

13 Learning, Knowledge and Action in Social Movements

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Ehe! Talkam like that. No shaky-shaky mouth again. But oga you see now, to be big man no hard but to be poor man no be small thing. Na proper wahala. No be so?

Chinua Achebe (1987: 179)

one must accept that there is an inevitable and permanent tension between theory and practice, between thought and action, between truth and power, and thinking that this tension can be eliminated is one of the worst illusions a public intellectual can fall into.

Walden Bello (2008)

Before considering the question that is seemingly always the most immediate one and the only urgent one, 'What shall we do?', we ponder this: 'How must we think?'

Martin Heidegger (1977: 40)

Introduction

As other chapters in this book describe, the development model promoted by the major donor countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) serves wealth and global capital, not the eradication of poverty and the transformation of the conditions of the poor. The global and national economic structures served by development assistance – indeed of which such 'aid' is an integral part – contribute to and reinforce inequity and the deepening of poverty generally, even as it sometimes provides incidental opportunities for some, in some places, to escape the structural poverty that is fixed within existing global and national economic structures and the development paradigm. Development

assistance relies upon and serves these structures of wealth and is a tool of these structures, reinforcing them economically, politically and morally.

In this context, what is the way forward for proponents of international social and economic justice action? How do we implement basic survival strategies in the ongoing permanent emergency of the poor and still build a base for transformation? The prevailing framework that dominates all other considerations is a framework of 'governance' and power, not of struggle and justice. It is always reduced, in the end, merely to a question of *who* governs; there is little room for a vision of change in the very act and form of governance to confront the structures that marginalize the marginal and block authentic economic and political participation for the vast majority.

At the same time, there are everywhere national and international organizations and social movements that do attempt to challenge wealth and the structures that serve it. To really make poverty history, those of us engaged in international social solidarity and social justice action have to choose whose side we are on. Are we on the side of social movements representing and supporting those trapped in intractable structures of inequality and enforced poverty? Or, are we on the side of wealth and global systems of wealth creation, and the delusion that economic opportunity and access to wealth can be made universal, or even moderately general, through current economic structures and paradigms?

If our choice is an option that promotes fundamental social and economic transformation – in days long past it was ambitiously called the 'New International Economic Order' and then later more whimsically, 'the preferential option of the poor' – then our priority and fundamental line of action has to be radical and public common cause with national, regional and planetary social movements to challenge and transform global political and economic structures. The way forward is realizing in our lives and in the world such a vision will be achieved through dialogue and shared experience, through mutual support and common cause, based on acceptance and respect and a humane vision of humanity, seeking a way forward on the frontiers of human hopes and our collective knowledge and experience.

To meet this imperative, we need to scrutinize our perspective on social movements themselves, and how we understand the notional construct of 'movement(s)', what they are, how they emerge, and how they know, analyze and act on their reality. We need to rethink the quality of social action and the profound politics of transforming our direct experience into collective knowledge and social action. The place that I start with in this process is with my own personal experience, which is where knowledge begins.

In late 1992, I made an extended trip to El Salvador, a country that I had been visiting regularly for a decade already in my work, which included support of people's struggles in the face of government repression and the prolonged civil wars that wracked Central America. I knew these countries intimately by this time and had written quite a bit about the challenges they faced.¹ I was visiting now in a new period of transition. A peace accord had been signed recently in El Salvador between the government and the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional/Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) and negotiations in Guatemala between the URNG (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca/Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity) and the government were well advanced. Now, within the peace process, we were supporting the reconstruction of rural communities that had been destroyed during the war and the economic reinsertion of displaced people, including the demobilized soldiers of the FMLN guerrilla forces.

