Ethnographies of Power


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Gillian Hart is my teacher, although I have never been a formal student of hers. The lessons she has offered have come through our (real and imagined) conversations, especially as these have unfolded in my engagement with her work. As master–student relationships go, ours is therefore an unorthodox one, enabled by the intellectual generosity of a teacher who refuses her title as master, so that teaching can start as conversation between militants.

One of the consequences of this unorthodox master–student relationship, however, is that what I take from Hart is not in the first place any concept. Instead, the deepest point of influence and inspiration has been in a style of intellectual engagement that exceeds the concepts she puts to work. In Hart’s work, concepts are always a rich totality of many determinations and relations, constantly and painstakingly reworked in relation to engagements with the concrete. And in this work, conversation – with all its productive tensions – is an additional support for tracing the paths between abstract forms and ever-finer determinations, and one mode through which this praxis finds its spaces of intervention (and sometimes also students).

In this chapter I try to make this style of intellectual engagement thematic by focusing not on a ‘Gill concept’, but one that she adopts a critical relationship to: Thabo Mbeki’s ‘second economy’. Reflecting
my enormous debt to Hart’s work, I argue that the development and deployment of the concept of the second economy tells us a lot about how the technical and political practices of neo-liberal governmentality were articulated with official nationalism (see chapter 8 in this volume for a discussion of the concept of articulation). Rather than repay the debt, however, this chapter marks out a slightly different path to the one Hart took – my paradoxical way of showing her influence.

Field notes on the crisis

Rethinking the South African Crisis (Hart 2013) is an important left-academic statement on the transition from apartheid for its suggestion that we focus on the interlocking practices and processes of de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation. The virtue of Hart’s conceptual reworking of the narrative of transition is to draw our attention to the articulation of practices and processes in different spheres, such that her account of ‘the South African crisis’ now shows it simultaneously anchored in the political, economic and cultural domains, with thick historical-spatial sediments. Hart’s concept of de-nationalisation draws together shifting class composition, capital flight, discursive forms and governmental practices: ‘[De-nationalisation] signals … the simultaneously economic, political and cultural practices and processes that are generating ongoing inequality and “surplus” populations, and the conflicts that surround them. De-nationalisation focuses attention on the historical and geographical specificities of South African racial capitalism and settler colonialism, their interconnections with forces at play in other parts of the world, and their modes of reconnecting with the increasingly financialised global political economy in the post-apartheid period’ (Hart 2013, 7).

And if the ‘forces of de-nationalisation’ can only be understood in their relation to the ‘practices and processes of re-nationalisation’, the latter too are linked to a wide spectrum of phenomena, including discursive interventions, expressions of official xenophobia, pogroms
and popular protest. It is, however, important to note that Hart’s appreciation of the complex unfolding of these processes was in the first place enabled by exactly the kinds of conceptual reworkings that I highlight at the beginning of this chapter, and her critique of Mbeki’s concept of the ‘second economy’ is an important part of this story: a critique that develops in conversations on the left.

In 2006 Hart challenged the audience gathered at a colloquium of left academics and activists to think about how the Mbeki-led ‘ruling bloc in the ANC [African National Congress] articulated shared meanings and memories of the struggles for national liberation to its hegemonic project – and how a popular sense of betrayal is playing into support for Jacob Zuma’ (Hart 2007, 85). The colloquium was partly centred on the intellectual work and legacy of Harold Wolpe and at the heart of Hart’s presentation was a ‘return’ to the race–class debate, framed as a search for ‘analytic tools’ for grappling with the ‘dangerous conjunctures’ signalled by the rise of Zuma, and the new fractures this was opening up in the ANC-led Alliance. What she retrieves from this debate is a Gramscian concept of articulation, worked out and developed by Stuart Hall and shown to be at work in the late Wolpe’s writing (but differentiated from his earlier Althusserian concept of articulation).

