverty research – understanding long-term, structural, assets based poverty - have a clear overlap with those of PEACH. Yet chronic poverty research, shaped by highly methodologically individualistic theory developed since the marginalisation of PEACH, has tended to produce results supporting that theory, explaining the cause of chronic poverty in terms of exclusion and the characteristics and experience of the poor. The deeper structural and relational causes of poverty have eluded researchers in this school.

One recent response to these limitations has been the recovery and development of social relational concepts, including domestic relations in the IGT/I literature (see Harper *et al.*, 2003, Bird 2007), and social relations in markets, politics and societies in AISE research (Shepherd, 2007, Hickey and du Toit, 2007, Wood, 2003 Murray, 2001 and Bracking, 2003). Early thinking in AISE research partially recovers PEACH *methods* for chronic poverty analysis through its social relational-transformational approach, a crucial step forward in this literature (da Corta and Bird, 2008: draft). However AISE authors, in common with the Critical Oppositional thinking in this chronic poverty literature,⁵ seem to distance themselves from the very *concepts* which can help specify the *economic relational processes* which contribute to adverse incorporation into 'the market'. This distance from PEACH leaves the *economics* of chronic poverty exclusively to NDE models of vulnerability and poverty traps (for instance Carter and Barrett, 2006; Dercon, 2006) whose endogenous explanations need to be explained 'exogenously'.

NDE approach is a very clear move away from classic political economy's focus on the processes of the accumulation and distribution of wealth, power and exploitation in explaining the emergence and transformation of rural institutions.

⁵ For ease, I identify a group labelled 'Critical Oppositional': 'critical' because they draw inspiration from Foucault and critical social theory which is concerned with the human agency dependent nature of social structure (see Lawson, 1997) and 'oppositional' because they are broadly oppositional to capitalism highlighting the need to regulate the pauperising effects of capitalism on the poor, hence tend to be politically progressive (see Lawson, 2006 referring to a cohering ontology of heterodox economics and Bernstein, 2003 referring to 'oppositional populism'). They tend to be non-economists.

In this chapter, I critically examine chronic poverty research, identifying its causal limits and explore what the new social relational concepts can offer (section 2). I then turn to recent PEACH research, arguing for a recovery of PEACH concepts and methods which help explain the deeper structural causes of poverty and escapes from poverty (section 3). I conclude with a case for methodological and conceptual pluralism to guide research on chronic poverty.

2. CHRONIC POVERTY RESEARCH

Panel studies

Empirical research into chronic poverty usually begins with panel studies, which trace mobility in an individual's or household's economic status over a period of time enabling a measure of the dynamics and extent of chronic poverty (those poor for over 5 years). Such mobility might be represented in a transition matrix revealing groups that demonstrate upward mobility, downward mobility or remain stable. Panel studies are also used to explore the causes of mobility – quantitative relationships between economic mobility (based on earnings, expenditure or financial assets) and individual characteristics (e.g. dependency ratios, education, health, livelihood diversification, gender, caste/race, etc). Causal analysis using panel data alone has been challenged when the characteristics of poor people which are correlated with poverty are confused with the *causes* of their poverty (Harriss, 2007:2). Moreover, causal processes are hidden when econometrically symmetrical groupings or received panel periods replace those that are historically relevant, when taxonomies based on above or below the poverty line supplant contextually or conceptually relevant social grouping of actors and when official take the place of contextually relevant space boundaries.

Proximate Cause Analysis

In order to put qualitative flesh on panel data skeletons, chronic poverty researchers have gathered qualitative data from a sub-sample of panel individuals focussing on actors' accounts of their upward or downward mobility. One common approach focuses on actors' perceptions of *proximate or precipitating* causes of their upward or downward mobility in the panel. These proximate causes may be then merged with results of exploratory correlation exercises to identify major 'drivers of downward mobility' and 'drivers of escape' (see B. Sen, 2003; Davis, 2006/7 and Shepherd and Mehta, 2006).

Livelihood Trajectories: 'Snakes And Ladders'

A more potent explanatory approach documents *sequences* of impoverishing or enriching events and livelihood strategies leading to downward mobility (snakes) or upward mobility (or ladders) over the life course, lending some insight into *causal processes* (see Kabeer, 2004; Davis, 2006; Krishna, 2006, Adato, Lund and Mhlongo, 2007).⁶ These studies have illustrated 'double or treble whammies', for example how the need for money to pay for hospital costs can subsequently force a land sale and

⁶ Adato, Lund and Mhlongo (2007) use an interesting family history method where events relating to each household member's history are sequenced and compared.

this can later be followed by loss of earnings through loss of wage work and possibly further asset sales to meet consumption costs (Davis, 2006; Kabeer, 2004).

⁷Conversely, sequential escapes from poverty may also be documented, such as a state loan enabling a labourer to purchase small livestock, fattened and later sold for larger livestock or land (Davis, 2006).

This research illustrates two features of the unique *assets-based vulnerability experience of being poor* which contribute to poverty traps:

- a) 'Adverse coping' – poor people exposed to frequent crises draw down on their productive assets and human capital, and this threatens long-term mobility through:
 - Loss of income,
 - loss of buffers, which can make poor people vulnerable to crises and shocks in the future; and
 - downward intergenerational mobility through loss of children's human assets (such as health and education assets which are often irrecoverable).

- b) The extremely constrained 'Sophie's Choice' available to chronically poor people when the need to preserve one asset endangers another. For instance, in order to prevent land or livestock sales, poor people:
 - eat less or overwork, risking future illness and inability to bring in wages;
 - eat less, risking *in utero* malnutrition, and human capital;
 - withdraw children from school to work, permanently damaging their human capital.

Exclusion Theory

Shepherd (2007) suggests that findings on adverse coping strategies and intergenerational transmissions of poverty might maintain those asset poverty traps identified in the micro-economic research of Carter and colleagues. The latter have identified a sub-group of the chronically poor who have the potential to be non-poor given skills and circumstances, but who lack sufficient assets to 'craft a path out of poverty' (Carter and Ikegami, 2007:1-2). It is assumed that this sub-group is trapped in poverty because their low asset level *excludes them from possible growth processes* (Carter and Barrett, 2006) and this exclusion is compounded by their 'social exclusion' as people below a certain asset threshold are also found to have the lowest social capital (see Adato, Carter and May, 2006 for South Africa).

Problems with Chronic Poverty Research

Understanding asset based poverty traps and adverse coping sequences are useful but it is only part of the story. Without explanations incorporating the deeply unequal social relations in which poor people are involved, and the wider political economy,

⁷ Similarly, male alcoholism might be a precursor to abuse, separation and subsequent downward mobility for the abused spouse through assetlessness and loss of family network (Lawson, McKay and Okidi, 2006, who then cross checks sequences in panel analysis).

such analyses can be desperately thin.⁸ By contrast, PEACH researchers in the early 1980s began to relate vulnerability and poverty traps to social relations in product and labour markets. For instance, PEACH studies of vulnerability and coping during famines and seasonal crises demonstrated how different elite groups benefited from, or even manufactured opportunities for, accumulation through asset grabbing during famine, hoarding grain in order to force price rises or using the opportunity to secure long term bonded labour contracts, all of which made poor people even more vulnerable to future famines (see Devereux, 1995, da Corta and Devereux, 1991).

These observations echo the sentiments in a series of very strongly worded papers commissioned by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC) which urge chronic poverty researchers to consider power and the constraints on peoples' agency through a social relational perspective and also to look at how low asset poverty traps, low incomes, and vulnerabilities are constructed in the first place through political, social and cultural *processes* (see Francis, 2006, Bracking, 2003, Harriss, 2007, Bevan, 2004 and 2006, Green and Hulme, 2005; Hickey and Bracking, 2005, Hickey and du Toit 2007).

