FROM **HOPE** TO **ACTION** THROUGH **KNOWLEDGE**

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Editors

Ramesh Bharuthram
and Larry Pokpas

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Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences

**Land, Research
and Politics:
Sense-making and
Policy Contestation
at the Institute for
Poverty, Land and
Agrarian Studies
(PLAAS)**

Professor Andries du Toit

Director, PLAAS

Professor Ben Cousins

DST/NRF SARCHI Research Chair in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies

Introduction

We begin this piece with a personal memory of Brian O'Connell. We were on our way to a lunchtime meeting convened at the Rector's dining room in the student centre. We were to represent the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), and to help the University to honour and bid farewell to an office holder of an important donor, the Ford Foundation, who was returning to the United States after representing the Foundation in South Africa for many years. As we arrived at the student centre, we found ourselves stepping around a man in late middle age, neatly dressed in a blue blazer, who was down on his knees, scrabbling around on the floor at the entrance of the building. Taking a second look, we realised that this was none other than our Vice-Chancellor and Rector, Prof Brian O'Connell. He was picking up little bits of trash: bottle caps, plastic straws, chip packets, Chappies papers. "The young people", he remarked to us as he stood up and dusted his knees, "are so unaware. They don't think of the cleaners and ground staff who have to pick up their litter". Then he deposited the rubbish in one of the big green UWC recycling bins that stood nearby, greeted us in friendly fashion, and accompanied us to our meeting.

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Another memory: Kader Asmal was Minister of Education from 1999 to 2004. On one of his visits to the University he questioned the Vice-Chancellor about the scathing criticisms of ANC land policies emanating from PLAAS researchers. “What do they think they are doing?” he asked. O’Connell replied: “They are doing what we expect good academics to do: high-quality research – and spelling out the implications for policy!”

That was Brian O’Connell as we knew him: mindful of both the noble and the humble work entailed in keeping a University going; fierce in his defence of academic freedom; rubbing shoulders with the great and the good; but never seeing himself as more important or more dignified than the men and women who do the dirty work.

O’Connell’s legacy

Brian O’Connell, of course, is remembered today for much more than officiating at University ceremonies and picking up litter. More than anything else, he is honoured as the person who presided over UWC’s ‘phoenix moment’ when, on the verge of sinking into bankruptcy and mismanagement, the university rose reinvigorated from the ashes to become one of South Africa’s leading academic institutions.

This was a triumph on many fronts. Besides finding concrete answers to the University’s financial quandary, it also involved defining a new vision of UWC’s place in South Africa. Twenty years before, in the context of brutal civil conflict (and surging hopes for onrushing revolution) former Rector and Vice-Chancellor, the late Prof Jakes Gerwel, had inspired both the academic community and the student body by naming UWC as the “intellectual home for the democratic left” (Lalu & Murray, 2012). But that vision was no longer able to unite the campus in the same way that it had done before, or to provide useful guidance for an institution seeking to navigate the complex realities of knowledge production, intellectual relevance and policy traction in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa.

This was about much more than political principle. Gerwel, it must be remembered, named UWC not as the home for the left, but the *intellectual* home for the *democratic* left – a much more specific appellation. And in the disorienting context of a new, often crudely pragmatic, neoliberal world, it was not clear what a living, relevant, critical and democratic intellectuality even looked like – let alone what it could accomplish. And in the context of that absence, there was an ever-increasing danger that UWC would

be shaped, not so much by its struggle identity, but by an older, much more troubling legacy: as an *apartheid* institution – a ‘bush college’, mired in debt and hedged in by narrow and racialised assumptions about its place and its identity, beset by resentments of the past and doubts about the future.

Brian O’Connell helped change all that. UWC was not to be defined as a ‘basket case university’. Neither would it assent to a narrow, crabbed definition of its cultural or political allegiances. On the contrary, he insisted that UWC would step proudly onto the world stage as an engaged South African institution, that it would be judged by the same standards as South Africa’s elite institutions (the historically white Wits, UCT, Pretoria, Stellenbosch and Rhodes), and that, while it would not forget its humble roots, would embrace in full the responsibilities of scholarly intellectuality. Those commitments were most memorably captured in his vision of UWC as a ‘sense-making’ institution.

