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On Being Disengaged

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Introduction

This paper is about routine oppression and neglect and my own involvement, and lack of involvement, in issues of social injustice both inside and outside the academy. My comments are self-critical, which might appear self-evidently desirable but it is a posture which could lead to self-indulgence. I also reflect on my own work in a chronological fashion so nostalgia, particularly for the seemingly unproblematic radicalism of the 1970s, might also affect my observations. Towards the end of the essay, putting my own story into context, I will try to make some generalizations about the production of knowledge in relation to both theory and practice, drawing particularly on some recent psychoanalytic work on the structure and organisation of institutions.

Practice

About eighteen months ago in Hull, I was walking past a Kwiksave supermarket, when I met a Gypsy family who I had not visited for years, since I had stopped the regular contacts which were a feature of my 'research project'. We recognised each other from a distance and I immediately felt awkward about the encounter. I shook hands with the woman and this increased my discomfort. Somehow, I had forgotten that any form of bodily contact between adults is avoided. The woman's husband had suffered a stroke and was in a wheelchair pushed by her daughter. He was unable to talk and, since we had once been close friends, I promised to visit them on their site within a week. On leaving the family, I had further negative thoughts. If I visited them, I would be obliged to visit most of the other families on the site, about twenty-five in total. Then, families on the other main Traveller site in the city would inevitably hear about my visit and I would have to visit them too. So, I thought that I would be letting myself in for at least two full days of

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visiting and the promise of further trips to the two sites when I was busy with other things at work. I was unenthusiastic.

I need not have worried because, when I went to see disabled Jimmy and his family, I found that nearly everyone on the site who I had previously known was dead. A number of these deaths were unsurprising since some of my former contacts were old, but it seemed that far too many survived only until their forties or fifties. When I first had contact with Gypsies in east Yorkshire, in the 1970s, death was also a frequent event, but then it was primarily babies and young children dying from gastroenteritis and other illnesses associated with poor sanitation and a lack of access to doctors and medical services. Now, if I were investigating the problem of apparently higher than average mortality, I would be looking at diet, problems of immobility, obesity and a high occurrence of diabetes, and the heavily polluted nature of the local environment which has been the living space of this group of Gypsies for the last twenty five years.

The Gypsies on this site were forced into a location which the city council had deemed unfit for residential use because of the proximity of heavy industry (it was a choice of moving onto the site or facing continuing prosecution for illegal occupation of land) but their presence in the city is no longer an issue for the local press, neither their treatment as a pariah group or their deprivation. Ironically, in February, 2003, a city council free newspaper ran a feature on the woman in my story and her sister, focusing on the ornate interior of her best caravan (her 'show trailer') with no reference to the conditions on the site. As the object of moral panics amplified by the local newspapers, Gypsies have been replaced in the city by Afghan and Kosovan Albanian asylum seekers. The Gypsies, who have never had strong political representation in England, now have a political status comparable to that of the Hungarian Roma, who, unnoticed by most Hungarians, constitute the majority of male prisoners in Budapest prisons although Roma are only about five percent of the total population, or of Australian Aborigines who also have a low profile politically, despite their oppression.

Academic engagement

When I started working with Gypsies with my partner, who started a school for Traveller children, my involvement was primarily motivated by feelings about social injustice and directed to practical measures to deal with immediate problems, such as finding sympathetic solicitors to take on eviction cases. This work was quite distinct from my academic life which, at that point, was devoted to obscure exercises in spatial analysis. The latter seemed trivial and rather pointless but I initially felt uneasy about writing academic papers on Gypsies because academics did not seem to me to be the kind of people who would get involved as a result of reading anything I might have written. This now seems arrogant. In any case, I soon put aside my reservations and wrote a short paper for *Antipode* followed by a more scholarly piece for the *Town Planning Review* in 1978. One concern here was academic legitimacy, which I took to mean drawing on fairly solid mainstream theory to underpin my arguments about discrimination and oppression. I knew nothing of Foucault's arguments about space, power and control but I did stumble on Basil Bernstein's Durkheimian theses about power, hierarchies and boundaries.

