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Evidence, policy and politics: A commentary on Deaton and Cartwright

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**Evidence, Policy and Politics: A Commentary on Deaton and Cartwright**

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Once upon a time, “evidence” was widely confused with randomized controlled trials (RCTs). The latter were held to be the paragon of rigour, and other forms of evidence, though not necessarily dismissed, were certainly devalued. Whenever observation, experience, reasoning or even statistical analysis suggested one thing and some RCT another, there was a tendency to assume that the RCT got it right. If not with evidence *tout court*, RCTs became synonymous with “rigorous evidence” or “hard evidence”. The privileged status of RCTs was expressed in statements such as “all too often development policy is based on fads, and randomized evaluations could allow it to be based on evidence” (Duflo and Kremer 2005:206).

Today, the fever has come down and most economists would take a more nuanced view of what constitutes evidence. We also have a better understanding of the uses and misuses of RCTs. For this we owe a great deal to Angus Deaton and Nancy Cartwright, as well to many others who have contributed to the debate on both sides. In this wonderful paper, Deaton and Cartwright present a characteristically lucid and insightful assessment of the logic, power and limits of RCTs (Deaton and Cartwright, 2018).

As the authors argue, what ultimately matters is not just evidence (broadly defined) but understanding. That, it seems to me, is a far-reaching insight, because understanding can grow in many ways. Evidence certainly contributes to “the process of cumulative understanding”, as Cartwright and Deaton call it, but so do, say, personal experience and public debate. Even reading fiction can enhance our understanding of real-world matters – John Le Carré’s novels, for instance, are no less enlightening (and more fun to read!) than the best RCTs when it comes to political economy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For further thoughts on these matters, see Drèze (2017).

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