This was a challenging and inspiring formulation. On the one hand, it invited the UWC community to think about what was involved in straddling the divide between the academic ‘ivory tower’ and the often brutal world of everyday survival found in the impoverished communities nearby the campus. Being a sense-making institution required the University to take on a role of service and connection with the society it served; but that role was to be lived out not simply through being the handmaiden of vested interests, or providing intellectual property to corporate paymasters. Rather, it required moral and intellectual leadership. It was, in other words, a call for the University to act as the platform for what the American sociologist Michael Burawoy (2004) has called *public* scholarship: scholarship that goes beyond a narrowly academic role and participates in the public discourse of society.

Use-oriented basic research

For those of us based at the Institute of Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), these invitations and challenges were especially resonant. PLAAS was initially established in 1995 with two main objectives in mind: to provide research on and policy advice to South Africa’s nascent land reform programme and associated programmes such as rural development and community-based natural resource management, and also to help train a new generation of black, applied social scientists working on rural issues. Dependent on donor funding, and with little

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financial support from the university, PLAAS had long been wrestling with the challenges of surviving in the rapidly changing political environment of the post-apartheid transition. We had found that undertaking engaged research that was related to policies as controversial as land and agrarian reform posed perplexing choices and presented daunting risks.

What had happened to the notion of academic independence and scholarly autonomy in the context of the triumph of 'neoliberal reason', when the value of knowledge was increasingly defined in terms of the needs of the marketplace? How could a research institution dependent on external donor funding maintain its intellectual integrity without compromising its chances of survival? How could researchers exploring the uncomfortable realities of social and economic change in South Africa speak truth to power without alienating government officials or antagonising vested interests? How could they maintain the trust necessary for constructive dialogue? How could PLAAS define and be true to its own mission in this complex and changing context? And how could we do all of the above, while training new generations of researchers and scholars?

In thinking through these challenges, we adopted a formulation of our institutional and academic identity that resonated strongly with O'Connell's notion of a 'sense-making institution'. We embraced the notion of Use-oriented Basic Research (UoBR) as defined by Stokes (1997; see also Cooper, 2011). This is research that goes well beyond the limits of 'applied research' or 'consultancy' as it is commonly understood, but at the same time refuses the stereotype of detached academic research located in an 'ivory tower'. It is also distinct from 'pure basic', or curiosity-driven research.

We see the central purpose of PLAAS research as not serving the needs of 'clients' in society, the way a consultancy does, but undertaking *basic* social science research which is, at the same time, oriented to being used for practical purposes. We aim to address fundamental scholarly questions about the nature of society and social change and the theories needed to understand it, but informed by the burning questions facing South Africa's young democracy. These include: how the unjust legacies of land dispossession and colonial conquest can be addressed; how the fruits of economic growth and global integration can be equitably shared; and how the persistent realities of poverty and inequality can be ameliorated or even reversed. While the notion of Use-oriented Basic Research does not in itself indicate precisely how these kinds of questions

can be addressed through research, it provides a useful framework for thinking about them, and for navigating the confusing terrain of socially-engaged scholarly enquiry.

In this essay, we want to consider how PLAAS has used this notion of UoBR to contribute to UWC's vision of being a sense-making institution, one that is deeply engaged in helping to attack deep-seated social problems. In considering over twenty years of PLAAS research, teaching, policy advice and public engagement from this angle, we hope to cast light on how we have participated in and contributed to the engaged but scholarly mission of UWC, and we want to reflect on the conundrums and challenges we faced along the way.

