

Martin Wittenberg:  
Actually bothering to get the  
answer right

October 2023

# Martin the Polymath



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Statistics, Math, Philosophy

Philosophy

Political Science

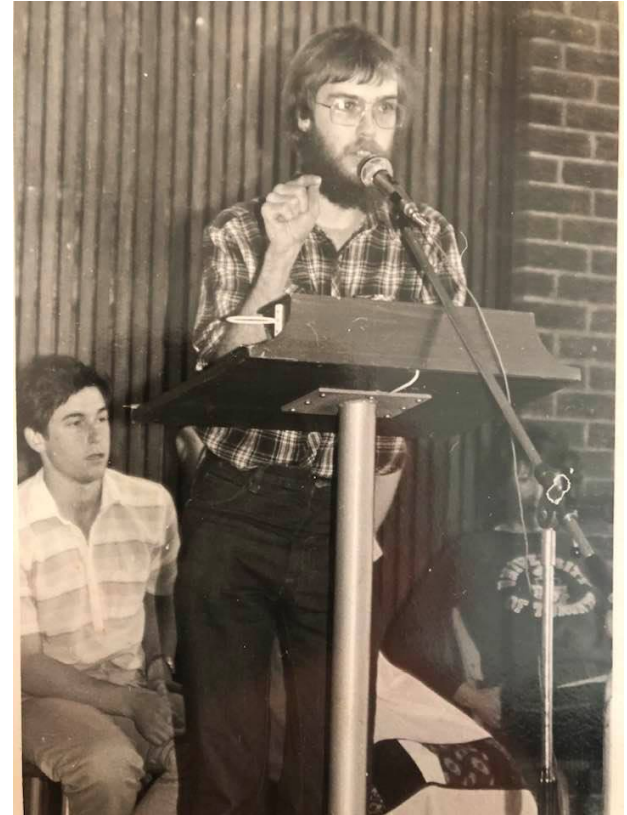
Geography

Economics



# From Maritzburg to Cape Town: Four+ decades in Academia

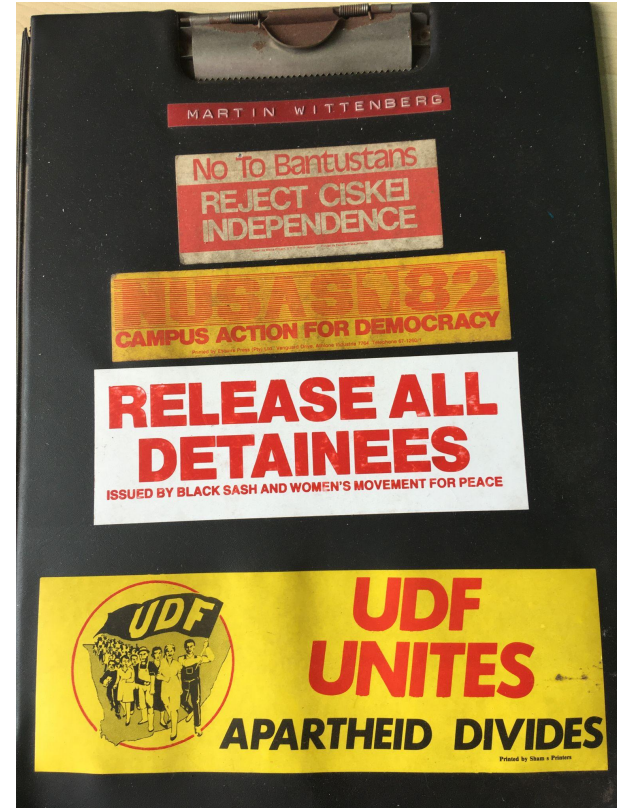
1980s: PMB/Univ. of Natal, student politics





# Martin's Commitment to Social Justice

- Nicoli Nattrass: *"What has always struck me about Martin is his powerful sense of justice and huge courage in pursuing it"*
- NUX in the early 1980s
- Political activism and leadership roles in the UDF in the mid/late 1980s
- Political fugitive, detentions in Pmb



# From Maritzburg to Cape Town: Four+ decades in Academia

1980s: PMB/Univ. of Natal in the bad old days

1990s: PMB to Jo'burg/Wits, thrown in the deep end by Charles Simkins

2000s: Jo'burg/Wits to Cape Town, via Princeton, and the rise of UCT

2010s: Honing the Econ(ometrics) machine, a stint at Yale, taking

DataFirst into the future

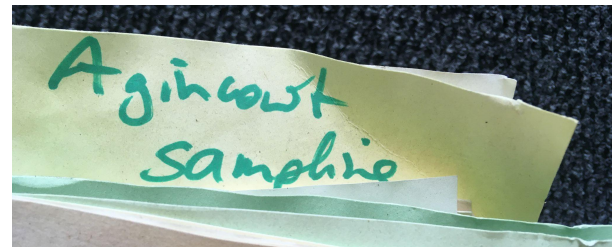
2020s: Mo' Metrics, Mo' Problems (to solve)