Bernstein's ideas were attractive and relevant and, in retrospect, I would consider this to have been 'good enough' theory. If the object of writing is to raise political consciousness and to influence practice, why bother with further theoretical elaboration?

However, this Occam's razor view of academic writing – that it is vain to do with more what can be done with fewer, as Bertrand Russell expressed Occam's principle – does not accord with the idea of academic knowledge as an element of the accumulation process. There is no such thing as 'good enough' theory when theories have to be continually 'produced' and I found myself being drawn quite willingly into this process of theory production. Intrigued by critical theory, particularly the possibilities of re-working spatial theory through psychoanalysis, I became more concerned with the rich literature of psychoanalysis than with the fate of marginalised minorities as I felt that ideas gleaned from psychoanalysis would deepen understanding. Apart from the intellectual challenges presented by this literature, my interest was also stimulated by the possibility of material rewards. It seemed to me that others who were engaged in more conventional research, based more on the critical reading of texts and less on involvement with other people, were getting promoted and I was not. Rethinking spatial theory from a psychoanalytical perspective provided the possibility of producing a number of reflective journal articles and book chapters which might interest critical theorists and add to my personal capital. I became more convinced about this strategy as a result of the attention I received from people in other disciplines – sociology, criminology, architecture, education, and so on. I was a sucker for flattery.

Interestingly, somewhat later, when giving a paper on fantasy/phantasy landscapes and processes of exclusion² at a conference with a group of anthropologists, one of them argued that 'we have done all this before', but, in their case, using the theoretical arguments of Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (Douglas 1966). This prompted me to become quite defensive about psychoanalysis. I was now contributing quite happily to the accumulation process, building up personal capital and contributing to my department's capital within the university. Fitting into the audit culture had its professional rewards although, as Fred Hirsch had anticipated in 1977, in his *Social Limits to Growth* (Hirsch 1977), this obsession with the accumulation of academic capital is intellectually unproductive and ultimately self-defeating. Knowledge becomes 'obsolete' with increasing rapidity and novelty is valued in the same way as material goods. In my own case, unable to resist a move from practical involvement to theoretical elaboration, a question of changing emphasis rather than one replacing the other, I had shifted from people to texts.

The madness of institutions

Having argued above that psychoanalytical theorising in cultural geography may not add much to what we already know, I now want to suggest that psychoanalysis can actually be quite helpful in exposing the madness of taken-for-granted everyday practices. In 2001, I attended a conference in London on 'lost childhoods', organised by the Multi-Lingual Psychoanalytical Society. I was listening to people who had experienced exile – from Hungary in 1956 after the Russian invasion, for example, or, in the case of Edith Kurzweil, the Freudian historian, from Germany in one of the kindertransporten to French-speaking Canada. Several of the speakers at this conference talked about 'splitting', the psychic separation of different phases of experience, particularly childhood from adulthood which, with migration, was often associated with a change of language. I would

² This was an application of psychoanalytical theory, particularly Kleinian object relations. 'Phantasy' indicates an unconscious process as distinct from the conscious process of fantasising.

suggest that my own movement from direct involvement to texts is also a kind of splitting although I have never entirely split off my earlier experience from my current interests. Ethnographic experience continues to inform my theoretical writing and my earlier empirical work was underpinned by large doses of social and anthropological theory. However, I can recognise a shift, if not actually a split or rupture, which has happened in an institutional context which encourages the formation of strong boundaries and hierarchies as a defence against environmental uncertainty – disorder and chaos. As Gordon Lawrence (2002) puts it: ‘...there is pressure on managers of institutions to bring into being organisational forms and structures which offer themselves and other role holders a feeling of certainty which, in fantasy, will withstand the environmental uncertainty and banish the psychotic anxieties’.³