Scholarly Research and Development Mythology

We begin our account with some thoughts about our scholarly research and its critical edge. Over the last twenty-four years, the core mission of researchers at PLAAS has been to undertake policy-relevant research – research that addresses key questions and problematics relating to the design of land reform, agricultural and poverty policy, the management of natural resource and fisheries – but is at the same time theoretically and empirically rigorous. Over time, the geographic scope of our research and policy advocacy has broadened well beyond South Africa's borders, and is now undertaken in close collaboration with partner organisations across Africa. We also participate in and help to lead broader initiatives of global scope, such as the BRICS Initiative in Critical Agrarian Studies, the Land Deal Politics Initiative and the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative.

The subject matter of our work has shifted over time, the winds of donor fashion have blown in different directions, and the buzzwords deployed in our abstracts and titles have altered somewhat: 'Community-Based Natural Resource Management' for instance, has given way to 'Ecosystem Services'; 'Making Markets Work for the Poor' has been replaced by 'Inclusive Growth'. One thing that has remained constant in PLAAS work, however, is a strong interest in and orientation towards the central theoretical and conceptual frameworks that have driven intellectual progress in such fields as critical agrarian studies, political economy, the social science of natural resource management and the anthropology of development. As such, our research has always been strongly connected

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to key debates and discussions that animate contemporary international scholarship, particularly in fields in which a commitment to social and political engagement tend to figure strongly.

These conversations, however, have never been simply academic. They have also often required PLAAS researchers to push back the conceptual boundaries of their chosen disciplines, in order to guide interventions in social realities that can radically reduce the deep poverty and spiralling inequality that characterise our world. In our work on customary law and social land tenure, for instance, we have found ourselves asking about the very nature of 'property relations'. Ben Cousins has contributed to global debates on the social embeddedness of property and the nested character of definitions of 'community' and the socio-political institutions that govern property relations (Cousins, 2007). PLAAS research has affirmed the continuing relevance and importance of the commons as a key feature of social tenures in the Southern African context. Some of the most important (and enduring) intellectual struggles here involve the need to question the assumptions of the popular, seductive but ultimately misleading narratives about the supposed merits of private property and titling schemes bruited about by Hernando de Soto and his followers. We have also questioned the relevance of the 'edifice' of institutions and professions involved in land administration in its various aspects, a structure based on the notion of a cadastre – a surveyed plot with a single owner – that does not apply to the property regimes of the majority of poor people in African contexts.

While recognising the importance of notions of 'living customary law', Rosalie Kingwill has warned against the reification of law as a separate domain in the analysis of social relations; she has pointed out how normative patterns of customary land holding and tenure are indeed gendered, but has questioned overly-binary accounts of how gender relations work out in practice (Kingwill, 2016). The policy implications of these critiques are profound, and the fact that they are based on rigorous enquiry has assisted in the advocacy of policies that recognise and support non-Western forms of property in law and in practice (Hornby et al., 2017).

But PLAAS researchers have not only challenged the intellectual shibboleths of the centre and the right: as often, we have also found ourselves questioning simplistic and romantic thinking on the part of the scholarly and social movement of the left. Thus, our engagements around the future of smallholder agriculture in Southern Africa have required

a rigorous confrontation with many of the central shibboleths of older versions of Marxism, such as the necessarily progressive character of large-scale systems of production, or the need to 'modernise' retrogressive social formations based on custom. The complexities of change and the persistence of agrarian dualism in South Africa and other Southern African landscapes raise important critical questions, for instance, about the overly-romanticised renditions of peasant life found in the work of radical international scholars supporting the work of *Via Campesina* and the forms of agrarian populism embodied in scholarly work on food sovereignty. Some of us have argued that class formation and differentiation within the ranks of peasant farmers can derail rural social movements if they are not acknowledged and addressed (Cousins, 2010).

In the field of natural resource and ecosystem management, PLAAS researchers have often questioned dominant technicist paradigms and neoliberal assumptions that influence the rolling out of programmes for community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), social forestry and fisheries management (Tapela, 2007). The notion of a 'community' as a homogenous entity has often been subject to devastating critique in PLAAS work, but the alternative is not necessarily individualisation – rather, an emphasis on the politics of local-level democratisation has emerged as key. Thus, Moenieba Isaacs has explored the implications of the neoliberal reliance on the individual transferable quota (ITQ) allocation system in the transformation of fisheries, and highlighted the tensions created between commercialisation and social justice (Isaacs, 2011). Mafa Hara has raised critical questions about the underlying contextual factors that influence the success or failure of inclusive and collective governance of sustainable utilisation of fisheries and natural resources in Southern Africa (Hara et al., 2009; Hara & Njaya, 2016).

