



When Theory Meets Politics

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“¿Viste? . . . el cuarto motor . . . ¿viste?”

[Did you see? . . . the fourth motor . . . did you see?]

The guy in the back of the car is gesticulating and laughing, but it is too late. I haven't seen it. But I want to. So we cut off the main road to circle back, to try to pass it again; we get lost in a maze of small streets, one-ways going the wrong way, and culs-de-sac. Finally we make it back on to the main road and drive by again, slowly this time, so that I, giving full rein to self-indulgence, can take photographs.

We are in Caracas, Venezuela. It is September 2007 and political contest is everywhere. What we had passed was a huge, red hoarding, one of many draping the city, arguing the case for the Bolivarian revolution and for the next steps to be taken to push it forward. On my way into the city, through the mountains from the narrow strip of coastal plain to which the airport clings, I'd already seen, slung across a whole block of flats, “Rumbo al Socialismo Bolivariano”, and everywhere were invocations of “Todo el poder al pueblo”. But there was also a more detailed, almost pedagogical, series of hoardings, spelling out “the five motors of the revolution”. Some listed all five; others proclaimed just one. And what we had just passed was a huge announcement for the fourth: “La Nueva Geometría del Poder”. The new power geometry. This is a concept I've been arguing for, and trying to work with for some years, and now here it is, in huge letters, and at the heart of one of the most radical of attempts to shift the balance of power, to re-imagine society, in a Latin America that is, once again, trying to re-invent itself and to refuse its supposed destiny of subordination to the imperium in the North. Clearly, this engagement as a “public intellectual” is going to be different from anything I've tried before.¹

There are many different ways of being a “public scholar”. I have been drawn into just a few, but each has demanded to be thought through in its own specific terms. Venturing beyond the confines of academe involves linking up with another assemblage of concerns, interests and aims,

in which your position has to be negotiated. What will be your role? What will be your voice? And what will be the degree and nature of the responsibility to which you commit yourself? These questions are in part pragmatic and practical; but they are also a matter, in themselves, of politics and political responsibility. They also complicate, and often challenge, the official discourses of “dissemination”, “application”, “relevance”, and “impact”.

Perhaps one of the simplest ways of putting a toe out beyond the door of the academy is addressing wider audiences. For me, this has included writing for, or working on the editorial boards of, a range of political magazines (*Marxism Today*, *Capital and Class*, *New Left Review* among others), doing talks or lectures or discussions in non-academic settings, and contributing to radio and television. It can include proseletysing for “geography” (the importance of the spatial, for instance), or contributing to political debates; even teaching sometimes, because I work at the Open University—a university dedicated to popular education, for which there are no entry qualifications—can have this flavour too. That ideas are not just “academic”, where academic becomes synonymous with irrelevant (“oh that’s just academic”) but part of the medium in which we live, that they should be shared and more widely shared. Popular education as a component of democracy.

At one level, this kind of engagement can be seen simply as “getting our message across” and in the UK, in the guise of “dissemination”, it has been incorporated into the standard practices of evaluation of academic work. In forms to apply for, or report on, research you will be enjoined to say, in a little box, how your work is “relevant”, and to which constituencies. It is part of a wider effort to make universities “useful” and has its own double-edgedness. Originally, “they” had in mind, as the recipients of our relevance, the makers of public policy and the entrepreneurs of the business world. Later (I write of the UK) they learned from the grumblings and recalcitrances of (I suspect mainly) social scientists, and this “audience” was broadened (voluntary agencies, trades unions). It is interesting to see how far this can be pushed—to cite, for instance, some group in the World Social Forum as the primary beneficiary of one’s “relevance”.

The implicit geography behind much of this form of public engagement is that the communication is one way. The term “dissemination” makes that clear; it mirrors those projects for “the public understanding of science”. The assumed positioning is evident, there is no need for negotiation: we tell them. And yet it can be (should be?) almost always also more than that. The question from an unexpected angle, that long discussion you had afterwards. The thoughts you carried home. This is perhaps especially true because for me being a “public intellectual” has often meant specifically political engagement. (I don’t think it *has* to, but it is so for me.) Moreover political commitment raises other questions of

self-positioning and responsibility, and yet more awkward intersections with the language of academic governance.

