

African Studies, the Formation of Knowledge and Political Commitment.

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As an adult educator in the midst of African scholars of varying disciplines, I feel inclined towards caution. I feel somewhat like an earlier adult educator who was working in Africa.

As part of a campaign against malaria, the Ministry of Health asked a Canadian adult educator to join a team in visits to the villages to explain the dangers of malaria and the importance of killing mosquitoes. After half an hour in the first village, the team didn't seem to be getting anywhere. Direct lectures didn't seem to be doing the trick ... the people were not as yet concerned.

The adult educator diagnosed the situation and prescribed some visual materials. He worked in the evening on a drawing of a mosquito, one sufficiently large to be seen from the back of the group during lectures.

The next day, the adult educator displayed his carefully drawn four-foot drawing of a mosquito to the assembled villagers. Immediately, there were looks of concern and a murmuring was heard. One of the villagers stood and spoke:

"Now we understand the seriousness of your problems. While our own mosquitoes are quite small and harmless, the mosquitoes of Canada are large and dangerous indeed."

My hope this evening is that our metaphorical mosquitoes are close enough in size to allow for adequate communication.

When I was first asked to talk with this important group, I was puzzled. What theme could I or should I as an educator, specifically an adult educator, refer to? I have chosen to draw my comments from some of the dialogue and activity which is now current in my field.

I would like to focus on two questions:

1. What is our role as scholars of Africa within the Canadian political economic reality?
2. What are the implications of a commitment to oppressed peoples for the methods and style of our research?

Turning to the first question:

In the specific contexts of the African struggle, the paths have always seemed more clear. During the early struggle in Guinea-Bissau, Amilcar Cabral described the role of the bourgeois intellectual as follows:

" In order not to betray the objectives of liberation the petty bourgeoisie has only one choice: to strengthen its revolutionary consciousness, to reject the temptation of becoming more bourgeois and the natural concerns of its class mentality, to identify itself with the working classes and not to oppose the normal developments of the process of revolution. This means that in order to fulfill the role in the national liberation struggle, the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie must be capable of committing suicide as a class in order to be reborn as revolutionary workers, completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people to which they belong."

Translating this into actions and activities which are possible and strategic within the Canadian context where the contradictions are not so sharply defined is more difficult. And as President Nyerere has noted earlier, "One cannot say that the educated are responsible for a smaller share of the miseries of mankind than the uneducated. History has not proved that."

The scope and practice of African studies in Canada has changed a great deal over the past years. We have seen shifts in emphasis and concern. Our earliest work was little more than elaboration of the diaries of Canadians who served in the British Colonial Service. It was not so long ago that the task

of African scholars was one of proving to the world that Africa in fact did have a history and an experience in complex political structures, and was not discovered by the Portuguese or Mongo Park. The field shifted again somewhat, influenced in part by the work of the "Dar es Salaam" school towards a study of society from the African point of view. This is of course still a most important and active approach.

The realities of post-independent neo-colonialism also suggested that the theories of underdevelopment and dependency which were first articulated in Latin America had a power of explanation which went beyond previous efforts. The work of Samir Amin and Colin Leys comes most quickly to mind. Now there is a sense among some, Colin Leys for one, that the dependency school is stagnating ... that a more powerful analysis is needed.

What has our history of involvement and scholarship shown us?

Where do we turn? On which paths do we continue? If we have learned one thing, it is that we can no longer see the world in compartments... Ivory Coast, Canada, Britain, Botswana, Cuba, Angola ... as though there were one kind of analysis for one group of people and another kind for others. The recognition that Canada and Canadian finance is an active agent in maintaining existing international economic relationships indicates that we have a very important role to play, and that our role is an educational and a political or activist role -- some would say a political educational goal.

Mari Evans, a black American poet, when asked the role of the black scholar in liberation, wrote the following:

Speak the truth to the people  
To identify the enemy is to free the mind  
Free the mind of the people  
Speak to the mind of the people  
Speak truth.