Elsewhere, PLAAS researchers have found themselves questioning some of the core assumptions influencing the production of poverty knowledge and narratives about economic development being propagated by powerful international development organisations such as the World Bank, AGRA and the UK's Department for International Development. Is it true, for instance, as global development agencies so often assert, that the roots of rural poverty are simply to be found in their lack of connection to the engines of capitalist economic growth in the urban areas (e.g. UNDES, 2019)? Does the path of inclusive rural development and inequality reduction necessarily always require tighter integration into global and national economies?

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In response to these ready-made ‘myths’ of mainstream development, PLAAS researchers have developed analyses that focus on real-world complexity and the dangers of not addressing it in policies: the risks of ‘adverse incorporation’ into dominant forms of economic organisation (Du Toit, 2004), the negative impacts of the integration of smallholder farmers into tight value chains, in the context of irrigation reform (Tapela, 2008), the poorly-understood generational dimensions of pathways of agrarian change (Hakizimana et al., 2017), money and the renegotiation of sociality in South Africa’s informal sector (Neves & du Toit, 2012), the contribution of large-scale agricultural investment to reproducing agrarian dualism outside South Africa’s borders (Hall, 2011; Hall & Cousins, 2018) and the growth of enclavic relationships in the spatial formations of agro-food value chains (Hall et al., 2017; Du Toit, forthcoming).

In providing critiques of dominant narratives of modernisation and commercialisation, PLAAS researchers have also proposed alternative formulations that seek to combine analytical rigour and policy relevance. Thus, in both academic publications but also in policy briefs and submissions to parliament, as well as in alliances with civil society organisations, we have argued for: a policy focus on market-oriented smallholder farmers as productive petty agricultural commodity producers to be supported both through redistributive land reform and in rural development programmes; the need to understand and support the informal agricultural economy, including the large ceremonial market for livestock and bakkie traders selling smallholder-produced fresh produce in small rural towns; the resilience of rural-urban connections and the value of rural homesteads for purposes of social reproduction; and ‘social tenures’ as a viable alternative to individual land titling, in both rural and urban contexts.

Policy, Evidence and Vested Interests

While many of these arguments and debates have been pursued in the pages of peer-reviewed journals and international conferences, they have also been centrally relevant to the way PLAAS researchers have pursued their role as policy advisors. And it is here that the tensions at the heart of the UoBR concept have really made themselves felt.

The notion that the value of academic research in general (and social science research in particular) is ultimately to be found in ‘impact’ on policies and ‘uptake’ by policy makers has, of course, been a central assumption held by many engaged scholars over the last three decades.

While there is much merit in this kind of orientation, it is important to understand that neoliberal developmentalism often involves very limiting assumptions about how to think about relevance and impact. In terms of the doctrine of 'evidence-based policymaking' that began to circulate in the world of international development studies from the 1990s onward, evidence was 'evidence of what works' – a formulation that emphasised narrow, instrumental '*means* rationality' rather than a consideration of the inevitably political, often contested, *ends* of policy deliberation (Sanderson, 2002). From this perspective, it was not the role of policy researchers to question the overall direction and aims of political policies – that was the prerogative of political leaders. Their job was to advise government on the best way of getting there.

