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Inequality, Higher Education and Knowledge Democracy

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In the city where I live, Victoria, Canada, a wealthy city in a wealthy country, there are 1500 women and men (in a population of 250,000) who do not have a place to sleep at night. In spite of the creation of the Coalition Against Homelessness, the numbers of people who suffer from poor health, violence, substance abuse as a result of poverty and homelessness continues at about the same level.

In India one of the fastest growing economies in the world, 600 million people live without literacy, adequate water and sanitation, poor health facilities and insecure food security.

Indigenous people in North and South America, Africa and Asia have dramatically lower life expectancy and higher levels of health difficulties than the non-indigenous members of their communities. Their languages are disappearing daily and with the languages, extraordinary parts of our human knowledge base and culture.

Climate change is having a more dramatic impact on the poor and marginalized persons in all our communities; one only has to look at the earthquake in Haiti or the floods in Pakistan to see how natural disasters impact the poor.

Concerns with the protection of the wealthy from risk, the protection of access to non-renewable resources and water occupy the minds of vast numbers of the world's inhabitants and a dramatically disproportionate level of government budgets.

The neo-liberal global economic machine produces wealth in historically unheard of quantities but exacerbates the gap between the rich and the poor both within nations and amongst nations.

These situations exist in spite of bodies of recent quality research on the impacts of inequality in our lives at both local and global levels. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's exhaustive study of inequality and its impacts around the world is but one the many technically competent and evidence-based studies which illustrate what many of us see in our work in communities on a day-to-day basis. According to Wilkinson and Pickett, on almost every index of quality of life, or wellness, or deprivation, there is a strong correlation between a country's level of economic inequality and its social outcomes. Almost always, Japan and the Scandinavian countries are at the favourable "low" end, and almost always, the UK, the US and Portugal is at the unfavourable "high" end, with Canada, Australasia and continental European countries in between. What is so powerful in their research is evidence that both the rich and the poor fare better in societies with less inequality. And this is true whether one speaks of mortality and morbidity, educational outcomes, mental health, obesity, violence, or the status of minorities. (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009)

It is the unequal world however that we live in. It is a world where greed continues to be celebrated and economic growth stubbornly put forward time and time again. This is the world that our work as researchers, as teachers, as activists, as scholars

and intellectuals, as Higher Education administrators must address. Gandhiji used a Sanskrit word in his teachings to say that we must measure the success of our work in terms of how it serves 'Antyodaya', the last person. This is the challenge of our generation.

A Knowledge Democracy Movement?

John Gaventa, a theoretician on power and citizenship, a pioneering participatory research leader, Chair of Oxfam UK and Senior Scholar at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex was the first person in my experience to speak of social movements using a 'knowledge strategy' as their core political organising strategy. (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008) His early work at Highlander Research and Education Centre in Appalachian Mountain region of the United States involved among other things the support of citizen researchers to go to local courthouses to find out the ownership of local coalmines. Absentee landlords owned all of the mines in question from as far away as New York or London. And while profits were good, taxes were very low for these absentee landlords so that resources were not sufficient to cover the costs of good schools, health services or other social services to allow the mine workers and their families to flourish. These citizen researchers using what John called a "knowledge strategy" for organizing, pooled their knowledge across six or seven Appalachian states and produced an important study on mine ownership, which had an impact on changing tax structures in some of the states in question. Highlander and Gaventa were later to move into a campaign for environmental justice using many of the same principles (Cable and Benson, 1993)

Gaventa's linking of knowledge with the organizing of a people's movement was similar to what the late Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere of Tanzania used to say and what we learned from Paulo Freire as well. Nyerere said, "Poor people do not use money for a weapon". He was speaking of a way of thinking about development and community and betterment, to the building of a national movement in his country that did not depend on external financial investment. Nyerere said poor people needed to use 'ideas and leadership'. Freire, the spiritual guide for this journal, and someone with whom I also worked and was influenced by, articulated a faith in the embedded knowledge of people who are living lives of poverty, exclusion, oppression, disadvantage and more. His central theme was that the ability to understand and articulate the experience of lives of struggle was not only possible, but was a necessary condition for organizing and transformation. He did not speak of a knowledge movement per se, but his poetic illuminations of the role of dialogue and learning based in the daily-lived experiences of people looking for more, gave us tools and approaches to support a knowledge movement.

How can we understand a concept like a ‘knowledge democracy movement’? First I am working on an assumption that social movements remain at the heart of local and global change; that they are critically important sources of power to shift the way that people imagine various relations of power. With that argument I am building on the very long tradition of learning and social movement theory and practice including much that I have written about in earlier forms (Hall, 2009). I am not referring to engaged scholarship or HE and community engagement itself as a movement, although there are movement

elements to the ways in which community university partnerships are expanding. I am also not thinking of the access to knowledge movement on its own either (Ostrom and Hess, 2006; Joranson, 2007). I am also not using other words to speak about the 'knowledge economy'. The knowledge economy specifically links knowledge production of certain types and skill development in certain ranges of skill development to global capitalist production and distribution mediated often through the digital technologies.

A knowledge democracy movement or a movement that uses knowledge as a key mobilising and organising strategy is centred within the lives and places of those who are seeking recognition of their rights, their land claims, access to jobs, ecological justice, recovery or retention of their languages. Knowledge itself within such a movement formation is most likely place-based and rooted in the daily lives of people who increase their knowledge of their own contexts and by sharing what they are learning with allies and others like themselves move, as Paulo Freire says, towards being agents in the naming of the world. The proliferation of discourse and practices within the world of community-university knowledge partnerships, in this conceptualisation, would be contributors to the broader knowledge movement. The extensive and important access to information developments would also be supportive of and a contributor towards a variety of knowledge movements, but neither the access to information developments nor the community-university engagement advancements form a global knowledge movement by themselves, but would be part of the necessary conditions for knowledge movements to gain footholds and flourish.

A central question we should ask ourselves is how can our work in promoting the co-creation of knowledge and community-university research partnership contribute to the strengthening of local or global knowledge democracy?

References