Working from Hall’s concept of articulation (see chapter 8 in this volume), Hart shows that something like race has to be understood in its historicity, which is to say, ‘in terms of relations and practices that have tended to erode and transform – or preserve – [racial] distinctions through time’ (Hart 2007, 89) as structuring principles of social life and the forms of class relations that characterise it. The take-away from this discussion was therefore an analytic practice centred on the historical formation and transformation of the ‘economic, political and ideological practices’ that underlie particular social relations and categories and the ways these practices have been articulated with other practices within a social formation.

Rethinking the social in this way has real implications for conceptual work, as Hart (2007, 90) suggests with explicit reference to Karl Marx’s
‘the method of political economy’ in his *Grundrisse* and Hall’s engagement with it. It means that conceptual work must necessarily be undertaken in relation to, and must keep pace with, concrete empirical points of reference. Armed with this concept of articulation, with its deep methodological and ontological implications, when Hart now turns to offer a concrete analysis of concrete situations, something important happens. In the final sections of her presentation, where she reflects on the concept of the second economy, we can already see Hart reworking her field notes on the crisis, now with local government at the centre, and in terms of conceptual coordinates that include populism and nationalism. And it is in these notes, developed through a ‘concrete analysis’ of the South African context, that Hart recasts the left narrative of the transition, highlighting ‘simultaneous practices and processes of de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation’ (Hart 2013, 6; emphasis in original).

More than a decade ‘late’, what follows is the story of how I took up Hart’s challenge in her 2006 presentation. The virtue of her reworked perspective on the transition, that is, the way it draws together practices and processes unfolding in different spheres, also means that all of these elements ultimately must be related to one another at an extraordinarily high level of abstraction. What I ended up focusing on then was some of the stuff happening ‘lower down’, centring Hart’s analysis of the ‘concrete situation’ that opened with Mbeki’s introduction of a concept of the second economy. But, for me, taking up Hart’s challenge (as a returning graduate student) also meant misreading it (with all her support) and reworking her questioning of the articulation between political economy and nationalism within a different conceptual framework.

**Hart and the two economies debate**

In his 2003 ‘State of the Nation’ address, Mbeki (re)introduced a distinction between a first and second economy as the terms of a narrative that explained the persistence of poverty. His speech began, however, as
an affirmation of progress. He reminded those listening of the people’s ‘long march against the system of white minority domination’ and their eventual ‘transition to democratic majority rule’ (Mbeki 2003). A ‘tide had turned,’ he said; lives were changing for the better and the ‘economy is demonstrating resilience … that is the envy of many across the world’. But when he turned to the question of poverty, he added:

With regard to the accomplishment of the task of ensuring a better life for all … government is perfectly conscious of the fact that there are many in our society who are unable to benefit from whatever our economy is able to offer … This reflects a structural fault in our economy and society as a result of which we have a dual economy and society. The one modern and relatively well developed. The other is characterised by underdevelopment and an entrenched crisis of poverty. (Mbeki 2003)

And the implications of this disjuncture were that the (‘correct’) interventions made at the level of the ‘first economy’ did not have corresponding (poverty-alleviating) outcomes at the level of the ‘second economy’, necessitating a realignment of governmental action.

Mbeki’s statement coincided with a wide-ranging review of the first ten years of democratic rule and a renewed emphasis on the governmental discourse on poverty and social assistance for the poor. In this context, the two economies thesis provided a simplified grid that explained the persistence of poverty while at the same time acting as a statement of political will that committed governmental agencies to renewed action targeting the poor. This idea of the second economy, however, also provoked a barrage of criticism and at the 2006 colloquium discussed above it was the subject of more than one polemical intervention. For all the work devoted to understanding and critiquing it, however, the ways Mbeki’s thesis reframed a nationalist representation of ‘the people’ and their ‘political project’ were generally ignored.
Focusing on the assertion of an impassable blockage between the first and second economies, the dominant line of critique worked to show the links between formal and informal economic activity and in this way also the deleterious unity of economic processes under policies sponsored by the executive. Alternatively, for other critics, second economy measures were shown to produce the very inequalities they were meant to address. Generally, however, what was emphasised about the thesis on this side of the political spectrum was its instrumentalism in deflecting criticism over ‘bad’ policy decisions.