This neat demarcation of the territory between researchers as technical advisors and policy makers as pragmatic decision makers, however, does not obtain in practice – particularly not in South Africa, where fundamental questions about the direction and design of economic and social policy have been constantly contested (Du Toit, 2012). While PLAAS researchers enjoyed a close relationship with key policy makers during the first five years or so of democracy, when President Mandela was head of state, the Mbeki years were characterised by a turn away from pro-poor land policies and an emphasis on using agricultural policy to create opportunities for medium to large-scale black capitalists (Hall, 2015). This was also a time of increasing polarisation within the national South African policy debate, with an increasingly controlling President Mbeki and his acolytes policing the limits of what could and could not be questioned. This meant that PLAAS researchers increasingly found themselves both questioning many of the underlying assumptions of dominant policy discourses and on the outskirts of policy debates.

Economic and policy thinking around approaches to land reform, PLAAS researchers argued, seemed to be informed by deeply entrenched – and deeply problematic – underlying assumptions, meta-narratives, and political and ideological commitments. From the point of view of the policy makers and interest groups that held the political steering wheel, land reform had to serve the purposes of de-racialising the agricultural sector, modernising society and promoting global integration. Agricultural policy was based on the notion that land reform beneficiaries had to adhere to the economic models entrenched in large-scale capitalist farming and support the aspirant black middle class or elite (Hall & Keep, 2017). PLAAS researchers warned that these policies were both politically problematic and unrealistic. A land and agrarian reform aimed

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at creating (or recreating) a class of wealthy, middle-sized black capitalist farmers would amount to expensive forms of narrowly-focused BEE is unsustainable under current macroeconomic conditions, and is unlikely to make a useful contribution to employment creation (Aliber et al., 2009; Cousins et al., 2018). And a tenure reform that panders to the interests and seeks to shore up the power of traditional authorities and chiefs will undermine the livelihoods and property rights of millions of poor, black South Africans, and fail to meet the requirements of the Constitution (Cousins & Hall, 2013; Weinberg, 2015).

In relation to communal tenure reform policy, PLAAS researchers have contributed to attempts to formulate new laws (in the Mandela era), but also to constitutional litigation seeking to challenge retrogressive legislation (Claassens & Cousins, 2008). This led to the striking down of the Communal Land Rights Act of 2004 by the Constitutional Court in 2010. In relation to land restitution, a successful civil society challenge to the Restitution of Land Rights Amendment Act of 2014 was supported by two PLAAS researchers (see Cousins & Hall, 2016, for their arguments).

The 'global land grab' driven by converging food, financial and energy crises from 2007-2008 saw a new rush for African farmland, often driven by dubious 'narratives of scarcity' (Scoones et al., 2018). Probing beyond the media headlines and policy pronouncements, PLAAS research, in collaboration with counterparts elsewhere, drew into question the *terra nullis* claims of land deal proponents, showing patterns of land dispossession, resource capture, class differentiation and agrarian restructuring in ways often antithetical to rural development (Hall et al., 2015; Sulle & Smalley, 2015). In contrast to much of the associated 'literature rush' which focused on quantitative measures of land deals, a political economy lens helps to locate land grabs within a historical perspective and to illuminate the ways in which these both reflect and reconfigure the interests of political, corporate and traditional elites (Hall, 2011). Partnerships with the African Union and with the Pan African Parliament saw PLAAS research being used to inform policy responses on the continent, and shaping assessments of global policy responses, notably the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (FAO, 2012; Hall et al., 2017).

But as the above account makes clear, our policy impacts in these areas were ultimately somewhat limited. To promote equitable social change, it is not enough simply to block misguided policies and to protect the

rights and interests of poor people and prevent elite depredation. It is also necessary to convince policy makers to adopt more pro-poor, inclusive and viable policies. In this respect, we have only had limited impact to date.

Social Movements and Action Research

Assessments along these lines gave PLAAS researchers much food for critical self-reflection during the long and politically frustrating years of the Zuma presidency. What are experts and scholars to do when they no longer have a hotline to the highest offices in the land – and when government policy goes adrift? Discussions of the role of scholars and academics in holding government to account very often begin with invocation of the duty to ‘speak truth to power’. This can be a somewhat flattering (possibly even self-serving!) formulation that links the ability of academics to make a difference in the world to their supposed moral authority as truth-tellers. In the secluded spaces of power, which this notion implies, professors and experts may deploy their superior knowledge and understanding (and their authority as members of the culturally anointed) to hold politicians’ feet to the fire. But what happens to ‘speaking truth to power’ when the professors are not invited into the room?