# Households are not static

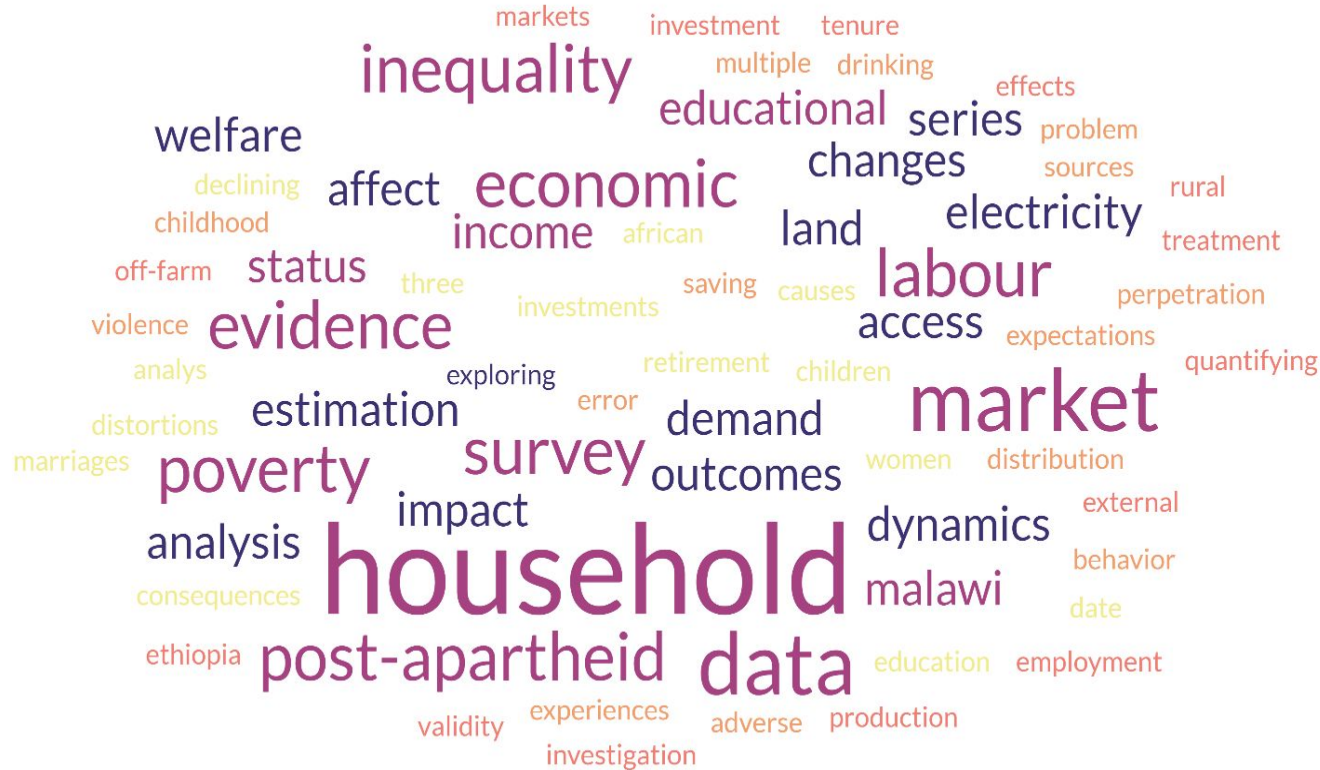


- Households are important sites of consumption (sharing food, transportation, housing itself)...
- ... but also of investment in human capital (health, education, values and preferences - “noncognitive skills”)
- People move in and out, and they usually have good reasons to do so
- No good solutions to this “endogeneity” problem
  - Implications for inequality measurement, migration decisions (Mincer (1978)), labour supply
- Martin’s contributions:
  - In-depth analysis of Agincourt DSS with Mark Collinson: transition dynamics
  - Aggregate trends in distribution of HH size with Nicola Branson, Amy Thornton
  - PhD students: Miracle Benhura (married women’s LFP), Grace Kumchulesi (marriage)

# Measurement and Data Quality Matter

- Survey data weights and reweighting existing surveys.
- Data quality concerns-
  - comparing DSS and survey data, tax and survey data, firm census and survey data.
- Substantive work on harmonising earnings in PSLSD/OHS/LFS/QLFS, which was included in PALMS
  - Two SAJE papers published in 2017 used this work to describe changes in wage inequality.
- Relevant for the foundations of what we know, critical for making **good** policy. Getting to the truth matters.