In this political context, Hart made her intervention, and with a Gramscian eye on the political, she transformed the terms of the debate:

First/Second Economy discourses can be seen as part of an effort to contain the challenges from oppositional movements that reached their zenith at the time of the WSSD [World Summit on Sustainable Development, in 2002] and render them subject to government intervention. What is significant about this discourse is the way it defines a segment of society that is superfluous to the ‘modern’ economy, and in need of paternal guidance – those falling within this category are citizens, but second class. As such they are deserving of a modicum of social security, but on tightly disciplined and conditional terms. (Hart 2007, 96)

In a parallel article that develops this line of argument, Hart centres on emerging municipal indigent management frameworks, shown to be paradigmatic for second economy measures (Hart 2006).

Two enduring themes of Hart’s rethinking of the South African crisis surface here: popular protest and ‘the government of the poor’. And if these are shown here in their dialectical relation, Hart draws into her analysis a wider field of practices in order to show how the concept of the second economy was genealogically bound to a mutating conception of the ‘national democratic revolution’ (NDR). On the one hand, Hart’s analysis drew attention to the ways in which (public) invocations
of the NDR by the ruling bloc within the ANC paralleled, and in part grew out of, a ‘drive’ to contain increasingly antagonistic challenges to ‘the ANC’s hegemonic project’ after 2002 with the emergence of new movements (Hart 2007, 95). On the other hand, taking the public statements of ANC officials seriously, she read successive expressions of governmental policy as a re-articulation of a conception of the NDR.

In this account, the adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme in 1996 was therefore more than simply a shift away from the ‘benign Keynesianism’ of the government’s earlier Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) towards ‘harsh neoliberalism’. It also represented, Hart insists, ‘a redefinition of the NDR in terms of a re-articulation of race, class and nationalism, along with the assertion of new technologies of rule’ (Hart 2006, 58). And to the extent that the second economy concept marked a new shift in discursive representations of the ANC’s governmental project, it represented a further redefinition of the NDR in relation to the problem of the surplus population.

This account came to serve as the initial scaffolding for my own research on the concept of the second economy. Following the paths opened up by Hart’s work, my own contribution to this conversation was to slow things down, showing the governmental significance of the concept as well as the antinomies of post-apartheid political practices that sit behind it.

The governmental significance of the concept of the second economy

Following Mbeki’s first statements on the second economy, this concept was given a less literal meaning that was responsive to the objections made to it, and by 2007 officials were insisting that the ‘second economy’ was a ‘metaphor’. What is important, however, is that at a governmental level the concept of the second economy functioned as a discursive emblem for a social security framework aimed at offering basic social
support to the poor. Its various elements (described as second economy measures) included, crucially, a set of targeted cash grants, lifeline allocations for water and electricity, municipal indigent management strategies, and (less crucially) jobs through public works campaigns.

These measures, along with the roll-out of basic services and housing, continue to represent the broad means through which post-apartheid governmental authorities administer to the poor, connecting them to an evolving social security framework as specific subject categories. Although the history of this framework cannot be read from Mbeki’s statements, the introduction of the concept of the second economy did mark an important moment in the post-apartheid government of the poor, characterised not only by an increase in spending on ‘second economy measures’, but also an attempt to deepen state knowledge of poverty, and to conceptualise and align measures targeting it as part of an ‘overall strategy’.

Setting aside my interest in the political genealogy of second economy measures targeting the poor, what intrigued me about official statements on the second economy was the ways they came to operate on two levels. On the one hand, they model a symbolic grammar for representations of the people and their will and, on the other, a practical grammar bifurcating modes of governmental practice. With respect to the concept of the second economy, then, it is crucial to ask how this way of conceptualising the social problem of poverty enabled, supported or clarified the modes through which officials attempted to govern a particular reality.