We have a great many examples in Canada of committed scholars playing an educational role. While there are examples from all parts of Canada, I have

drawn from those I know most closely in Ontario.

The Toronto Committee for the Liberation of Southern Africa (TCLSAC) was initiated and supported by John Saul, Jonathan Barker, and others as a means of doing educational work with both the public at large and within the schools. TCLSAC has continued to produce an analysis of African events in a format and language which is accessible to many people.

Gatt-Fly has been concerned during the past years with the educational and research tasks of analysing trade, tariff and international market data to Canadians and with providing a critique of Canadian trade policies.

The Development Education Centre has worked closely with teachers and the public to produce slides, books, teaching kits and other educational materials from a critical perspective.

On a different level, Cran Pratt, Gerry Helleiner and others have been instrumental in the development of the North-South Institute which is undertaking studies which are intended to influence Canadian foreign policy and be used in public education.

I do not of course mean to disregard the excellent work that many persons have been engaged in through CIDA, SUCO, World University Service and CIDA. This is clearly a role which will continue to be played by many of us.

It is worth noting that in the experience of many of these organizations, and indeed in many of us, an interest in Africa has often returned to Canada for action. Analysis of underdevelopment in Africa has had implications for the study of underdevelopment within Canada and regarding Canada vis-a-vis the United States. The work of TCLSAC for example was once focused more exclusively on the analysis of African events for Canadians. It has moved into active analysis of Canadian economic support for Southern Africa and has been a leader in the campaign against the banks which have investments in South Africa. Similarly, the Development Education Centre which was set up to discuss issues of Third World development has found itself, through the strength of its analysis,

heavily involved in the study of the role of INCO in Canada. Gatt-Fly, similarly, works very closely with the People's Food Commission, a national forum of working people for the analysis of trade issues.

Clearly we need to be doing more work like this. We need to reach the schools, the libraries, the newspapers, and the radio stations with our questions. We need to push for credit within our academic structures for making the educational contributions which are necessary. But we have to work with some humility. Okot p'Bitek has given us a mirror through Lawino, the wife of the educated Ocol in his poem, The Song of Lawino:

"My husband  
has read at Makerere University  
He has read deeply and wisely  
but if you ask him a question  
he says  
You are insulting him  
He opens up with a quarrel  
He begins to look down upon you  
saying  
You ask questions  
That are a waste of time!"

Clearly it is easier for us to talk amongst ourselves. All of us, myself included, revel in it. The conferences, symposia and workshops of the world can absorb our time without mercy. We need to constantly ask ourselves the question of with whom do we work? How do we as scholars show our commitment to not only the working peoples of Africa, but the working peoples of Canada as well. Should we not seek out, painful though it may be to each party, ways of relating better to working people throughout organized labour. We need to talk much more about these ideas.

I would like to turn now to my second question: What are the implications of a commitment to oppressed peoples for the methods and style of our research?

Again, you will see that much of the tone of my discussion comes from a concern with broad based educational engagement.

I would like to begin this section with a statement from Gramsci. In a discussion about the creation of knowledge, he said:

"That a mass of men be led to think about their immediate reality in a united and coherent way is more important and original "philosophical fact" than the discovery by a 'genius' of a new truth which remains the patrimony of a small group of intellectuals".

The question must be raised of what it is that shapes our present approaches and styles of research or knowledge creation.

The production of knowledge throughout the world has become big business. Evidence of this can be found in the size and structure of the university and research establishments that we deal with. As early as 1962, estimates in the United States were that 28.7 percent of the current GNP was concerned with the production or dissemination of knowledge.

What is important about these observations is that if the production of knowledge has become a business, then knowledge itself has to some extent become a commodity. Commodities, as products for exchange, are directly subject to the influences of the market economy. This implies that the type of knowledge created by and large is determined by the material social relations.

John Horton, in discussing sociology as a focus of social scientific knowledge production, has described the situation as follows:

"A reifying scientific consciousness expressed the commodity organization of scientific labour. Sociologists have escaped neither the commodity market nor commodity thinking...Like other workers in a capitalist society, intellectuals survive by producing commodities for exchange" (Horton 1971:175).