Theoretical Influences on Methods and Results: $Q^2 = MI^2$

One major reason for the failure to engage in deeper structural causal analysis in Chronic Poverty Q^2 empirical research is that chronic poverty research has drawn on contra-structuralist, methodologically individualist theory and methods developed since PEACH fell out of favour in the mid-1980s, including:

- An agent-centred version of the livelihoods strategy analysis pioneered by Ellis (2000) which tracks over time a household's assets (human, social, and natural physical and financial) and strategies adopted in response to crises and opportunities⁹,
- The participatory approach pioneered by Chambers (1997) which centres on poor actors' meanings of poverty, their strategies and their agency (see Narayan, *et al.*: 2000 and Kanbur and Schaffer, 2007), and
- Theories that long-term poverty is a result of the asset based vulnerability experience of poor people and their supposed economic and social exclusion (e.g. Carter and Barrett, 2006, Dercon, 2006, Harper *et al.*, 2003).

⁸ The cycle of vulnerability and asset dispossession of the poor is common through history and through space: whether a poor peasant in 12th century England or contemporary Burmese labourer – poverty and vulnerability to repeat crises beget further poverty as poor people shed assets and endanger reciprocal social networks– something which keeps getting 'rediscovered' in poverty studies. Research on assets, adverse coping and poverty traps is very similar to Chambers (1983) early research on poverty ratchets who describes: "ratchet effects, like movements down past a cog which are difficult or impossible to reverse, making poor people permanently poorer. The poverty ratchet – the loss of assets or rights which is difficult to reverse – may be forced by a slow build-up of pressures which pass a threshold, by an expenditure which is foreseeable but large, or by a sudden crisis."(pp. 114-5) Chambers also identifies 'seasonal ratchets', such as the need for small peasants to sell subsistence crops after the harvest then later to buy food at much more expensive prices (p.210, based on the PEACH research of Barbara and John Harriss).

⁹ Ellis's original model clearly contained social relations, but tended to be dropped from empirical applications of his approach.

As a consequence of this highly methodologically individualist post-PEACH theory, poverty and escapes therefrom are explained in terms of actors' individual characteristics, their independence (rather than relational dependence), their behavioural initiative, strategies and action (agency). This methodological individualism is reinforced *several times over* in chronic poverty Q² research, through the marriage of:

- i. MI econometric panel methods, to
- ii. MI qualitative research based on tracking the lifeworld livelihood strategies of individuals or individual households within the panel.

Thus Q²=MI² research and this methodological individualism is further reinforced by data gathered through MI participatory methods from a sample of poor people and by analyses shaped by MI endogenous explanatory frameworks of NDE.

For these reasons, analysis of poverty *is methodologically and empirically closed off* from wider social relations and macro structural change. As a result, not only can findings of such research can be extremely partial, but also they *tend to confirm the post-1980s, post-PEACH MI theory which initially shaped chronic poverty research*: poverty being located in the agents own low asset/human asset traps, their vulnerability, their adverse coping strategies explained endogenously in terms of their *exclusion* from economic and social structures. As Harriss (2007) warns, locating of the cause of poverty in a person's characteristics, strategies and near universal experience of poverty rather than in the unequal relations that characterise the larger political economy profoundly depoliticises poverty.

Why Did Social Relations Fall out of the Chronic Poverty Toolbox?

Paradoxically, Hulme and Shepherd (2003:409) explicitly sought to marry individualist poverty dynamics (individual or household mobility) with social structural change, yet in subsequent Q² empirical research such relations seem to be neglected. Similarly in Ellis' (2000:30) original livelihoods framework an individual's assets were very clearly mediated by social relations and institutions. Yet this acceptance of social relations on a rhetorical level has not been translated seriously and consistently into empirical practices in chronic poverty research.¹⁰ I think this reveals a much deeper problem of the erosion of relational theory in development since the demise of PEACH in the mainstream, particularly the neglect of theory and concepts which expose the centrality of social relations to understanding poverty, and which specifically problematise choice and mutuality in the economic relations of poor people.

¹⁰ Naila Kabeer identified the limits to her snakes and ladders approach suggesting that *poverty traps* which kept people poor are underpinned by structural disadvantages in power relations. As a feminist scholar she looks at some gender issues, but neglects other social relations and how changes in the macro political economy can transform such relations. For instance, she acknowledges that markets tend to exploit or exclude the powerless but does not go further in this publication. This may be a problem of time as marrying panels and doing life histories is time consuming and gruelling. Indeed, Kabeer and Davis are by no means alone, there is something about working with panel data where dedicated 'social relationists' temporarily 'go' methodologically individualist in an attempt to marry their research to econometric analysis of panel data (my own research efforts in Manchester, 1990; Harriss and Ramasamy, 1986; Athreya *et al.*, 1990 (first chapter only).

Social Relational Concepts and Methods: Problematising the Value of Inclusion

In order to address these limitations researchers at the CPRC under Andrew Shepherd (2007) have been looking into how to put social relations and structure back into long-term poverty studies through the development of new concepts and methods focusing specifically on social relations within households (IGT/I) and adverse terms of incorporation into states, markets and societies (AISE).

Domestic and Intergenerational Relations

IGT/I research has recently begun problematising choice in livelihood strategies by recovering feminist research on *domestic and intergenerational relations*, focussing on how such relations influence timely spending on offspring during crucial stages of childhood which can affect their prospects for mobility in adulthood through the nurturing of human assets (health, physical and cognitive abilities, education), inheritance of productive assets and psychological and social inheritances (Harper *et al.*, 2003). Fresh conceptual territory is being developed through ideas on the *intergenerational contract (IGC) or 'bargain'* which can be understood as the relationship between different generations which is shaped by norms, rules, conventions and practices structured by gender and age (Bird, 2007 drawing on Malhotra and Kabeer, 2002). Spheres of economic responsibility might include who receives what spending on education, on food and on health care, who inherits what assets and in what form (e.g. direct or in dowry to groom's family), who is responsible for providing for whom and when (including in later life), who is responsible for domestic work, work on own assets or outside paid work (see also Rogaly, 1997:63-5) and who controls joint resources.

Bird (2007) suggests that intergenerational contracts often involve decisions for one cohort (e.g. sons, older sons) to do well at the expense of another (e.g. daughters, younger sons) with diverse poverty trajectories for siblings as they mature. As an example, parents might encourage a daughter to work off loans taken in order to fund her brother's ability to stay in school at her own lasting educational expense. This may result in sons become educated and landowning and their sisters becoming dependent on landless labouring and their brothers' patronage if widowed or separated (Venkateswarlu and da Corta, 2001). Poverty can be reproduced as one set of intergenerational *norms* is replaced by another: the switch from bridewealth to increasingly higher expected parental payments of dowry among lower castes (Sanskritisation in south India) or increased female seclusion can have a devastating effect on longer term female economic mobility.

Whilst this research focuses on changes in the terms of these contracts over generations *within households* over time, PEACH research has linked the terms of domestic contracts to power relations in markets, states and societies which can affect different household member's future mobility. As an example, the bargaining position of subordinate household members vis-à-vis employers can fall when responsibility for family provisioning is shifted onto them or when they are involved in paying off debt taken by a patriarch (da Corta and Venkateswarlu, 1999; Venkateswarlu and da Corta, 2001). This can reduce their power to strike against low wages offered by employers (Kapadia, 1993) and can diminish their power to 'choose' higher paid employment (Rogaly, 1997). As a result women and children tend to face lower

wages and tougher working conditions which reinforce their subordinate position in the home (see Rogaly, 1997 and da Corta and Venkateswarlu, 1999).

AISE Research

AISE researchers have also begun to problematise choice in the livelihood strategies of chronically poor people and seriously question the assumption of the automatic benefit of their inclusion into the economy, state and society. Hickey and du Toit (2007) promote the relational concept of ‘adverse incorporation’ into the state, the market and civil society in order to understand people’s poverty. Drawing on the conceptual and methodological research of Colin Murray, (2001:4-5), the authors comment that:

This concept of adverse incorporation, it is argued, captures the ways in which localised livelihood strategies are enabled and constrained by economic, social, and political relations over both time and space, in that they operate over lengthy periods and within cycles, and at multiple spatial levels from local to global. These relations are driven by inequalities of power. (Hickey and du Toit, 2007:4)

The concept of *adverse incorporation* was originally put forth as both an argument and a concept to challenge the widely held view that poverty is caused by social and economic exclusion, by people being left out of development and markets, which the authors note derives from a residualist (or non-relational) understanding of poverty (citing the PEACH research of Bernstein, *et al.*, 1992).