From the early 2000s on, these questions have never been far from the minds of PLAAS researchers. There is not much point in doing ‘Use-oriented Basic Research’, after all, if the intended users of the research simply ignore your advice, or turn out to be operating from fundamentally different assumptions about the desired direction of change!

One possible response was to redefine our definition of the users of our research. If officials in the South African government were turning deaf ears to the findings of research about the impact of land reform policy or the needs of artisanal fisheries, there were other powerful decision-makers worth cultivating. Over the last two decades, therefore, PLAAS increasingly began to address an international policy audience. We wrote our research reports with a view to shifting the views, not only of South African government officials, but also of policy makers in international development organisations and transnational governance institutions.

Another response was to engage with the different communities and stakeholder groups that government was supposed to be serving.

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PLAAS has always seen itself as acting in partnership with the social movements and non-governmental organisations that are practically engaged in confronting the real-world consequences of misguided policies. As the relationship between PLAAS and its interlocutors within government became more strained, our connections with organisations and movements of the dispossessed became more important to our definition of our role in the democratic process. PLAAS researchers began to act, not only as expert witnesses or advisers in court challenges, but also to undertake research that speaks to and engages directly with the needs and concerns of poor and marginalised groupings.

For researchers such as Moenieba Isaacs, herself from a marginalised fishing community, these links proved crucial to her ability to contest the corporate capture of the allocation of fishing rights by successive ministers, and to work closely with community-based organisations such as the Masifundise Trust in advocating alternative policies. In the land sector, PLAAS's engagements with groups such as the Centre for Rural Legal Studies, Women on Farms, Sikhula Sonke, the Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA) and Tshintsha Amakhaya have played an important role in defining the aims and objectives of research projects. These linkages have also been crucially important in the development of PLAAS's work on 'land grabs' and agricultural commercialisation elsewhere in Africa, where we have worked in close collaboration with those directly contesting the impacts of evictions and displacements, including the Zambia Land Alliance (ZLA) and Acção Académica Para O Desenvolvimento Das Comunidades Rurais (ADECRU) in Mozambique (Hall et al., 2015b).

These kinds of engagements, it should be said, are themselves far from straightforward. One of the difficulties of working in the rural landscapes of Southern Africa – landscapes shaped by deep poverty, inequality and institutional fragmentation – is that rural civil society often lacks material resources, and the movements of the rural poor are often fragile and lacking in capacity. Quite aside from the material and practical difficulties involved in working across huge differentials in access to resources and capacity, this has also brought political tensions into PLAAS's work. PLAAS remains, after all, an academic institution, committed to the imperatives of academic knowledge production. Just as PLAAS researchers have to maintain a critical distance from government policy makers, we are also not always able to accept the sometimes-oversimplified assumptions and narratives of activists or local gatekeepers.

But these tensions are not a reason to abandon ‘action-research’ or UoBR – indeed, properly managed, they are part of its essence, serving to challenge the self-understanding and the assumptions both of the researchers and the activists involved in such partnerships (e.g. De Wet, 2001).

Public Sociology and the National Stage

Perhaps some of the most important aspects of PLAAS research are evident not in direct relationship with particular groupings of the rural poor, but in our engagements in the public sphere, participating in the processes of a democratic polity. This is perhaps where PLAAS is mostly closely aligned with Brian O’Connell’s notion of the University as a ‘sense-making’ institution: these engagements are always processes of entering into *and actively contesting* the meanings of public language itself, seeking to reshape the discourses through which South Africa as a political community makes sense of its own reality.