Akin to gated communities, universities are institutions which can provide satisfactions for people who will adhere to ritual practices which remain unquestioned within the insulating bounds of the institutional or suburban capsule, whether it is mowing the lawn, producing so many papers a year, or sitting on committees. However, the comfortable sense of routine and repetition may be threatened by individuals who eschew the usual rewards and commit themselves to ‘unproductive’ work, while conformity is encouraged by implicit and occasionally explicit penalties for working outside conventional boundaries. Thus, working with Travellers on practical problems and not publishing, or doing something which could be of practical value while living in a poor neighbourhood, would be penalised, deemed unproductive (although lip-service is now paid to such activity under the heading of ‘social reach-out’). Conversely, the unpredictable, chaotic aspects of ethnography or involvement in grassroots political movements can be avoided by producing the right sort of academic capital and staying inside the boundaries constructed by the institution. Lawrence’s argument, however, is that a retreat from the unpredictable, uncertain environment into a rule-bound but predictable environment where the rewards are clearly identified, increases psychotic anxieties and further strengthens the boundaries between the inside and the outside. Thus, in this sense, recent trends in the organisation of production in the academy do resemble the progress from CCTV to gated communities, to panic rooms. The need for security creates structures which actually increase the sense of insecurity and, hence, a need for stronger structures to provide the illusion of greater security, and so on. The corollary of this is conformity. The maintenance of strong boundaries requires consensus and predictability. Within institutions, this is achieved through the vertical organisation of activity – the concentration of power at the top and the downward transmission of decisions, coupled with increased surveillance and accountability to keep a check on deviance and resistance. In this context, non-conformity becomes more threatening, as Basil Bernstein recognised forty years ago, hence perpetuating psychotic anxieties.

³ Psychotic anxieties are anxieties of a primitive nature which as Steiner (1987, 69-70) argues ‘threaten the immature ego and lead to a mobilisation of primitive defenses. Splitting, idealisation and projective identification operate to create rudimentary structures made up of idealised good objects from the persecutory bad ones’. The point here is that primitive anxieties surface when people become anxious about external threat or about themselves becoming transgressive within a highly structured system. Psychotic anxiety is associated with what Melanie Klein terms ‘the paranoid-schizoid position’, where individuals are unable to distinguish shades of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and have a strong sense of a threatening ‘other’.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have described the history of some of my own research projects and I would conclude that it has followed a rather predictable and depressing course which mirrors changes in academia that discourage long-term involvement with communities. The idea of the university as the source of marketable products has narrowed the range of admissible activities. The emphasis on the generation of money and the production of a specified range of literature as commodities is insulating the academy and contributing to the creation of what Lieven de Cauter (de Cauter, 2000) has described as a ‘capsular society’. The production of value in academia, narrowly defined, militates against border crossings because this would increase environmental uncertainty. In the case of research which was really ‘grassroots’, seriously involving people outside the academy, it is likely to be judged unproductive in terms defined by academic audits such as the British Research Assessment Exercise, for example. It hampers the efforts of departments to ‘succeed’, according to market criteria. Thus, the insulation or capsularisation of knowledge production, discouraging movement outside the academy (apart from cynical, short-term ‘reach-out’ projects), simultaneously encourages work on the quantifiable – texts, funded projects which generate data in the short-term, and so on. I have suggested here that this is a kind of madness, a paranoid-schizoid disturbance, which is permeating the most developed societies. The institution becomes locked into a system with strong rules determined by the state, one reflecting the needs of capital, and is less able to respond effectively to the needs of others, particularly those who are categorised as ‘other’, who are distanced from the researcher and would-be activist. Relating my own work to this kind of institutional change, I can see that the rather loose and informal organisation of the academy in the 1970s, facilitated my research – few people knew what I was doing and I did not have to account for myself at six-monthly intervals, nor generate a stipulated amount of research income. Subsequently, I was more inclined to fit in with the demands of a more strongly bounded institution, producing papers which counted in the all too frequent audits. For cultural geography, the institutional context makes pressing problems of alienation, racism and distantiation more difficult to address. Geography, like other increasingly insulated disciplines, becomes a part of the problem and the case for resistance becomes more compelling.

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