Da Corta and Bird (2008: draft) draw on Hickey and du Toit’s AISE relational-transformational framework in order to begin to sketch out *the range of social relational trajectories* which might precede sustained *escapes* from chronic poverty. As an illustration, changes in the terms of adverse incorporation into:

- *Markets* might involve for instance, the movement from bonded labour relations to attached to free labour relations,
- *Polities*, can involve shifts in status from clients to citizens,
- *Societies*, ‘*communities*’ or *public spaces* (schools, health facilities etc) might involve a movement from included but segregated to included, de-segregated, but bullied terms,
- *Households* might involve shifts in power in domestic and intergenerational contracts overtime (as outlined above).

Hickey and du Toit make clear that these movements can be partial and complex - for instance the terms of newfound citizenship can continue to be adverse and mediated through a patron’s political boss (p. 12). Similarly, PEACH research shows that free labour can be exploited and that relations can ‘revert’, e.g. free to neo-bonded labour (e.g. Lerche, 2007) or deteriorating domestic relations for women in the transition from bridewealth to dowry, or with greater seclusion (e.g. Heyer, 1992).

The AISE and IGT/I relational researchers do a great service to chronic poverty research in several ways. The first is that they highlight the need for plural *transformative social relational trajectories* to help explain longer term sequenced livelihood strategies and also explain ultimate mobility outcomes (see also Murray,

2001, 1987 and Bagchi, *et al*, 1998). This enables an understanding of the social constraints to livelihood strategies which may force ‘Sophie choice’ decisions to draw down physical or human assets. This might be sketched as follows:

- i. Changes in macro structural change or events – whether economic, political, cultural or legal - can improve or reduce the power of different groups,
- ii. Various social relations (AISE and Domestic) are, in turn, contested by oppressed or elite, challenging or reinforcing authorities, norms and conceptions which support unequal power in social relations → the new sets of relations, which can improve or slash the freedom or power of subordinate people in such relations.
- iii. These transformations in social relations can constrain or enable poor people’s inter-generational livelihood strategies (including the adverse coping sequences or Sophie’s choice asset decisions discussed above).
- iv. The outcome of these strategies determines their ultimate upward or downward mobility.

Whereas in this research tends to put much greater emphasis on the challenges by poor/oppressed agents’ to the terms of their contracts, outlining the varied ‘weapons of the weak’, PEACH places equal emphasis on elite challenges to the terms of these relations, from the perspective of elites, identifying the multiple ‘weapons of the strong’, as we argue more fully below.

A second advantage to AISE research is that the authors - together with other critical oppositional thinking such as Murray (2001) Bracking (2003) and Bevan (2004) - respond to a cry for methods for poverty research which are structural, relational, dynamic and transformational (e.g. Harriss, 2007) without sacrificing critical/postmodern/interpretive attention to agency, meaning, and ideologies of inequality and oppression. They seek an alternative to the positivism of current Q² approaches on the one hand and overly agent focussed participatory approaches of the early ‘Voices of the Poor’ literature on the other (Narayan *et. al*, 2000). I contend that their methodological thinking is given a rigour and coherence in much broader ontological arguments for a *critical realist social science* which is an alternative to empirical positivism and pure relativism (which can reduce social science to the interpretation of agents’ meanings). Critical realism in Britain is chiefly influenced by the ideas of Roy Bhaskar (1975) and is defined by the belief the there is a world existing independently of our knowledge of it. It seeks to understand – *the real* – regardless if we have a full understanding of it. The *real* has definite structures, causal powers and propensities to certain kinds of change. This differs from both *the actual* (e.g. a labourers’ potential to labour is actualised when she works) and *empirical* defined as what is observable (Sayer 2000:12).

The stratified ontology of critical realism is important to understanding gaps in Q² poverty analysis. The latter tends to focus on *the empirical* (econometric analyses of observable characteristics) and *the actual* (sequenced event analysis) where causation is understood as regularities among sequences of events (a Humean ‘successionist’ view of causation). Critical realism challenges the notion that explanation is

necessarily equivalent to repeat occurrences under closed conditions: instead it balances the actual and empirical with an important focus on the *real*, on identifying and understanding the causal mechanisms and their tendencies to certain kinds of change – whether or not such mechanisms have been activated and under what conditions (Sayer, 2000:14).

As an example, a realist structures like patriarchy or caste have certain tendencies, such as the drive to control the labour or limit the agency of certain groups. However, a critical realist analysis would seek to show how these tendencies may or may not be actualised given contextual change, such as multiple macro influences (patterns of state intervention, economic change, global patterns of female seclusion or local processes of Sanskritisation) and change in other social relations – class, race - as well as chance and learned behaviour. As a result, social structures are seen to evolve and if they revert they do so on different social bases.

A key argument for a critical realist *causal or explanatory approach* is that it is open, holistic (micro to macro), composed of multiple social and other relational interdependencies and post-disciplinary. Thus social change is contingent and contextually variable (Sayer, 2000). These features make critical realism a better explanatory approach to its ontological opposite, the methodologically individualist, endogenous and *closed* explanatory frameworks in economics (Lawson, 1997) and econometrics. Such openness in critical realist methodology is particularly crucial feature for poverty analysis because open frameworks enable:

- (i) analysis of how the poor might escape poverty traps (see da Corta and Bird, 2008: draft), and
- (ii) empirical research to investigate the possibility that poverty is the result of *inclusion* into meso and macro economies, societies and polities and thus *allows empirical research to escape from the trap of 'poverty = exclusion' theorisations.*

Finally, critical realism recovers for chronic poverty analysis a focus on underlying realist structures and mechanisms without sacrificing interpretive/critical attention to agency and meaning. The prefix *critical* links Bhaskar's realist theory of social science with a *critical social science* which Lawson (1997:158) makes plain: "...because social structure is dependent upon human agency, it is open to transformation through changing human practices which in turn can be affected by *criticising* the conceptions and understandings on which people act." This might include gender or bondage, for instance. Because critical realist social science identifies and interrogates misconceptions or social ideas and practise causing suffering of its objects of study, Bhaskar (1993) contends that critical realist social science has *emancipatory potential* (Sayer, 2000:156) and thus can enable poverty research to return to the politics of poverty (Harriss, 2007).

Recovering PEACH Methods without its Concepts

Hickey and du Toit (2007), du Toit (2005) Bevan (2004), Bracking (2003), Murray (2001) and other Critical Oppositional thinkers take us very far down the methodological road necessary to explain chronic poverty and their methodological

thinking coheres with arguments for a critical realist social science. However, critical oppositional thinkers have an ambiguous relationship with PEACH: some distance their approach explicitly; some adopt some PEACH concepts whilst neglecting others and some simply omit entirely a discussion of PEACH and its concepts yet curiously heavily reference PEACH scholars. This ironic for, as we argue below, PEACH scholars - together with other post-disciplinary thinking in the 70s and 80s - *helped forge* these critical realist methods: they were critical of positivistic law-guiding science approaches to economic and econometric studies of poverty and also tried to adopt and develop new thinking (not yet discussed as postmodern) on meaning, nuance and sensitivity to lived experience.

Critical oppositional thinkers on chronic poverty seem to recover PEACH methods without PEACH concepts and materialist dialectics. By using patron-client frameworks instead of class analysis, by inadequate serious economic enquiry into the relationship between poverty and unfreedom, exploitation, class struggle, technical change and processes of capitalist accumulation on multiple levels, the ability to understand *economic processes* which contribute to adverse incorporation into 'the market can be seriously impaired. This doesn't mean a return to 'everything is functional to capital' - if there ever was a time when this predominated - it does mean that the processes of capitalist accumulation need to be re-written back into stories of long term poverty. In other words, the 'dark side' of inclusion into capitalisms needs much greater theoretical and conceptual depth. It means re-capturing for analysis those conceptual 'elephants in the living room' - such as class, exploitation and capital - the untouchable caste of concepts which have been artfully avoided in discussions in mainstream development studies.

