

2016

Davie, Grace. *Poverty Knowledge in South Africa: A Social History of Human Science, 1855-2005*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2015, 334 pp.

Sandy El Hage

Lebanese American University, [sandy.elhage@lau.edu](mailto:sandy.elhage@lau.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://encompass.eku.edu/jora>

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

El Hage, Sandy. "Davie, Grace. *Poverty Knowledge in South Africa: A Social History of Human Science, 1855-2005*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2015, 334 pp." *Journal of Retracing Africa*: Vol. 3, Issue 1 (2016): 79-81. <http://encompass.eku.edu/jora/vol3/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Retracing Africa* by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact [Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu](mailto:Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu).

**Davie, Grace.** *Poverty Knowledge in South Africa: A Social History of Human Science, 1855-2005.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2015. 334 pp.

An underlying crux of modern civilization accounts from economic development, whereas the wherewithal to meet demands for modern development is a discerning feature of nation and state building. In South Africa, economic development maintains a grim present from a tragic history, lending to its characterization as an undisputedly unequal nation. A narrative from contemporary South African history finds state-building occurred as a result of *rapid* industrialization in the early nineteenth century, following colonialization by European settlers and English colonies. As a result, industrial expansion and economic prosperity benefitted colonizers, and social reforms were therein enacted to address a capitalistic need to buttress a robust labor market. In a historical analysis, Grace Davie explores these affects of modern economic policies from South Africa to conjure an argument for the endurance of poverty, despite centuries worth of social reform.

In a poignant assessment of South African liberal reformism, *Poverty Knowledge in South Africa* explores the trenches of economic development in South Africa from government centralization leading into the era of apartheid and beginning with the modern reign of the African National Congress. Davie's framework dually serves as a critical and didactic purpose in portraying pitfalls of social welfare policies meaning to address the endurance of poverty between industrialization and precipitated derelict standards of living among the working class. In an unabashed stance against positivist thinking, Davie begins by posing an unrelenting quest to understand the concept of poverty and the means through research taken to answer the poverty question. In explicating the foundation of poverty knowledge, Davie relies upon contextual histories around nation-state building and economic development. Wherein, Davie's investigation into public policy reveals the earliest history of poverty knowledge arose from tenuous and inapplicable measures, exemplifying GDP and standards to maintain "European standards" of living, rather than measures seeking to alleviate disenfranchised conditions. From the inception of a South African state, social hierarchies between colonizers and indigenous Africans arose from racist welfare policies to mitigate the "poor white problem" (21). Throughout *Poverty Knowledge*, Davie attempts to explain South Africa's social construction of poverty, and in doing so reveals a deeper historical context of racism and segregation among South African colonizers, indigenous people, and migrant labors.

Davie's main thesis begins with the simple premise around poverty's conceptualization to stem from a rich legacy characterized by specific struggles

over power. Pointedly argued, the concept of poverty originated in inception from a statist operation to protect capitalist expansion by favoring the demographic of white working class people. In divulging early notions of poverty as bolstered by government's racially biased social welfare policies, Davie accounts for the flaws in knowledge production and the fatal appropriation of applied and social scientific research for the interest of opportunistic pursuits in policymaking. Three major themes unfold within Davie's extensive biography to explain the historically flawed mechanism to answering the poverty question: (1) co-production; (2) limitation in research frameworks from the human sciences; and (3) epistemic mobility, or policymaking. With these themes taken altogether, poverty experts are implicated in line with a critical assessment of South Africa's welfare state for misusing the state as a vehicle to serve policymaking interests. Davie unpacks the thesis further to argue that poverty knowledge in post-colonial South Africa still maintains an enduring quality of recycled policies to address industry needs, as protected by an economic apparatus serviced by government motives with most conveniently the nation's wealth concentrated among a white minority, a demographic relic of colonial South Africa.

The most telling feature of *Poverty Knowledge* derives from Davie's conveyance of flawed policymaking and the extent economic interests served as an apparent priority to the welfare state. Davie's argument powerfully resonates with critical thinker Alice O'Connor<sup>1</sup> in directing point blank responsibility to creators of poverty knowledge in South Africa to unseal the "conscious and unconscious limitations of conceptual legacies" (22) dating from colonial South Africa and presented-day frameworks of macroeconomic policies and neoliberalism. Whereas, many of the complexities governed by co-production have risen from a lack of critical thinking towards *how* poverty knowledge is produced, rather than question complacency inherent in the liberal enterprise to addressing poverty.

Davie's judgments towards knowledge production serve as a cautionary provision for academics and intellectuals meaning well to tackle the perennial issue around poverty reduction and social welfare. Providing solely positivist baselines and standards to assess qualitative features of poverty undermines the tragic state of communities and societies faced in an everyday struggle to address realities of injustice. Thus, without critical assessment towards existing policies, poverty experts perpetuate an agenda of stratified economic interests to become the overseers of the liberal enterprise.

In providing a contrasted narrative to misguided policymaking, Davie's latter chapters focus on present-day social movements among wagedworkers to take back

---

<sup>1A</sup> O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (New Jersey: Princeton University, 2001).

“peoples’ power” (244). These chapters serve to recount for social scientists a vast evidentiary corpus to base future policy research. Davie eloquently concludes that poverty knowledge could work towards the betterment of peoples’ struggles when it is addressed in isolation from economic policies. To do so, co-production of knowledge-based policies must then divorce interests from economic development in a capitalist context, and rather, and perhaps radically when poverty knowledge is generated in a bottom-up mechanism inclusive of grassroots research, and as reported by public witnesses privy to poverty’s inhumane conditions.

Sandy S. El Hage  
International Affairs  
Lebanese American University