These dimensions of sense-making came powerfully to the fore in recent years, when the explosion of the debate about ‘expropriation without compensation’ (EWC) catapulted the ‘land question’ to the centre of the national debate. This provoked a society-wide effort to revisit the nature of South Africa’s political settlement, as well as the status of property rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights in the Constitution. EWC suddenly became a central term in South African political discourse, and PLAAS researchers were key to framing and informing the national debate. From being a rather moribund, indeed neglected sideshow in the South African arena, the failures of the South African land reform programme and competing proposals about how to fix it were suddenly placed at centre stage. PLAAS researchers were in high demand, by the President and by Parliament, by financial institutions and diplomatic missions, by civil society and the media. In the first six months of 2018 alone, for example, PLAAS researchers appeared on national television 25 times, gave 67 radio interviews, and penned many op-ed pieces for newspapers and other media. By participating in these debates, PLAAS researchers found themselves playing a minor but vital role in South Africa’s political drama, helping to reduce polarisation and facilitating a shared national conversation across ideological dividing lines, pushing back against politicians trying to generate ‘red herrings’ and use land reform for grandstanding and forms of political theatre.

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Sometimes PLAAS interventions in the public sphere have taken the form of ‘fact checking’, testing politicians’ generalisations and sweeping claims against the complex realities uncovered in fieldwork. Sometimes these interventions have been more political, raising critical questions about the class agenda or the eventual aims of land reform.

In these highly charged contexts, new quandaries and questions have confronted PLAAS researchers. It is here that the notion of the university as a democratic, sense-making institution comes into its own. It is here that we can see how ‘public sociology’ is about much more than ‘speaking truth to power’ – and how it also goes well beyond the direct contestations and discussions involved in social movement alliances. In the first place, power is not understood to be residing in the office of the President or in officials as policy makers. Rather, power and legitimacy reside in the entire circle of all those who participate in debate: the imagined political community of South Africa and ‘all those who live in it’. And secondly, by entering into such debate, participants play a performative role, invoking and provoking a broader political community, calling it into being by participating in it (here, see Chipkin & Swilling, 2018). Taking part in these debates has required PLAAS researchers to leave their place as spectators and researchers of political processes, and to become public participants in it, questioning dominant understandings and being questioned in their turn. These discussions confront researchers with fundamental questions about how to think about the nature of South African democracy and our place within it.

Land and the National Question

One of the most important of these challenges relates to questions about how to intervene in a field of discussion that is concerned, not only with narrow and technical policy questions, but also with burning and unresolved political issues.

Considering public intellectuals’ participation in the land question simply as focused on public education – technical interventions by qualified experts on matters of public concern – misses an important dimension: the unstated *meanings* at play in land debates. The land question is about much more than the distribution of agricultural land. Anyone who says ‘land’ in South Africa is often also (and actually) saying ‘nation’ – and ‘race’. The demand for expropriation without compensation is, after all, not primarily a call that proceeds from a concern with land reform’s fiscal

implications, nor is it based on an analysis of the technical obstacles facing land reform. Rather, it is a primarily a demand for a renegotiation of the nature of South Africa as a political community, an articulation of the reality of continued disenfranchisement and marginalisation despite the civic and formal equality guaranteed by the Constitution – and an assertion of the primal and primary moral and political status of those who can claim indigenous status on South African soil. This means that the debate about land is often a deeply racialised debate – one in which PLAAS researchers cannot afford to be unconscious of their own privileged economic, and in some cases racial and gender status.

Policy research in a post-truth world

Furthermore, negotiating these difficult questions means that PLAAS cannot avoid confronting the challenges confronting university-based experts and researchers in the context of a rising tide of anti-intellectual and anti-liberal sentiment, encapsulated in the notion of post-truth politics.

These questions have become particularly salient for UWC and, indeed, for all South Africa's 'sense-making' institutions in recent years, when a rising tide of anti-liberal politics – frequently but in our view inaccurately designated as 'populist' – has challenged core aspects of the post-Cold War international consensus. This includes assumptions about the space of knowledge production and technical deliberation in processes of policy formulation.