3. PEACH RESEARCH

PEACH research captures several elements relevant for today's research on chronic poverty. PEACH scholarship shares a methodological and conceptual descent from a 19th century focus on development of capitalism as a *post--disciplinary whole*. It is based on the *critical political economy perspective* of Marx, Lenin and Kautsky, an approach which identified and criticised the conceptions upon which capitalisms in different contexts are based, such as the inequalities of class or injustice of property rights. Political economy also has a central focus on *power* (Harriss-White, 1996:31) and on processes of accumulation.

The Caricature of PEACH

The contemporary distancing from PEACH conceptualisations in mainstream thinking might arise from a familiar caricature of PEACH. For instance, Hickey and du Toit, who replace a class theoretic with 'analyses of exploitative patron-client relationships from an adverse incorporation perspective', argue that their AISE methodological framework draws on the strength of the tradition of agrarian scholarship:

- "without lapsing into the same economic and reductive tendencies",
- by focusing "on structural and power relations other than those that shape economic and social class and are as likely to draw on post-structuralist social theorists like Foucault (Bracking, 2003) and on actor network theory" and
- by capturing "local history, politics, culture, gender and identity",

- by “considering not only the exploitative aspects of such relationships, but also examining the institutional arrangements and cultural frameworks that make it difficult for clients to leave” (p.5, citing the empirical work of du Toit, 1993, 2004 and Wood, 2003).

This rather misrepresents PEACH research, especially the diversification of PEACH in the mid-1980s and its contribution to post-structural thought. The misunderstanding could well be born of a caricature of early PEACH which has its roots in the broader critique of Marxism and structuralism in general in the mid-1980s. The argument at the time was that Marxist research contained tendencies toward teleological and economistic reading of agrarian change: the forces of production (technical change) and commercialism transform pre-capitalist to capitalist mode of production, thus driving agrarian class structural change in a linear fashion based on differential access to productive assets. The small peasantry are proletarianised or transformed into a disguised proletariat (PCPs) in service to trader capitalists. The state, dominated by the same emergent capitalist elite, supports this progression. Other processes of change – politics, gender, race, caste, biological stages and life cycles, culture, ideology, identity were understood to be functional to capitalism and its laws (Booth, 1985). There was little room for historical contingency and for poor people to use their agency. One consequence of this critique is that those tutored in development studies and post-structural social theory in grad school in the 1990s may well have only encountered PEACH in this heavily caricatured form.

Defence of PEACH Research and its Unique Methodological Legacy

The critical realist thinker Andrew Sayer (2000) argues with regard to Marxist left social science in general that whilst it is true that from the late 1960s to the early 1980s “much was excluded in those ostensibly all embracing, all-explaining discourses – notably gender, race, sexuality and much of lived experience; here the rise of feminism, anti-racism and post-colonialism have challenged the old new left to devastating effect” (p.5). Yet Sayer also argues forcefully that these problems *did not* reflect research within the Marxist left after the early 1980s, when there were “reactions against homogenizing and reductionist tendencies ... (marked by) nuance, complexity and sensitivity to local, lived experience.” (ibid.) He suggests that they: “had to develop more open, context-dependent and plural accounts within which Marxism might have been an important ingredient but no longer a totalizing theory” (p. 5). He contends that: “Many reacted to reductionist accounts by shifting to middle range theory and empirical studies, for example from Marxist theories of accumulation to analyses of the institutional forms present in particular capitalist societies. This meant a greater openness to diverse empirical and theoretical influences.”(p.6). He adds that “*all this happened before ‘postmodernism’ began to be discussed.*” (ibid. my emphasis, see also Bottomore, 2003:383).

PEACH Practice: Diversity through Iteration between Theory and Village Study

I believe that this widening of the PEACH approach *was already apparent in the 1970s, and accelerated in the 1980s* for alongside these meta-theoretical and meta-

method debates was the practice of examining poverty through *village studies*, which began with Lipton in the 1970s. Whilst mechanistic, teleological functionalist accounts and tendencies did exist in the early period of PEACH, they sat alongside unusually scholarly meticulous empirical and historical research (involving knowledge of mainstream discipline, local context and language, and Marx). Moreover, research findings were reported and challenged within post-disciplinary intellectual environments, such as the QEHWPS, Oxford comparative political economy seminar led by Judith Heyer, Gavin Williams, Barbara Harriss-White and Megan Vaughan, and similar seminar series run at SOAS, IDS, and UEA. In this intellectual climate it is not surprising that most of the criticisms of Marxist method in PEACH research were posed by PEACH researchers themselves (for instance, see Roseberry, 1978; Hart, 1986 in Harriss, 2006:137). What emerged from this empirical tradition and post-disciplinary intellectual environment was a collision of Marxist methods - history, class relations, class struggles and transformation (dialectical change) – with concrete village economic, social and cultural reality (see Harriss-White and Harriss, 2007). What resulted, I contend, was a largely uncelebrated and open methodology for understanding agrarian change and processes of impoverishment and enrichment. This PEACH methodological legacy spawned a great deal of influential research on the relationship between capitalism, the vulnerabilities it constructs, and poverty (reviewed in Harriss-White, 2005).

Thus, contrary to its caricature:

- PEACH empirical research identified much of the difference and nuance that predated subsequent *post-structuralist research* (compare contributions in Heyer et. al, 1981 regarding World Bank and other institutional ideologies and practice of rural development with James Ferguson's (1990) more recent 'anti-politics machine' research).
- PEACH research in India in the 1990s reveals labourers using *agency* to leave bonded labour arrangements and move into high wage off-farm employment driven by complex political, economic and cultural shifts in caste and gender. *This is agency 'writ large'* (see, for instance, Ramachandran, 1990; the contributions in Byres, Kapadia and Lerche, 1999; da Corta and Venkateswarlu, 1999; Venkateswarlu and da Corta, 2001; Rajasekhar, 1988).
- Moreover, class relations are found to revert backwards as well as forwards, for instance, petty commodity producer (PCPs) can revert to subsistence peasant production under situations of high price risk (Ellis, 2006) and free labourers can become tied labourers (e.g. da Corta and Venkateswarlu, 1999) or even fully bonded labour (de Neve, 2006).
- Shapers and *principal drivers of agrarian change* have been located in state politics (Ramachandran and Swaminathan, 2003; Harriss, 1992; Robinson, 1988) caste and culture (Heyer, 1992; Kapadia, 1993, Scott, 1985) and gender (Razavi, 2002, Chaudhry, 1994),
- Understanding gender-class theoretical links have progressed way beyond issues regarding the unvalued domestic productive work of women in peasant households (Deere 1979; Young, *et al.*, 1981) to the role of gendered

domestic relations in structuring labour markets and product markets (Kapadia and Lerche, 1999; Harriss-White, 2008, Razavi, 2002).

- New theory has evolved in commercial capitalism (Harriss-White, 2008), unfreedom under capitalism theory (Rao, 2005, Brass, 1999), more diverse definitions of agrarian capitalism (Banaji, 2002) and multiple transitions in different historical contexts (Byres, 1996).
- Ideologies and norms supporting exploitative contracts have been investigated through domestic relations (Razavi, 2002), in labour and exchange contracts (Brass, 1999, da Corta and Venkateswarlu, 1999), at higher meso levels (Venkateswarlu and da Corta, 2001) and national and global companies (Venkateswarlu, 2005).

In short, *challenges to PEACH* often came from *within* PEACH and *became* PEACH. This intent to diversify further is reflected in the new editorial statement (2008) in the *Journal of Agrarian Change*. This diversification and new theory contributed to the evolution of *critical* PEACH method where these critical insights were linked to Marx's materialist dialectics. PEACH researchers and other political economists and post-disciplinary researchers in the 70s and 80s hammered out methods before postmodernism became discussed fully and operated on a critical realist basis, many intuitively. Referring to this pluralisation of much broader Marxist empirical research in the 1980s, Sayer argues, "In some ways, critical realism, with its focus on necessity and contingency rather than regularity, on open rather than closed systems, on the ways in which causal processes could reproduce quite different results in different contexts, fitted comfortably with these developments." (p.5)

Moreover, the critical oppositional charge of 'economism' is also out of date. Today the problem is *not enough economism*. Both chronic poverty research and the Critical Oppositional School in chronic poverty research –strong on political and social processes – but can be thin on micro-macro dynamic analysis of economic processes.¹¹

In summary, Critical Oppositional thinkers both heavily reference PEACH thought (e.g., Bernstein *et al.* 1992, Harriss-White 2005, Harriss, 1983/1992) yet also distance themselves from PEACH. John Harriss (2007: i) calls for a 'dynamic, structural, and relational' method in order to address the causal limitations of chronic poverty research. Critical PEACH methods are all of these *without annihilating the material basis of political economy* which is crucial to understanding those changing economic relational processes which affect chronically poor people.