Focusing on discursive representations of the second economy, what became apparent was that in the end government officials were less concerned with insisting on the impassable singularity of distinct economic formations than with framing a governmental approach in terms of two seemingly opposed models of governmental practice. So, within the idiom of the two economies, the ideal of governmental action was presented as a form of ‘economic management’, conceived as a mode of indirect government through market effects. For this form
of ‘economic management’ (corresponding to a ‘first economy’), governmental interventions were represented as the work of creating ‘the right deposition of things’ (Foucault 2007) (for instance, appropriate laws and an enabling framework for a market-centred allocation of infrastructure and resources) to bring about a higher order of political ends (equality, redistribution, social inclusion and so on). On the other hand, the discourse of the two economies suggested that, in the specific/distorted circumstance of South Africa, this mode of action was also insufficient to address the problem of poverty. For this reason, the political end of mitigating poverty required direct intervention and support by governmental agencies, and through means standing apart from market mechanisms (such as targeted cash transfers and concessions for accessing de-commodified water and electricity through life-line allocations).

In this narrative, the second mode of practice stands as the exception to the normal run of things. In addition to the various social security interventions undertaken by governmental agencies, and economic interventions aimed at growing the first economy, what was also needed were ‘catalytic’ programmes to encourage ‘mobility’ between the second economy and the first (Netshitenzhe 2007; Republic of South Africa 2006), such as education and measures for fostering entrepreneurial habits and the conditions for the development of enterprise. It is important to see that this approach was not so much a departure from neo-liberal governmentality as a refocusing of local social security frameworks in line with a specific mode of representing the problem of poverty. And whether explicitly stated or presupposed, the problem animating governmental discourse on the second economy was exactly what Hart characterised as the presence of a ‘segment of society that is superfluous to the “modern” economy’ (Hart 2007, 96).

In a telling address, Joel Netshitenzhe, at the time in Mbeki’s Office of the Presidency, explained that the idea of the second economy emerged with the examination of data on employment, inequality and
growth as part of government’s ten-year review process (that is, examination of statistics focused on the population) and a growing sense that ‘even as the economy grew by 6% and more, there would still be a large sediment of an “under-class” imprisoned in the poverty trap’ (Netshitenzhe 2007). In this account, it is this specific governmental problem and ‘the need to define the phenomenon of the under-class’ that the metaphor of the second economy was attempting to capture.

The problem indicated by the numbers Netshitenzhe was looking at is well known. Simply stated, it was the fact that a large section of population is unlikely to ever find a place in formal economic activity, given the shape of capitalist development in South Africa. What the emergence of second economy discourse represented, as Hart spotted, was a governmental orientation to this problem. All the same, the imagined resolution for the Presidency remained within a framework in which the poor’s entry into the formal labour market was to be the basis of their social inclusion. In this context, measures for administering to the poor were necessarily represented as temporary, stopgap measures to help them on their (impossible) journey to the first economy.¹

**Between neo-liberal governmentalisation and the resistance of the poor**

At the centre of the governmental problem to which Hart connects the concept of the second economy is a subject that must be ‘identified and registered’, ‘(re)defined’ as ‘indigent’ and drawn into the state’s ‘structures of social security’ on ‘tightly disciplined and conditional terms’ (Hart 2007, 96). But there is also in Hart’s account the suggestion that the moment in which this subject appeared politically mobilised – in the wave of social movement struggles that unfolded in the early 2000s – was the same moment this subject entered the gaze of the state as needing to be rendered subject to governmental intervention.

Drawing on Prishani Naidoo’s reflection (see 2007, 2009) on the development of indigent management policies in Johannesburg, and
my own work on the commodification of basic services, I wanted to highlight how tightly interwoven the development of the struggles of the poor in Johannesburg were with the measures and institutional forms for administering to them. And as Hart was beginning to speak about ‘a dialectic of protest and containment’ (Hart 2007, 96), my own research was describing ‘a double movement between neoliberal governmentalisation and the resistance of the poor’.