That there is a form of commodity production is clear. As individual academics, our ideas are "packaged" in the form of papers, books, journals, articles, reports which are exchanged directly or indirectly through seminars, international conferences, and symposia. Departments within Universities are

developed and supported by "selling" their services to the state or to industry. Within the many industrialized capitalist states, African Studies as a specialization have come about directly through the initiative and support of national governments which have a need for a knowledge base about Africa. The "Institution-Building" grants of the United States Agency for International Development, grants by the Ministry of Overseas Development in The United Kingdom to institutions such as the Institute for Development Studies, and at least partial support for various university departments through CIDA in Canada, are examples of how the economic need stimulates production.

In an earlier paper, I have characterized the situation as follows:

"In the narrowest sense, researchers gather or "mine" ideas and information in order to survive and advance economically. Priorities are given to collecting data in a central point, summarizing it and than packaging it in such a way that it can be marketed. The need to serve policy makers is also recognized by some as an additional market (usually the best funded projects). The need to serve the people from whom the information has been gathered (the unemployed, urban immigrants, poor farmers, etc.) is indirect and by necessity of low priority. These groups will not buy the results (and perhaps didn't want the research in the first place)."

But is knowledge strictly speaking a commodity? Are intellectuals workers in the academic form of a capitalist mode of production?

Martin Shaw has argued that the products of the knowledge industry are in fact "pseudo-commodities". He argues that the price of the articles exchanged, the books and articles, etc., are not as important as the act of publication itself. Most academic are content to have articles published with no direct payment at all. The role which knowledge production plays has much more to do with the career structure within the academic world. Nicholaus describes the social science picture in the following way:

"In the post-war era, the road to prominence, hence office within the profession has been paved with research publication. Once he obtains financing for a research venture, the sociologist builds up, through publication, his professional reputation. This form of capital is then convertible into academic promotion, which yields better access to more research funds, permitting further publication and so on up, until, as supervisor of graduate students, the successful sociological entrepreneur is in a position to start and manage younger persons on the same spiral."

While Shaw is correct about the pseudo-commodity relationship of the products of individual academics, the viewpoint of knowledge as a commodity can be seen in its direct sense in the form of consultancies either done on an individual basis or by university departments or specialized agencies. Large groups of consultants operate in Europe and North America as well as within the international sphere. Consultants do not aspire to political or academic independence. They respond to the direct needs of the state or private industry. Their commodities are clear and obvious. And while there is not time enough at this juncture to expand this issue, it is quite evident that within both the national and international spheres the influence and power of these firms is substantial.

If one carries the analysis of knowledge as a commodity production further, the parallels with general commodity production are more clear. Two of the characteristics of commodity production are: the creation of uneven development, and the facilitation of capitalist penetration and dependency.

To what extent is there an uneven development of knowledge production within the international sphere or even amongst the universities within Canada? Is there not a tendency for the large or already important universities to attract more funds for research by virtue of their reputations? Nearly all the books used in sociology courses in African Universities are written in the U.S., Britain, France or sometimes Canada. The sheer volume of knowledge production is absurdly

tipped in the direction of those nations which dominate the international economic markets. Cultural dependency and cultural imperialism result directly from the uneven development characteristic of other forms of capitalist development. This extends as we will see later, into the questions of legitimating research and research methods.

To extend our discussion somewhat further, we might ask to what extent has the production of knowledge become a monopoly?

That we have made some progress is clear, but we would do well to pay some attention to a poem attributed to the former Master of Balloil College:

Here I stand, my name is Jowett.  
There's no knowledge but I know it.  
I am the Master of this college  
And what I don't know isn't knowledge.

Have we created a structure for the production of knowledge which has nearly ensured that it is impossible for a farmer living in a village in Senegal to contribute to the world's store of information? The standard for research that is put forth by the various influential academic societies and intellectuals has been shaped necessarily by the needs which the state has for research. We have created a set of requirements in terms of techniques and style which require years of specialized training, most likely a Ph.D., to achieve. In practice, this has resulted in a situation where a few persons of bourgeois class positions are working on the theoretical and practical academic discussions - are creating knowledge - about the entire univers of people and problems.