PEACH Concepts

The literature on PEACH is vast, and because understanding economic processes is perhaps the biggest weakness in chronic poverty research and Critical Oppositional

¹¹ There needs to be greater *dynamic* analysis of the effects of technical change, global commodity prices and rural development policies on the prices faced by poor people, dynamic changes in their wages and staple food prices, days of employment as well as prices of inputs and of farm gate commodity prices in areas remote from principal towns, gathered through the muddled, arduous and expensive empirical approaches of local field study (see for Ellis, 2006).

understandings, we limit ourselves to processes of adverse incorporation into *markets* and focus on economic processes affecting *casual labour* - the largest group of the world's chronically poor (CPRC Report, 2004/5:72). In India, where over one-third of the chronically poor live (*ibid*), there has been a steady increase in the proportion of the population working as casual labour (Bhalla *et al.*, 2006:7). Possibly one-fifth of casual labourers are considered 'forced labour', unable to exit labour contracts, with a much larger percentage regularly moving in and out of unfree, attached labour contracts (Brass, 1999). Labour tying is common in agriculture, growing in rural-non-agrarian industries (Lerche, 2007:439) and particularly high among India's 30 million migrant labourers (Shepherd and Mehta, 2006).

Moreover, Shepherd, Wood and Hickey and du Toit frequently refer to adverse incorporation in markets through exploitative patron-client relations, using the example of tied labour relations and so conceptualisations of tied labour might well be a good place to begin to examine the relevance of PEACH concepts - such as unfreedom, class, capitalist accumulation and capitalism - to poverty analysis.

NDE and Tied Labour

One way to explain tied labour and other institutions has been through NDE. This explanatory framework was rooted in the logic of risk, information asymmetries and transactions costs for each actor, in this case, employer and labourer (Bardhan, 1984/9 and Stiglitz, 1986). NDE models of institutions recognize that employer and labourer face different conditions (i.e. inequality) but both are better off having made the agreement (Pareto optimal). This relationship is not seen as exploitative (Stiglitz, 1986).

There are problems with these models' contextual assumptions which simply do not apply for many south Asian labour contracts. In the NDE literature, the exchange of labour service for credit is understood to be:

- Voluntary: labourers voluntarily enter into and remain in such,
- Not unfree or forced: workers can choose to end the arrangement at any time, and workers are free to choose their employers and wages are competitive (e.g. loans are often viewed simply as a cash advance on wages), and
- Mutually beneficial - labourers benefit from such arrangements in the way of insurance (subsistence, employment or wage guarantees) and employers are insured against wage uncertainty and/or supply uncertainty (e.g. Bardhan, 1984).

These assumptions are empirically hard to sustain in much of India: tied wages are often below market prices, labourers and small producers are often forced into such 'agreements' by survival, employment guarantees do not extend beyond amount of loan, and workers cannot end the arrangement without sacrificing availability of future loans or encountering ideological and economic sanctions exercised on kinfolk (see da Corta and Venkateswarlu, 1999 and Venkateswarlu and da Corta, 2001).

A key problem is the NDE assumption of choice or voluntarism in these arrangements, an assumption which is problematic even with the non-chronically poor (see Byres, 2006) but which is positively irrelevant to the very restricted conditions faced by the chronically poor. If employers propose only 'take it or leave it' offers

then it matters very little that a poor person is able in theory to reject such an offer and starve (JM Rao, 2005:186). In some cases, the notion that desperately poor people always ‘weigh risks’ and ‘strategise’ seems particularly inappropriate; neologisms born of the post-PEACH discourse of participation/empowerment together with NDE economic theorising create fictions that, for instance, the neo-bonded relations of a female or child labourer fulfilling loan repayments of a male head are ‘voluntary’, and that semi-starving to preserve assets becomes a ‘strategy’. There is a need for a more appropriate language to problematise choice/voluntarism in the analysis of rural institutions and poverty.¹²

Chronic Poverty, Critical Oppositional Approaches and Labour Exploitation

Chronic poverty and Critical Oppositional approaches argue that tied relationships arise out of the need for the chronically poor *to manage extreme vulnerability*, in severely unequal power and resource contexts. Whilst NDE might argue that a chronically poor person is better off because they received a consumption loan which formal credit institutions would have failed to provide, Critical Oppositional researchers argue that the poor are exploited in these situations and worse off (i.e. not pareto optimal) because such poverty forces them into a patronage which traps them in poverty by preventing them from accumulating (e.g. Shepherd, 2007). Labour exploitation is understood through a patron-client or non-class social relational perspective (e.g. oppressed and elite).

Emergent thinking on tied labour in the chronic poverty literature seems to be an extension of thinking on *adverse coping* understood from *the perspective of poor actors* who need to manage their vulnerability. This idea reflected Wood’s Faustian Bargain and in Shepherd’s (2007) suggestion that “the chronically poor involve themselves in patron-client relations, in which lower earnings are exchanged for greater security, enabling the patron to accumulate capital through the exploitation of the client; the client loses both in terms of his/her agency and also accumulation possibilities.” (p. 18). He also suggests breaking such clientelistic relations and enabling labourers to enter accumulative trajectories, for example, via opportunities in higher wage migration (p. 21) or off-farm income.

Whilst critical oppositional thinking goes further than NDE models in understanding tied relations, the problem in this literature is that without a class theoretic difficulties can arise. Firstly whilst Shepherd rightly mentions ‘accumulation’ by the patron, PEACH research takes this further and suggests that such relations arise not merely out of poor people’s strategy to manage their own vulnerability but *also* that patronage is deployed by capitalists in a very strategic manner in order to *manage the cost and discipline of labour in the project of capitalist accumulation*. In PEACH thinking such processes of accumulation are also addressed from the *perspective of capitalists* in order to understand how their various strategies and vulnerabilities vis-à-vis meso and macro capital can affect prospects for labourers.

Moreover, the suggestion that emancipation from patronage and inclusion = upward mobility *could be* confused with its corollary that clientage and exclusion from

¹² Difficulties with NDE approach to explaining agrarian institutions compared to classical political economy have been thoroughly addressed in Byres (2006).

markets = chronic poverty, thinking which has an enduring hold in development economics. This idea can be found in Sen's (1999) understanding of unfree labour (tied relations) in terms of 'an enforced exclusion from the labour market, 'denied the opportunity of transactions' and hence of obtaining higher wages (p.7). PEACH emphasizes that poor people in such tied labour arrangements are perhaps excluded from what Mackintosh (1990) labels the *abstract* markets of economists but thoroughly incorporated into *real* markets, through processes of capitalist accumulation (see Rao, 2005; Brass, 1999).

A related problem is that we have no concepts to analyse the exploitation of labourers once 'free' from exploitative patronage relations. Debt or patronage is merely one of a number of strategies adopted by capitalists to coerce free labour. The problem with this type of thinking is similar to Banaji's (2002) description of the literature on colonial bonded and other labour arrangements where "(free) wage labour emerges as a veritable Garden of Eden, and markets are shorn of the coercion and sheer exertions of power which are integral to the way they function in reality." (p. 109).