On one side of these arguments was a reflection of the rationality that underlies measures targeting the poor and the ways it moved in the direction of making a life lived under the sign of indigence as unattractive as possible in order to ensure that the poor should rather look to the market for any lasting escape from the condition of poverty … should rather look to themselves to empower themselves. Measures like indigent management strategies and water and electricity lifeline allocations had to therefore be at an ‘optimum minimum’ – warding off welfare dependency at the same time as they sought to ward off resistance. Rather than working to secure a dignified existence for those belonging to the surplus population, for a neo-liberal governmentality, dignity is precisely what governmental measures must work to avoid. And the measures to meet the ‘extreme needs’ of the poor must themselves work to ensure that the poor are turned to a life conditioned by market relations.

Apparatuses for governing the poor are, however, machines that work by constantly breaking down, forcing a constant process of reconstitution. The principle of change for these rapidly morphing forms is often opposition, resistance, counter-conduct. On the other side of the argument was therefore an account of how the struggles of the poor constantly worked to push concessions offered by governmental agencies across new thresholds as they acted for a life beyond bare existence. But even with their ‘successes’, they often become increasingly subject to new modes of surveillance and control.

In linking the development of indigent management policies to the social movements’ resistance of the early 2000s, both Hart and Naidoo
opened the way for my account of a double movement of neo-liberal
governmentalisation and the resistance of the poor. However, the resis-
tance that shaped Johannesburg frameworks targeting the poor also
included less organised forms of action, undertaken independently of
the social movements referenced in Hart’s account (2007).

As I turned to deployments of a conception of the NDR, I again
emphasised the operation of NDR discourse, before 2002, in under-
writing state policy through the inscription of a set of limits on the
content and forms of dissent within the Alliance. In fact, the political
deployment of the NDR within the Alliance, in the name of an osten-
sibly neo-liberal policy framework, is threaded through the mesh of
tensions out of which the new movements of Hart’s account spring
(2007). What the post-2002 public deployments of the NDR concep-
tion highlighted was the growing dysfunctionality of the Alliance in
containing popular forces, and a concomitant drive to generalise the
discursive frames and disciplinary models of the ANC-led nationalist
movement over a wider area – its ironic response to cracks in its hege-
monic project. The failures of this drive are apparent today inside and
outside the ANC.

The NDR and the problem of nationalism

One of the important steps taken by Hart is to shift beyond various
modes of denunciation of duplicity in order to recentre the question of
post-apartheid nationalism and the discursive figures that character-
ise public representations of the ANC’s project in government. In her
work, what is important is not simply the ways in which deployments
of NDR are instrumentally directed towards soliciting hegemony for a
ruling elite as they pursue a programme of neo-liberal restructuring –
a talking left that enables a rightward step. Now it becomes important
to understand how the conception is made to work to particular ends
and how it in fact bends to those ends. Hart’s analysis points to the
possibility of constructing something like a political genealogy of the
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NDR conception that makes its changing shape, the contingencies that mark its deployments in different contexts and times, and the political imperatives it accumulates, the subject of critique (2007). In connecting the NDR conception to Mbeki’s two economies thesis – with its extension of a dualistic conception of the social formation, and an expression of a will towards the social inclusion of the black poor and thus the ends of the struggle – Hart also allows us to see Mbeki’s statement as a crucial moment in this genealogy.

It is important to note (as Hart reminds us) that Mbeki’s two economies thesis was a reworking of his earlier ‘two nations’ speech (Hart 2007). Presenting on the questions of ‘reconciliation and nation building’ during a 1998 session of the general assembly, Mbeki (then the deputy president) developed a conception bearing many of the marks of his later two economies thesis, but to a different end: ‘South Africa is a country of two nations … One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous … It has ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure … The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor … This nation lives under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure … And neither are we becoming one nation’ (Mbeki 1998).

The pessimism of the two nations’ speech marked a significant shift from the language of ‘a new South Africa’ in which Nelson Mandela had cast his image of reconciliation and stood in stark contrast to the dualism of Mbeki’s 2003 ‘State of the Nation’ address that announced the ‘turning of the tide’. Part of what marks the space between Mbeki’s statements in 1998 and his later formulation, is that in this 1998 iteration it is the ‘material base’ (that is, the singular economy) that both structures the division between the two nations and acts as the motor that drives and enables the project of national reconciliation. In 1998, with challenges to the ANC coming from the parliamentary right, whose leadership and support were drawn largely from white, middle-class constituencies, the remnants of the past are represented as
going beyond the ‘objective’ forms through which the legacy of the past is imprinted on the present, to take on a ‘subjective’ dimension as well.