As well as “disseminating”, UK academics are also required to demonstrate how our work can be “applied” and what “impact” it has had.² Again the implication is of a simple, unproblematic, and one-way, relation.

One means of having influence in the political field is through direct policy engagement. I have tried this in various ways, with different degrees of satisfaction and success. I was, just to give one example, for much of the 1970s an “expert” on a Labour Party policy committee. There were two crucial things to be negotiated here. First, politically speaking, I came from a different planet, and thus much thought and care had to go into developing a voice that might at least have some traction in the discussion. However, apart from the problem of political position, there was also a “culture” to negotiate. This group was by no means the worst I’ve come across, but what it seemed to want most from its participants was gravitas, not to say portentousness. Apart from my gut resistance to this in any case, it is difficult to exude gravitas when you’re 5 ft 1 and the committee room table comes up to your chin, when you’re blond, and a GIRL, who is not even wearing a suit. Throughout my intermittent attempts to engage with “the establishment” of this country I have been left in no doubt that your ideas are evaluated through a filter, unacknowledged and often unintended, of expectation of a particular kind of embodiment. You can play the required female game and smile a lot, or you can adopt a deportment that says you take yourself very, very seriously. There is a self-importance that brings out in me an overwhelming desire to prick it. It is itself a form of class and gender war.

But the issue of politics is paramount. How could any of us from even the broadest of broad lefts expect to have any policy “impact” on the rampaging Thatcher government? The very *possibility* of “impact” is two way. And although there is sometimes an implicit supposition that our advice will be “technical” (ie politically neutral), it is of course rarely so, nor expected—actually—to be so. Even in the era when New Labour was rabbitting on about evidence-led policy, they frequently rejected evidence that went against their already-held positions. Or they framed questions you couldn’t possibly answer because you didn’t see the world that way in the first place.

But there are other ways, more and less direct, of engaging with policy and politics. The more direct way is to engage in the policy-making process itself, when a political situation arises where this is possible: when you get the chance to engage with a “government” that is actually working for the kind of world you might want to live in. In the 1980s I was a member of the Board of the Greater London Enterprise Board, the economic policy arm of the left-wing Greater

London Council (GLC). It is salutary, and politically important I think, not always to be in a position of critic (I think of all the easy, anti-State stuff, and sniping from “the margins”—which academics rarely inhabit—that litters much theoretical and “critical” writing); to be forced to be constructive and to take a different kind of responsibility (including responsibility for compromises). This kind of engagement, in the immediacy and implacable reality of a decision-making process, proved to me beyond doubt that the notion of “applied work” is in these situations utterly inadequate. The notion of “application” presumes a classic linear model: first you do the theory, have the ideas, then you go out and inflict them upon the world. No way. Some of the moments most disruptive to my existing way of thinking have been in precisely such engagements; and that provocation to reconceptualise has continued through the subsequent decades of my involvement with London politics (Massey 2007).

The “less direct” way of engaging politically as an academic has been through active participation in struggles and campaigns and through contributing to wider debate in civil society. In 1995, Michael Rustin, Stuart Hall and I founded a magazine: *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*.³ It sprang from our frustration at the vacuity of political debate. This was the fag-end of the Thatcher/Major era; it was plain that the Conservatives were going to lose office; it was also plain that there needed to be debate about what would succeed them. *Soundings* is not “academic” (at one point we thought of jokily subtitling it “a non-refereed journal”), but it is somehow no accident that the three founders work in universities and that a high proportion of its contributors do so too. As well as the journal, the project involves seminars, networks, conferences. Communication is certainly not one way.

Moreover in these meetings—I’m thinking, for instance, of a heated discussion one Saturday afternoon about whether Brown would be any better than Blair, and how, if at all, one should engage—I’m not there as a “public scholar” but as a politically engaged person who happens to (have the luck to) work in a university. For me, in the UK in a context where the change you want to work towards is so much more radical than currently hegemonic agendas, it has been this longer haul, of trying to shift debate, to change its terms, rather than some immediate effect on policy, that has been the most honest and sympathetic.