Finally, in Critical Oppositional thinking 'life-world' patron client or other non-class relations are linked to larger 'totalities', such as 'capitalism's pauperising effects' (Hickey and du Toit, 2007:15) or global structures (see Bevan, 2004).¹³ They rightly seek to *pluralize* the range of social relations – relations into markets, societies and polities households which are shaped by gender, caste, race, etc – which affect the chronically poor. However, it's not clear how such non-class relations link to meso and national and global economic processes without a materialist analysis of accumulation. According to M. Kahn (1999) patron-client models have replaced neo-Marxian models based on class relations in recent years by sociologists in the Weberian tradition who seek to understand populist political programmes (for instance, analysis of neo-patrimonial states controlled by charismatic leaders), by resistance historians (such as Scott's research on 'weapons of the weak'), and in order to understand the rise of 'peasant based' political movements. These models may have influenced the perspective of critical oppositional thinkers in their analysis of adverse incorporation into states/polities. However, when analysing adverse incorporation into *markets* we are left wanting for these analyses tend to be removed from the economic interests of 'patrons' or capitalists. Indeed capital and capitalists seem to have little place in this universe – their accumulation processes are invisible, their class struggles and their strategies toward managing the price and discipline of labour, their vulnerabilities vis-à-vis meso level capitalists and larger national and global companies are invisible – yet *all* have direct consequences for the employment and remuneration of the chronically poor labourers.

PEACH Perspectives on Unfree Labour

PEACH is much richer than the new critical oppositional approach for it is a *critical* social relational -transformational approach that does not neglect an analysis of material change, an analysis of processes of capitalist accumulation. PEACH often begins with class for a reason – not as merely a description of livelihood chances or as a socio-cultural characteristic – but as a conceptual tool identifying a poor person's

¹³ The explanation for capitalism's pauperising effects draws heavily from analysis of Harriss-White's research on poverty and capitalism (2005) basing this research on nearly four decades of PEACH.

position in processes of production and accumulation which can help us to uncover central mechanisms of their poverty creation. Those chronically poor labourers who are ‘highly dependent on wages’ acquire their livelihoods through relations with their employers (capitalist producers): such relations are therefore central to understanding chronic poverty. These class relations are marked by important *opposing interests in the context of considerable differential power*: capitalist employers seek cheap, disciplined, obedient and reliable supplies of labour and labourers seek good wages, work conditions, steady employment and ability to protest and the mobility necessary to seek higher wages elsewhere when necessary.¹⁴ Rural capitalists together control the means of production and therefore access to livelihood for labourers. Capitalists use their superior power in order to accumulate surplus from ‘free’ labour conceptualised in labour theory of value terms.¹⁵ In the Marxian sense ‘exploitation’ is synonymous with ‘*surplus value appropriation*’. Thus a free labourer can be ‘exploited’.

This Marxian idea of exploitation /surplus appropriation is understood to be *intensified* when capitalists use their power in non-labour markets to tie labour. Classically labour is tied through employers’ power in credit markets, however empirically employers are found to use their power in markets for land rental, inputs, food and clothing as well as their power to regulate labourers’ access to information and political, social and cultural benefits. Employers tie labour in an effort to secure reliable supplies of labour (they will actually turn up), cheap labour (they will work for less than going rate or will not bargain rate up during peak periods of labour demand) and disciplined labour (they will not walk out half way).¹⁶ PEACH researchers tend to label such relations attached or tied labour, unfree labour relations or neo bondage.

Explanations for Labour Tying

Earlier PEACH theories of tied or unfree labour understood them as part of *pre-capitalisms* (such as semi-feudalism), based solely on non-economic forms of coercion (e.g. physical force, traditional authority of dominant castes, ideology of clientelism and custom), and/or exclusion from markets. Such theories have given way to understanding unfree labour as a form of intensified surplus value appropriation (intensified exploitation) *under capitalism*, a strategy deployed by

¹⁴ In this paper we focus on labour-capitalist employer relations, there many other relations, for instance between petty commodity producers and merchants or commercial capitalists, where the latter seek cheap and/or reliable supplies of commodities for trade and so tie producers to their trade through consumption/inputs loans (see da Corta and Venkateswarlu, 1999; Harriss-White, 1996/2008; Olsen, 1981; Bernstein, *et al.* 1992)

¹⁵ As an example, if a labourer works 8 hours, in ‘3 hours’ she earns her wage (necessary labour time) and then she works an additional 5 hours (surplus labour time) all of which goes to the capitalist as surplus which is accumulated and re-invested. Even if this labour theory of value conceptualisation may be questionable in terms of determining commodity values (Fine, 2001), it is an important reminder of the ethical and political basis of PEACH approach which though massively diversified out of a strict canonical capitalism theoretic, continues to problematise given property relations and the exploitations which arise from such unequal relations.

¹⁶ This second form of intensified exploitation has more in common with broad understandings of exploitation defined as buying labour at less than local going market rates or official understanding of exploitation as hiring labour at lower than the official minimum wage (the latter a Government of India definition, see Lerche, 2007).

capitalists when they face pressures of various kinds. For instance, J.M. Rao (2005), a classical economist, explains labour tying through a model where dominant landowner uses his superior power in the credit market to secure labour when faced with competition from 'up and coming' new peasant capitalists, drawn into capitalist farming in the *early stages of agrarian capitalist development*. By 'discriminating' among different labourers through tied loans, dominant landowners are able to appropriate what economists call 'monopoly surpluses, as they exclude tied labourers from working for other peasant landowners (p.163). Capitalist employers can also face stress in *more advanced stages of capitalism* as overproduction produces falling commodity prices in the context of rising cost of labour (and other inputs), as occurred in parts of India in late 1980s. Brass (1993:34-5) argues that when further accumulation is blocked, capitalists can be forced to restructure labour markets replacing free labour with unfree, cheaper labour a process he labels 'deproletarianization.' In his example, employers re-structure the market by spatial differences between labourers: employers restore profitability by securing migrant labour on a tied basis, which lowers labour costs and also puts pressure on assertive local labour seeking better deals to settle for less, falling in line with lower migrant wages. Such restructuring has been show to also involve discrimination between labourers based on age and gender: between assertive male workers seeking emancipation and higher wages and cheaper, unfree female labour (da Corta and Venkateswarlu, 1999) and to replace assertive adult female labourers with more easily disciplined and cheaper, unfree girl child labour forced to endure very difficult labour conditions (Venkateswarlu and da Corta, 2001).

Poverty of 'Free' Labour

Some chronic poverty thinking labours under the misapprehension that adverse incorporation in the market = patron client or tied relations, yet clearly capitalists can challenge assertive 'free' labour without tying but which nevertheless have important consequences for class struggle and for chronic poverty. This includes mechanising the most assertive/expensive labourers' tasks (usually male, irrigation and ploughing) or replanting to less labour intensive crops (e.g. from paddy to fruit trees) or moving to cheaper labour states /regions or out of farming altogether - all of which threaten unemployment and lower wages. To such strategies can be added those other pauperising strategies of capitalism, such as its rejection of the infirm 'those unable to offer their disciplined labour to capital' (Harriss-White, 2005, with illness, disability and ageing all too common in a typical working person's life), the private enclosure of common property resources (such as grazing land) and over-farming and environmental destruction.

In sum, understanding chronic poverty from poor people's perspectives upwards – their need to manage vulnerability – can disguise patron-capitalists' strategies of accumulation through the exploitation of tied and free labour. Such strategies may well be outside of a poor actors' life world account of his/her poverty through a life history. PEACH empirical research on unfreedom (a subset of PEACH research) suggests that when capitalists suffer pressures, whether competition in early stages of capitalist development through new entrants (Rao, 2005) or profit squeezes in later stages (Brass, 1999) or merely to control assertive free labour when demand for labour rises, capitalists draw on their power in different markets, non-market, and ideological strength in order to manage labour assertiveness, price and supply.

PEACH research shows that such capitalist strategies are often a response to their own vulnerabilities vis-à-vis wider macro pressures, particularly those constant pressures of competition and cyclical profit crises. The latter can translate into corresponding cyclical pressure on the agency, income and employment of ‘free’ labour. Understanding the nature of various rural capitalisms is therefore crucial to understanding chronic poverty.