What is important to recognize is some people's common sense becomes recognized as philosophy and other poeple's does not. Gramsci has suggested that "All men are intellectuals ... but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals." He goes on to describe two groups of intellectuals. In the first place, there are "traditional" intellectuals, the scholars, scientists and so forth, who although seemingly detached from class positions, nevertheless are

the result of specific historical class formations. Secondly, there are the "organic" intellectuals, or in our terms as persons capable of creating knowledge, but are the union leaders, community organizers, and farm organizers. Gramsci goes on to point out that the working class is capable of producing its own intellectuals of both types, and that one function of committed academics would be to foster the recognition of workers' rights to create philosophy.

Agostino Neto wrote a poem related to these themes in 1948:

There he goes  
 the man  
 with downcast eyes.  
 His back seen through his torn shirt  
 bearing a heavy burden  
 of ignorance and fear.  
 He does not cry out his longings  
 lest he perturb a world  
 which dazzles him  
 with a false glitter of its fake gold.

Yet  
 He was already a gentleman  
 he was a sage  
 before the law of Kepler  
 He was fearless  
 before combustion engines.  
 This same man  
 this misery...  
 It is for his days of glory  
 that I yearn.

We have come dangerously close to creating a situation in the social sciences which effectively denies recognition of the knowledge-creating abilities in most of the people of the world. Modes of indigenous education in Africa which have provided structural frameworks and interpretations of the world are missing from what we represent as a universal body of knowledge. What are the implications for example, of the fact that peoples of southern Venezuela have a precision in naming the types and colours of grass that grow there which is beyond the scope of English or Spanish? What is the importance of the fact that the vocabulary for ants found in Hausa in Northern Nigeria is far richer than any European language or that the Maasai have concepts for cattle exchange relationships and

physical types that even the Texans can't match?

We have already touched somewhat on the role of research in the context of the state, but it bears further discussion if we are to get a firmer grasp of the directions we might look for alternatives. C. Wright Mills has noted that "Increasingly, research is used and social scientists are used for bureaucratic and ideological purposes."

There is, to being with, the quite basic need of hierarchically oriented administrators and policy makers to gather information from those who do not make decisions in order to make decisions for them. This operates at both the national level as government ministries go about the task of attempting to "solve" various problems of inequity and distribution and at international levels as outside organizations or inter-governmental agencies carry out a similar role. As Shaw noted:

"Information is not only collected on every conceivable kind of social activity; it is also tabulated and what is more important, interpreted in an enormous range of private and published documents for the purposes of informing and guiding the decisions of those who control in our society."

In spite of the tendency of capitalism to play down the nature of class relations and to represent them in abstract terms, there is a need for the system to understand the human social reality of the worker. But, says Shaw, "It needs to do this in a way which helps to maintain its social relations of production, not one which calls them into question."

Another way which research may be serving as an instrument of social control is through (what at first seems a contradiction) offering a safety valve for dissenters and radicals to vent their concerns. It occupies the time of some in the production of paper rather than of power. This can be seen in many universities which now have groups of Marxist scholars who are completely occupied with the production and counter-production of papers for the sole consumption of the academic world.

The use of research as a legitimizing tool is all too common to us. Government departments which need to make decisions, can hire several researchers to study alternative futures, one of which is bound to contain the decision which has to be made. The field of evaluation is especially vulnerable to the plights of government programmes that have to find some way to show that they have been worth the worker's surplusses. In short, the research backs up the decisions which have to be made or given a set of specific constraints from the start, identifies the range of acceptable solutions.