In the later two economies thesis, (re)presented for an altered political context, the division is no longer between two nations, but structures a split in the body of the people; between those who can participate in all the nation ‘has to offer’ (the benefits of national wealth and progress) and those who cannot. The image of the first economy, vibrant and robust, holds the promise of citizenship, democracy and progress. By contrast, the second economy belongs to another temporal form, figured as the stubborn imprint of the past on the present. In both characterisations, however, the dualistic ‘image of the past’ persists, becoming the point and motivation for state action expressed as national will – whether as threat against the ‘agents of the old order’, or in reproducing bare life.

Beyond how it operated at a governmental level, stepping back to a different level of abstraction, the two economies thesis was another way of imagining the nation and its people, a narrative that modelled a grammar to reconcile the nationalist principle of progress with the growing material inequities of the national population. But why then did government need the two economies thesis? As we have seen, this characterisation marked a moment of consolidation and extension of governmental approaches, but the latter could just as easily take on less metaphorical, more practical terms. Moreover, intergovernmental communication and institutional structuring gain little from the pomp and ceremony with which the characterisation was passed into the public realm, dressed, we might add, in the imaginings of ‘a nation’ and ‘the history of the struggle’ (as in Mbeki’s ‘State of the Nation’ address).

Intersecting questions

The questions that inspired me in Hart’s interventions in the debates on the concept of the second economy have, over time, morphed into a slightly esoteric theoretical problem, but one I believe we should
take seriously if we are to understand the nationalism of the Congress tradition as it has come to be articulated with the government of the state. In its most abstract form, this is a question of how to think the relationship between government(ality) and popular sovereignty.

Motivated by a similar set of concerns, Partha Chatterjee’s *The Politics of the Governed* characterises the relationship between government(ality) and popular sovereignty in terms of an antinomy: “The classical idea of popular sovereignty, expressed in the legal-political facts of equal citizenship, produced the homogenous construct of the nation, whereas the activities of governmentality required multiple, cross-cutting and shifting classifications of the population as the targets of multiple policies, producing a necessary heterogeneous construct of the social. Here, then, we have the antinomy between the lofty political imaginary of popular sovereignty and the mundane administrative reality of governmentality” (Chatterjee 2004, 35).

Chatterjee’s statement owes a debt to Michel Foucault. As is well known, Foucault’s lecture (2007) that introduces the concept of governmentality does so in relation to his genealogical reflection on the entry of the concept of economy into political discourse, and in this sense, on the birth of ‘political economy’. And in this lecture, Foucault presents the development of modern governmental practices as a transition away from the traditional modality to sovereignty (Foucault 2007). However, he also insists that, in this context, the question of sovereignty came to be even ‘more sharply posed’. And for Foucault, it was in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s work that a diagram for relating the new arts of government with a conception of sovereignty began to emerge.

It is in fact in Rousseau that we find – from a genealogical perspective – an important formulation of the problem of the articulation of political economy and civic nationalism. Speaking about Rousseau’s article ‘Political Economy’, Foucault says that Rousseau had already shifted from a notion of economy conceived along the model of the family, so that when he turns to the question of sovereignty in
The Social Contract, his question now is how, ‘with notions like those of “nature,” “contract,” and “general will,” one can give a general principle of government that will allow for both the juridical principle of sovereignty and elements through which an art of government can be defined and described?’ (Foucault 2007, 107). But apart from these brief remarks on The Social Contract, Foucault gives us little sense of the form of relation that characterises the space between modern government and a re-articulated conception of sovereignty.

What should follow our perception of the kind of ‘antinomy’ that Chatterjee highlights? After all, the most sacred artefact of post-apartheid nationalism, the Freedom Charter, leads with the Rousseauian signature, ‘no government can just claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people’ (Congress of the People 1955). If we assume an antimony then, what are its effects, both for how ‘government’ and ‘the people’ come to be represented?