Canonical and Actual Capitalisms

Some PEACH scholars seek a universal definition of agrarian capitalism, and to identify its realist construction, phases, contradictions and tendencies to certain kinds of change which work across time and space. This includes, for instance:

- a fall in extra-eco coercions (force and ideology characteristic of pre-capitalisms) and associated rise in market dependence for survival, in competition and ‘relentless and systematic’ drive to improve productivity (E.M. Wood, 2002:50-1 based on Brenner, 1998:10),
- overproduction crises associated with such productivity improvements and new entrants and fall in prices relative to costs (Harriss, 1992),
- dispossession and proletarianisation (Lenin, 1899/1977, Byres, 1982),
- the control and discipline of labour (Banaji, 2002; Brass, 1999),
- the indirect control of petty commodity producing family labour (Kautsky, 1899/1988) and nature of commercial capitalisms (Harriss-White, 2008).

Others, NDE and some Marxists have both underscored the inevitability of interlinked markets becoming unlinked and institutions such as bondage inevitably ceasing to exist.

However, the critical realism of PEACH *practice* has always balanced theory with empirical research into what is *actualised* or not in diverse and changing empirical contexts, taking into account:

- different macro influences – global supply and demand, technical change (labour absorbing or replacing) state intervention (pro-labour or pro capital) and
- the various links between class and changes in other social relations – such as the influence of change in gender and intergenerational relations on employment and wages (e.g. Kapadia, 1993) or between race/caste and labour class struggles (Heyer, this volume).
- as well as chance and learned behaviour.

Thus agrarian capitalisms are understood to *evolve rather than equilibrate* (Sayer, 2000) and critically realist PEACH method has produced a diversity in the stories and trajectories of agrarian change (see the pages of the JPS and JAC).

In other words, the gift of PEACH has always been to keep one eye on theory, on possible realist causal mechanisms of capitalism, and balancing this with the other eye on post-disciplinary, critical realist empirical research – but without ‘losing’ themselves entirely into one or the other - and enabling empirical research to inform theory. This is demanding as one confronts in empirical research ‘a plurality of social forms’, as Bernstein and Campling (2006) argue, that “one of the most severe challenges to theory and method able to inform, and be informed by, empirical

research, is to grasp the connections between the systemic qualities, and contradictions, of the present phase of capitalism and the diversity and variations of its social forms, always contingent outcomes and constant flux (in often unanticipated ways, and about which reliable prediction is extremely rare).” (p. 434)

Multiple Sources of Power: ‘Weapons of the Strong’

In empirical reality capitalists tend to use multiple sources of power which defy assumptions regarding the inevitability of the declining of extra-economic coercions, bondage and decline in interlinked markets. The reality of contemporary rural capitalism for many in south Asia is that capitalists are found to use:

- economic power in credit markets, but also economic power in other markets (rental is common one, food, inputs and clothing),¹⁷
- political power – such as brokering poor people’s right to the whole range of state benefits, to the courts, to police protection,
- social, cultural, religious benefits and ‘social’ inclusion,
- physical force (terrorising labouring families, e.g. Telangana AP and Bihar).

Moreover, all of the above are also used to exercise sanctions on the kin of a labourer who refuses to work for a particular employer or absconds once tied (for instance, their kin won’t receive loans, state benefits etc.).

Capitalists also invoke existing and conjured ideologies in order to coerce labour, such as:

- traditional ‘loyalty’ of certain labouring families to patrons,
- traditional (if outdated) ideas regarding sexual, age, caste divisions of labour - such as male, female and caste based occupations and the valuation of different kinds of labour,
- re-worked traditional ideas, such as ideas on how post-pubescent female labour pollutes fields in order to deter assertive older female labour from coming to fields for work (Venkateswarlu and da Corta, 2001).

Indeed capitalists continue to call on whatever *combined* local power they have in various economic markets or outside. PEACH research illustrates political economy’s unique ability to move beyond economic monopolies, to a combined localised power in multiple, linked markets, and power in political, social, health, cultural spheres which together enable employers to pose ‘all or nothing’ offers. In other words, this can *simulate* the types of ‘monopolies’ identified by economists which restrict the choice and may compel the poor to engage in adverse coping. Recognition of such multiple sources of power does not deny capacities for agency and the multiple

¹⁷ In field research in south India I interviewed one commercial capitalist who commented that he uses ‘whatever is available’ when competing against new entrants in the commission trade by securing supplies of groundnuts from small farmers. He said he does not just use credit, but ‘all his businesses’ – selling clothes, provisions, and inputs ‘exist’ for the main reason to tie smallholders. The deliberate nature of extending loans in order to secure labour too cannot be over-emphasised. In cottonseed areas of south India employers approach male labourers with daughters with a large loan before labourers ask for it, which underlines the very calculated nature of these loans and the need to understand capitalists, their strategies and their vulnerabilities within the context of evolving local capitalisms and patterns of technical change.

‘weapons of the weak’; it just restores some much needed balance to this issue, recognition and specification of the cross disciplinary ‘weapons of the strong.’

PEACH practice rather than seeking to merely validate theory, as the caricature of Marxist method suggests, it has gone beyond *canonical* capitalisms, abstract markets and dichotomous conceptualisations (such as free/unfree or included/excluded, economic or non-economic coercions) to document how rural capitalisms/economies may *not* conform to conventional definitions or theorisations of capitalism and markets. PEACH has shed light on how, in empirical reality:

- capital tends to seep into the fissures within and between markets, polities, societies, and cultures in order to survive relentless and intense competition,
- capitalists might intensify exploitation when they cannot afford to adopt labour saving technology, when there are time lags before adoption, or machinery is simply not available for certain tasks (cottonseed pollination, transplantation),
- when those extra-economic coercions that theoretically should no longer exist but do and are used together with localised power in several linked markets,
- and when the interlinked markets remain linked, or become re-linked, rather than becoming ‘separate’ as NDE economics predicts.

This diversity is reflected theoretical work by Banaji (2002) in his essay on colonial Indian agrarian change where he remarks: “agrarian capitalism is conceived too narrowly in the literature on India, models which are simply unrealistic when applied to the social and ecological circumstances of this part of the world” (p.105). He argues that “given the great historical diversity of concrete local trajectories of capitalism in the countryside, it now seems clear that there is no prototypical agrarian capitalism, no ‘pure’ form which regulates the understanding of all others, and therefore no *class structure* that is prototypical of agrarian capitalism” (p.114). The tracking of this diversity in local trajectories of rural capitalism, of multiple social arrangements in very different contexts is much more in the spirit of PEACH research.