# Academic Apples do not fall far from the tree



Chat GPT's prediction of Martin's next advised thesis:

Chat GPT's prediction of Martin's next advised thesis:

*Economics Empowerment and Gender Equity: A Comparative Analysis of South African and Malawian Women's Labor Market Participation (2000-2020)*



Martin the Finisher...?

# Martin the Finisher...?

**Chat GPT response:** Thank you for providing the list of unpublished papers by Martin Wittenberg. To identify the next most likely paper to get published, it's important to consider factors like the relevance of the research topic, the potential impact, and the current academic and research landscape. Based on the information provided, one paper that stands out for its potential relevance and timeliness is:

# Martin the Finisher...?

*"Investigating inequality trends in Africa: ACEIR research and the WIID" (with Murray Leibbrandt), UNU-WIDER working paper 2023/102, 2023.*

This paper, which explores inequality trends in Africa, aligns with contemporary discussions around inequality, economic development, and social welfare, which are important and timely research topics. Additionally, collaborating with Murray Leibbrandt, a well-known economist, could enhance its visibility and impact.

# Martin the Finisher...?

As for the journal where this paper should be submitted, considering the economics research focus and the affiliation with UNU-WIDER, a reputable journal in the field of economics or development economics might be a suitable choice. Some potential journal options include:

**World Development:** This journal publishes research on economic development and could be a good fit for a paper investigating inequality trends in Africa.

**Journal of Economic Inequality:** Given the focus on inequality, this journal specifically addresses topics related to income distribution and inequality measurement.

**Journal of Development Economics:** This journal publishes research on various aspects of economic development, including inequality and labor market dynamics.

## Martin the Creator of Knowledge Public Goods

DataFirst is a research data service dedicated to giving open access to data from South Africa and other African countries. We promote high quality research by providing the essential Open Research Data infrastructure for discovering and accessing data and by developing skills among prospective users, particularly in South Africa. We undertake research on the quality and usability of national data and encourage data usage and data sharing.





# Martin the Teacher, Advisor, and Mentor

Miracle Benhura (Ntuli), Wits

Aylit Romm, Wits

Reza Daniels, UCT

Grace Kumchulesi, Malawi National  
Planning Commission

Richard Mussa (deceased), Univ. of  
Malawi

Obert Pimhidzai, The World Bank

Sean Muller, Johannesburg Institute for  
Advanced Study



Muna Shifa, UCT SALDRU

Adeola Oyenubi, Wits

Jacqueline Mosomi, UCT SALDRU

Amy Thornton, UCT SALDRU

Plus 6 in progress! And 17 Masters  
theses incl. Greg Lewis, Jesse Naidoo,  
Nicola Branson, Taryn Dinkelman,...



# PGDip in Survey Data Analysis for Development

- Martin has a desire to see survey data used and improved.
- In 2012 Francis Wilson and Statistics South Africa agreed on funding for a training programme.
- Martin developed this programme- a series of short courses and then the Post-Graduate Diploma in Survey Data Analysis for Development.
- 60 students graduated with a Post-Graduate Diploma
  - Most of these were Statistics South Africa employees.
  - An additional 300 people attended short courses.
- Martin lectured on 3 of the courses- Consumption and Micro Theory, Complex Surveys and Measuring Economic Welfare.

# What is it like to work with Martin?



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“Garbage in, garbage out”

“DESCRIPTIVES! DESCRIPTIVES!  
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“Do not conflate fancy methods with  
correct empirics-”

“That makes no sense!”

“It’s not clear to me that..”

“It’s not obvious to me that...”

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“DESCRIPTIVES! DESCRIPTIVES!  
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“Do not conflate fancy methods with  
correct empirics-”

“That makes no sense!”

“It’s not clear to me that...”

“It’s not obvious to me that...”

“Frankly, this is bullshit!”

“I don’t expect you to beat the data until it  
confesses...”

“...but what is the story?”

“There’s no money in theory!”

**Bloody everything:** “Bloody amazing, bloody  
ridiculous, bloody bizarre, bloody boring, bloody  
mind boggling”



# What is it like to work with Martin?

“Being precise all the way through to the end...having the humility, patience and tenacity to attend to any mistakes in the original and subsequent drafts, and faithfully describing what it is that you are actually doing and finding, versus what you think you may be doing and finding!”

# Looking forward

*“Inequality will be broken only if the next generation is better taught” – Martin Wittenberg (2017)*



## Looking forward

*“Inequality will be broken only if the next generation is better taught” – Martin Wittenberg (2017)*

You have had a key role in ensuring this happens.

We appreciate you, we love you, and we treasure you and the perspectives on social science that you have shared with us, and which will continue to guide us in our work. Thank you.