The second economy concept is not new to South African theoretical debates. However, what separated Mbeki’s characterisation is that the second economy comes to be imagined as a singular level of governmental intervention, corresponding spatially with sites of mass poverty. As is well known, Foucault’s research on neo-liberalism drew attention to practices working at ‘recoding of the social as the economic’ (Foucault 2008; Lemke 2001, 2002). In a paradoxical way, two economies discourse did this as well. In Mbeki’s mouth, what belonged to the social (as the problem of the surplus population) appeared in the frame of ‘the dysfunctional economic’. At the same time, from a Foucauldian perspective, the great emphasis placed by governmental agencies on establishing an indigent register, developing the analytic and statistical models to gather information on the ‘second economy’ (or, more precisely, on the poor) and extending institutional frameworks to administer to this section of the population might be seen as less about finding ways of penetrating a second economy, than of creating one – that is, the constitution of a particular field of knowledge
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and governmental management and the designation of a specific (which is to say, exceptional) tactical approach towards it.

The quick answer, then, to the question of why officials needed the two economies thesis is that a neo-liberal governmentality needed a popular frame as it was articulated with official nationalism, or rather the technical-political mechanisms targeting the poor needed a narrative that drew them together as resolution to an imagined national problem. In this sense, what the two economies conception worked to do was (re)code a neo-liberal rationality for the progressive ‘will’ of the nationalist imaginary.

Conclusion

In his re-articulation of the NDR in the form of the two economies thesis, Mbeki was working at one mode, however crisis ridden, of discursively relating two poles – government and popular sovereignty. To be sure, Mbeki’s statement offered an admission of the emptiness of the landscape of post-apartheid citizenship for the poor. However, it did so only by connecting this deficiency to the unexhausted legacy of apartheid and national oppression, and thus to the persistence of the ‘structural faults’ and barriers it created, while reaffirming the ideal of transcending such limits as the ongoing work of the liberation movement in government.

In this narrative, growth in the economy (as a consequence of ‘correct’ policy) that could absorb the poor carries real symbolic weight. In the two economies discourse it was given the work of (progressive) realisation of citizenship, imagined as an outcome of the integration of the poor into the formal economy and the activation of the entrepreneurial agency of the population, with basic support along the way. Like the working of the god of providence, here enabling interventions and administrative capacities engender ‘collateral effects’ through which the will of the people is to be realised, that is, as an indirect outcome of the
good (economic) government of the state. And it is in this way governmental decision-making and its field of causality are linked to a broader set of political ends coded in the nationalism of the Congress tradition.

Today officials seldom talk about second economy measures, but the social security framework that was described in these terms reflects the persistence of the Mbeki-era rationality with respect to the government of the poor. The frames for linking the government of the state with a set of aspirations coded in the nationalist discourse of ANC officials have also been shifting (from the second transition, through economic freedom, to, more recently, radical economic transformation). Ironically, with the decline of the hegemony of the ANC, there is also a remarkable nostalgia for the Mbeki era with its highpoint in the early 2000s; seen as the golden era of the post-apartheid government of the state in middle-class publics. As Hart has shown, however, the ‘incurable structural contradictions’ that underlie the present crisis were already there. One thing that did mark Mbeki’s presidency as different, however, was the depth of his sense of a governmental project whose popular frame became the two economies thesis. Today, new frames like ‘radical economic transformation’ are now more prominent in the nationalist vocabulary, but they also point to a deeper crisis of connecting discursive forms of the Congress tradition to the practical rationality for the government of the state.

NOTES

1 In making all this explicit I am, of course, doing little more than offering a supporting appendix to Hart’s statement, one that delineates how the two economies thesis worked at a governmental level as a discourse or rationality for expressing a broad approach to the government of the state. What is far more interesting, however, is what Hart’s 2006 account and later writing fix on – the second economy measures themselves and the ways in which they came to be shaped by the political action of the poor.

2 Giorgio Agamben’s (2011) discussion of the relationship between the concept of providence and liberal government helped inspire this formulation.
REFERENCES