Methodological Pluralism: A Framework for Chronic Poverty Research

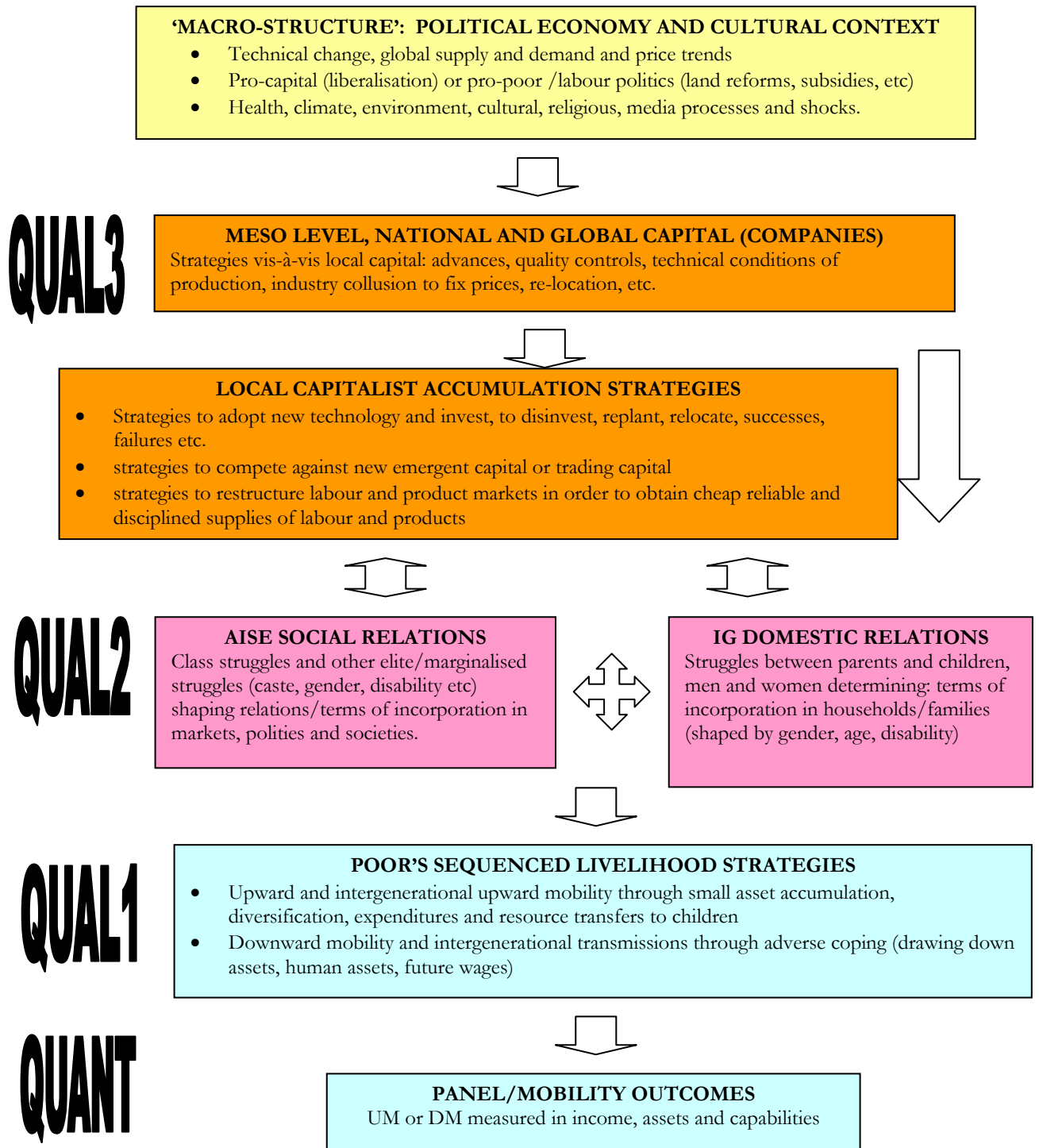
The argument for the recovery of PEACH into mainstream research is not an argument for discarding CP, panel studies and the focus on agency – but rather for *restoring balance* lost in the post-PEACH years which involves recovering a plural approach to research on long-term poverty. Below a Quant Qual³ approach is used to illustrate the importance of a deeper qualitative approach to accompany panel data analysis and as an extension of Q² chronic poverty. This framework might overcome some of the methodological and ontological barriers which held back chronic poverty research, including:

- MI econometric and relational research (du Toit, 2005),
- endogenous economic models (NDE) and exogenous contextual explanations (Lawson, 1997),
- between interpretive and realist approaches (Bevan, 2004/6, Olsen and Morgan, 2004).

In the diagram below we illustrate how PEACH methods introduce a crucial additional level of analysis to the critical oppositional approach outlined above. This

level of analysis includes the multiple layers of capitalist strategies of accumulation and their vulnerabilities to competition and cost crises.

- i. The top layer illustrates '*macro structural changes*' such as liberalisation, structural adjustment, technical change, broad demand or supply changes for particular commodities together with political, cultural, and social change all of which influence opportunities or pressures on successive layers of *global, national and meso level companies and traders*.
- ii. Strategies of the latter, in turn, throw up opportunities or pressures (such as specific quality controls, price fixing, etc.) on *local, commercial and productive capitalists*. The resulting changes in profitability, competitive pressures or price squeezes encourage capitalists to adopt various strategies toward chronically poor labourers and smallholders. Similarly macro structural trends also directly affect the agency of poor people and class struggles ensue, where poor people either win better contractual terms or alternatively lose income or suffer unemployment.
- iii. Class struggles take place with and *interact with* other political, social struggles of marginalised groups (AISE relations and domestic relations) shaped by age, gender, race, caste, disability, etc.
- iv. The outcomes of *all* these struggles set constraints and opportunities for a poor person's *livelihood strategies and sequences* - with greater emancipation, choice and prospects enabling accumulation sequences or, on the other hand, restricted choice, and adverse coping sequences.
- v. All of these affect the final *multiple panel outcomes*.



Theoretical Pluralism

This framework can be used in empirical research and ultimately to help to explain endogenously theorised, more closed models in different contexts: such as Carter and colleagues' asset poverty traps, Harper *et al's* intergenerational human asset poverty traps, and Dercon's model of vulnerability, as well as helping to explain the reasons why people are forced into the adverse coping sequence found in Q² research. All of these can find richer meaning in terms of an exogenous, relational, transformational and dynamic approach to poverty, linking micro to macro levels which is truly cross-disciplinary.

4. CONCLUSION: METHODOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL PLURALISM AND EMPOWERING POLICY

In this paper, we argue that chronic poverty research confronts important limitations which arise from the concepts, methods and field research approaches which were developed in the wake of the devastating critique of political economy in the mid-1980s. Its concepts did not sufficiently problematise choice in social relations; its methods were highly methodologically individualist and reliant on endogenous explanations, a closed approach which prevented research into poverty caused by actors' incorporation into political economies. Field research methods were informed by actors' lifeworld perspectives and by participatory research used methods, such as use of focus groups, which could not always fully address opposing class, gendered and caste interests and the ideologies/norms supporting inequalities in these relations.

Critical oppositional scholars started down the road of recovering PEACH and Feminist methods for the study of chronic poverty, seeking a more structural, relational and transformational approach which enabled an understanding of how changes in social relations either constrained or enabled different livelihood strategies, enabling much richer understandings of poverty processes, and as ones of incorporation rather than exclusion. Their methodological argument gels with critical realist explanatory approach. However, worryingly they hesitate when it comes to PEACH concepts and the materialist dialectics necessary for looking at processes of capitalist accumulation. This is partly understandable, they are not economists and therefore less likely to interrogate deeply economic causal processes (e.g. through careful gathering and analysis of cross-market prices data, technology and profitability of different enterprises etc.) their focus tends to be on poverty caused by adverse incorporation into polities and societies shaped by gender, caste, race etc. Like chronic poverty before it, they remained in an actor's lifeworld perspective (e.g. seeing involvement in tied relations as poor clients strategies to 'manage vulnerability' rather than also patron/capitalists strategies to 'manage labour').

Broadening chronic poverty research through a plural PEACH approach enables a deeper causal analysis of poverty and with it the consideration of a somewhat wider range of policy possibilities and a more deeply progressive and empowering range of policy responses. For instance, when poverty is theorised as a problem of risk or vulnerability, the solution offered is often insurance/social protection; when it is understood as resulting from adverse incorporation resulting from unequal gendered, caste or race barriers and relations, the solution is affirmative action. However, if we understand poverty as also a problem of *incorporation into the normal workings of*

markets and of capitalisms, then the policy focus turns on the regulation of capital's pauperising effects, of empowering through pro-labour and pro-poor development rather than pro-capital policies (such as liberalisation, Lerche, 2007; Harriss-White, 2005). It also means lobbying global and national companies regarding their labour policies (Venkateswarlu, 2006).

Political economy, especially PEACH, has been frozen out of development economics and along with it the latter lost an important debate between competing perspectives over methods for poverty research. The re-introduction of PEACH can enable the recovery of a debate within development economics over methods regarding the role of choice, voluntarism, and mutuality in labour, other markets (credit, commodity, land rental etc) and domestic contracts, the relative merits of endogenous and exogenous (macro-micro) explanatory frameworks, the study of realist structural tendencies in capitalisms, and social relations and their transformations. The recovery of a debate over methods can empower the subject of development economics to address poverty more effectively.

Poor people have been disempowered by the vice on political economy (Fine, 2001). John Harriss (2006/2007) cautions researchers that toleration of inequality and poverty embedded in institutional norms, especially legal and political systems, can also become embedded in assumptions and research techniques in mainstream poverty analysis, which, in turn, can cement further a particular political perspective on development (see also O'Connor, 2006). This recalls earlier PEACH arguments regarding the ideology underlying research methods and practice of large development institutions, such as the World Bank (Heyer *et al.* 1981). Today, we ignore PEACH and its value for understanding the problems of chronically poor people at the peril of contributing to their disempowerment.

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