Marx's explanation of how the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas are quite helpful in this regard:

"The division of labour...manifests itself also in the ruling class, as the division of mental and material labour, so that within this class one part appears as the thinkers of the class (its active conceptualizing ideologists, who make it their chief source of livelihood to develop and perfect the illusions of the class about itself) while the others have a more passive and receptive attitude to these ideas and illusions because they are in reality the active ones and have less time to make up ideas about themselves. This cleavage within the ruling class may even develop into a certain opposition and hostility between the two parts, but in the event of a collision in which the class itself is endangered, it disappears of its own accord and with it also the illusion that the ruling ideas were not the ideas of the ruling class and had a power distinct from the power of this class. The existence of revolutionary ideas in a particular age presupposes the existence of a revolutionary class."

The tactical question which must be raised at this point is to what extent do universities or research institutions allow for some "free space" in a political sense? Does the acceptance of a political economic interpretation of research and universities imply a situation of impotence, fatalism or some other form of inaction? There are a great many committed academics who do not agree.

Cabral and Freire speak of committing "class suicide", of dying as a member of the bourgeoisie and aligning oneself with the working class. Mao-Tse-Tung spoke of the concept of "redness" and "expertness", the implications being that one could be both politically committed and specialized in an area of work.

There are a number of activist research approaches which are being tried by persons concerned with tying their production of knowledge more closely to the concerns of working people in both Africa and Canada. These approaches are characterized by their engagement in specific political contexts and struggles. They are concerned with either or both of two objectives: first, putting clear and truthful analysis into the hands of those engaged in an active struggle, in a language which is understood by working people; the second objective is stimulation of a situation in which the analysis is actually carried out by the persons who are faced with the struggle themselves. This latter objective is shared in the work of Freire and others in Guinea-Bissau, Kassam in Tanzania, and Mirie in Kenya, the purpose being to stimulate a collective investigation process which has as its goal profound social transformation. Variations of this approach to research are known as militant research, activist research, participatory research, and action research. The approach is by no means limited to work in Africa, but is still another example of contributions which have been made by third world researchers.

The villagers of Kamirithu in Kenya last year engaged in a joint research process about the socio-economic context of their village. Their analysis of a town which incidentally contained a Bata shoe factory, served as the basis for literacy classes which in turn produced 40-50 new literates. In addition, the work served as the basis for a drama about the village and life in modern Kenya. There was no theatre, so the villagers built one to house 2,000 people. When the play was staged, over 30,000 people came to see it. After a brief run, the license was withdrawn and one of the persons involved in writing the play was jailed. The village, however, continues to work on a new play.

In Tanzania, the people from the village of Bwakira Chini near Morogoro were engaged in a process of research and discussion around the provision of adequate grain storage facilities. Instead of coming into the village with a plan for grain silos already made, the assumption was made that the villagers had the necessary skills for constructing the necessary storage, if their own expertise and knowledge were tapped. After a process of dialogue and discussion lasting several weeks, the village committee produced a design for a modified version of what they had been using for years that was both feasible and efficient from a disease and insect preventing viewpoint. As icing on the cake, they gave a lecture to the Faculty of Agriculture on lessons learned in crop storage and silo construction. They had become experts in their own eyes and the eyes of others, experts with control of their own lives.

I opened these comments on a light note but I would like to close on a serious one.

It may not be enough for us to function as isolated academics associating occasionally in meetings such as this one. In times such as these, it may be very difficult to work in an active fashion. As jobs grow more scarce, African studies may seem like something of a frill. Politically active African scholars will be seen as still more expendable. My question is - Have we done enough organizing amongst ourselves? How are we facing the days of retrenchment and cutbacks ahead?

Those of us who work in non-governmental sectors, the "Charitable Organizations", have additional causes for concern. The guidelines given out by Revenue Canada in February indicated that charitable organizations were not to become engaged in political activities. Their definition of political activities included any attempts to influence government policy in any way, other than by a government brief. If these guidelines were to be applied, few organizations in Canada would

meet these criteria. From the Catholic Church's stand on abortion to the Greenpeace's campaign for baby seals, the reason we are organized and associated is to support or protect ideas which we hold as important and which are not being dealt with adequately at a government level.

I hope that all of you will give some serious thought to these important questions. Thank you.