Here, it is important to remember that over the last three decades the very possibility of 'sense-making institutions', 'evidence-based politics' 'public intellectuals' and 'use-oriented basic research' in the global South, as well as in the North, has depended on institutional and financial investments in very particular kinds of spaces for technocratic, governmental deliberation. These are those 'secluded spaces' (Callon et al., 2009) where complex questions about the allocation of resources and the direction of policy do not have to be ideologically overdetermined or decided simply on the basis of neo-patrimonial considerations of the strategic logic of organised crime. This space constitutes a space of political and discursive possibility – albeit a highly constrained one. In particular, strong limits to what could be discussed, by whom and how, were in the past set by the underlying assumptions of what we have characterised in this essay as 'neoliberal developmentalism'.

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This was an ideologically hybrid tradition that came to dominate international development work after the end of the Cold War, defined in part by an ideological commitment to the notion of market-led, modernising progress and global economic integration, and in part by discourses emphasising the importance of liberal democracy and human rights. While strongly universalist in character, and rhetorically oriented towards the notion of a just and sustainable global order, these commitments were in practice often explored in very limited ways, and in particular by a reluctance to link the pursuit of the individualistic human rights agenda, centred on the importance of political and civil liberties, to broader distributional questions about global inequality (Moyn, 2018).

For all these limitations, struggles around the meanings of development and progress created a highly productive and contested space in which researchers, activists, public intellectuals and development managers could contend with each other around the direction of economic policy. While the overall direction of economic policy and social programming was often quite conservative, it was also possible to make significant gains. The ability of alliances of researchers, intellectuals and social movements to push back against corporate capture of the land-based investment agenda, and to publicly challenge and expose some of its worst excesses, is a case in point. The changing frontiers of the international discourse on distributive politics, and the increasing willingness of global development and policy institutions to accept cash transfers (and even universal income grants) as a legitimate vehicle of social policy – something unthinkable two decades ago – is another. So is the increasing salience of distributional issues, of both global and national economic inequality, and the role of capitalism in exacerbating them (e.g. Piketty, 2014). While the ideological agenda of neoliberal developmentalism was not vanquished in these contestations, neither was it simply triumphant.

Recent developments, however, indicate that these kinds of political and ideological battles are likely to become much more desperate and closely fought. Straws in the wind are many, but three particularly important ones are:

- o The rise of anti-liberal, 'populist' and right-wing politics, and the increasing profile of politicians who weaponise popular resentment of institutional-based elites in a discourse against expert knowledge, visible both in the increasing prevalence of post-truth politics and various species of science denialism;

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- o The impact of the global financial crisis and climate change, which have undermined the optimism about growth that informed development narratives in the past, and led to the increasing prevalence of much more nihilistic and short-termist varieties of 'chaos capitalism', wholesale state capture and the proliferation and normalisation of offshore and illicit economies (Shaxson, 2011; Bracking, 2016);
- o The increasing pressure on universities – on the one side from the collapse of public funding, on the other side from the rise of massification, of an 'audit culture' and neoliberal forms of university management, reducing the space of academic freedom.

These developments threaten to undermine the fragile institutional base that has allowed progressive scholars and academics to participate in debates about the factors influencing social change and the desired direction of social and economic policy. There is an increasing danger that the allocation of resources for social distribution is informed, not by critical evaluations of available evidence or by an understanding of the needs and concerns of subaltern populations, but by cynical patrimonial and clientelist politics, regulatory capture by international corporations, and the increasing leverage of criminal syndicates and networks of hidden power (Cockayne, 2016).

Conclusion

What then, is the future of the university as a sense-making institution? Will it still be possible for researchers to participate in democratically constituted spaces, where political alternatives and competing visions can be discussed and contested in an intellectually rigorous, robust way? There is much to fight for. The memory of Brian O'Connell – raising funds for development research, picking up chewing-gum papers and plastic packets on the steps of the institution he helped to run, while providing powerful and effective leadership at the same time – is an inspiring one to keep in mind. We will need intellectual leaders who have a sharp eye on the lofty ideals that inspire intellectual life – but who also have the humility, the realism, and are grounded enough to engage in an open and respectful manner with the realities, no matter how messy, at coalface.

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