Being involved in ongoing political struggles means, each time, re-negotiating the nature of one’s involvement and responsibility. This I have found to be particularly acute in engagements outside my own country. Two brief examples.

After the release of Mandela, in the early years of ANC government, I was invited to participate in debates about what should be the regional organisation of South Africa. This opportunity meant linking in to a history in which I had not been part, into a geography of struggles in

which I was clearly not “expert”, into debates where particular words could let loose bounding chains of connotations that I could not know about, and a situation where I was white and from “the West”. What role can you play? Many have written about this (Spivak is one obvious contributor) and there is no space here for a serious discussion. (In a comradesly and welcoming group in the new South Africa I worked out something around being able to use my own experience to ask questions, even awkward ones, within an assumption of political solidarity.) The only point I want to make here is that this thinking about, and negotiation of, one’s positioning is the toughest part of the whole thing.

And so again in Caracas the same questions arise as to how to respond to the invitation: questions of voice and stance and role. I am to do lectures, television stuff, public political meetings . . . (And in a Spanish learned for 1980s Nicaragua, with the Sandinistas in government and Reagan’s Contra waging war; while back home Thatcher was preparing to abolish the GLC. How things come round.) But here in Venezuela there are more complexities. This concept (of “mine”) has travelled, been adopted by Chávez. It’s being used in a particular way. What responsibilities does one have in a situation like this? Whose concept is it now? The best, minimalist, way may be not to insist on anything, but to aim to enrich discussion through elaboration (“what I was trying to get at when I came up with this idea . . .”; “the way I’ve tried to use it . . .”; “the kind of thing it can be used for in the UK . . .”). Yet inexorably one becomes part of the politics of this place (“well I think it needs to be used in the economic as well as the political sphere . . .”; “you have to look here at the balance between centralisation and popular power . . .”). One of the many impressive aspects of the Bolivarian revolution is its active and explicit use of “ideas”. Chávez on television and in meetings reads passages from “academic” tomes, and then meditates on them, live, trying to draw out thoughts that might be relevant to building “a socialism for the 21st century”. The works of Hardt and Negri, and of Laclau, amongst many others, are drawn on extensively. The concept of multitude resonates strongly in a country long ruled by an oligarchy separated by a chasm of wealth, power, and the self-enclosures of mutual ignorance, from the mass of the impoverished. The concept of hegemony and a reformulation in that light of the notion of populism helps think through a conjuncture in which the legitimacy of the formal state apparatus has pretty much collapsed. It is utterly invigorating to be in a situation where ideas really matter. But also one where they are not simply taken as “truth”. Concepts are drawn on and reworked in the complexity of the actual situation. This is part of that long Latin American endeavour of developing a voice of its own. The different theories/concepts anyway interrupt each other. (I am engaged in a demanding debate about how to (indeed can you?) work with Negri and Laclau together.) I am totally at one with this; it is after all an argument

about geographical specificity. It means you “let go” of “your” concept (power geometry, say) at the same time as trying to insert into the debate the aspects that, you think, for now, provisionally, might be essential. (I have to stop myself falling again into anger at the CV-enhancing stuff that sometimes passes for theoretical engagement back home, so often written of as “risky” even “dangerous”, before the authors return to their oh-so-conventional lives.) Sometimes you’re running after the concept, trying to keep up, and learning. I am told that on the streets in some parts of Caracas there is talk of “la geometría del poder *popular*”. There are other ways too, but for me this, along with the hard and lengthy reflection and rumination that come afterwards, is how “theory” develops; and this is how it can matter.

Endnotes

¹ The motors concern (i) enabling legislation, (ii) constitutional reform, (iii) education, (iv) a new power geometry (political territorialisation), (v) development of popular power.

² “Applied” work is imagined as distinct from theoretical and has, in this age in which we are enjoined to be useful, become more fashionable at least in the formal criteria for evaluation—closely, in the private imaginations of many, it still carries less esteem. “Impact” may be within or beyond the academy.

³ <http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings>

Reference

Massey D (2007) *World City*. Cambridge: Polity

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