One morning we visited the site of a massacre that had occurred in 1982, about the time of my first visit to this country, and which was now in the process of being resettled after years of abandonment. As we crawled across the savannah over riverbed roads and down overgrown paths, we passed the crumpled shells of the adobe homes destroyed by the army in their sweeps through this area. Later, we sat under the trees for some time talking with a few of the old campesinos, whose faces were maps of a journey through time, and whose eyes and hands told not only of farming but of years of fighting in the underground. As I sat and watched and listened, I sensed that their resistance was not the resistance romanticized within the myths of international solidarity. I reflected on the inescapable reality that the struggle we supported is not the struggle they fought, and I wondered whether we will ever support their struggle. In my notebook I wrote: 'This place, this tree where we sit with these people, this earth – these have been here for all time, timeless. History is merely shadows passing over the land. The shadows are gone, and new ones will pass. The land remains, with the people. Our story knows not this tree, and the land is silent after we pass.'

Other images remain from that place: the road we travelled ruined by years of non-use, the hidden bomb-shelters for the children, little rabbit holes that led into small tombs for the living, dug into the clay and hidden by bushes and thorns. And the altar in the weeds, all that was left of the chapel that was destroyed when the army came through so many years ago. Now life was back, and the reconstruction begun, a new era of struggle, and this place and these people would continue on. International aid money of all stripes was pouring in now that the conflict was 'over'. And somehow, I thought that crisp morning, we all had missed the point

and had not seen at all what had happened here, and what was about to happen again – *is* happening again. I wrote in my subsequent report:

The way forward is not with micro-economic intervention that implements projects which try to wedge (a few) poor into the (few) cracks in the existing economic system. Rather it is to introduce an economics that compensates, insulates and ultimately undermines the impact of the present system on the poor and gradually transforms their vulnerability into their own authority and economic power. The ‘alternatives’ being considered deal with the crisis momentarily, but don’t confront the cause. In this sense the strategy is doomed to further marginalization and dooms the participants to continued marginalization as well. You can’t save the marginal by moving a few of them to the centre; you save the marginal by changing, and finally doing away with, the margins.

Now, many years later, and countless similar experiences before and since – in Africa, in Latin America, in Asia, and in Canada – I am increasingly sceptical of the clarion call of movement politics, and even more so of the crusade of international solidarity to ‘make poverty history’. We simply cannot any longer believe our own advertisements without self-criticism and reassessment of the depth and quality of our engagement with the poor. The discourse concerning an ‘alternative vision of development’ is loaded,² and as time passes it is increasingly difficult to defend romantic visions of revolutionary change and its processes. The struggle for justice and an alternative path is a longer one than that experienced in our lifetime, and our own privileged participation in this process does not allow us to appropriate history and blow out of proportion what we are about, or our role. We need to regain a more modest perspective that places today’s events and struggles in a historical and global framework that allows us to genuinely and realistically strive towards an alternative vision without claims to being part of a world-historical moment.

In a recent essay John Berger (2007: 7–8) writes:

Today the desire for justice is multitudinous. This is to say that struggles against injustice, struggles for survival, for self-respect, for human rights, should never be considered merely in terms of their immediate demands, their organizations, or their historical consequences. They cannot be reduced to ‘movements’. A movement describes a mass of people collectively moving towards a definite goal, which they either achieve or fail to achieve. Yet such a description ignores, or does not take into account, the countless personal choices, encounters, illuminations, sacrifices, new desires, griefs and, finally, memories, which the movement brought about, but which are, in the strict sense, incidental to that movement.

The promise of a movement is its future victory, whereas the promises of the incidental moments are instantaneous. Such moments include, life-enhancing

or tragically, experiences of freedom in action (freedom without actions does not exist). Such moments – as no historical ‘outcome’ can ever be – are transcendental, are what Spinoza termed eternal, and they are as multitudinous as are the stars in an expanding universe.

Berger concludes:

Not all desires lead to freedom, but freedom is the experience of a desire being acknowledged, chosen and pursued. Desire never concerns the mere possession of something. Desire is a wanting. A wanting now. Freedom does not constitute the fulfilment of that wanting, but the acknowledgement of its supremacy.

Meaning in movements

If Berger is correct that the universal struggle against injustice ‘cannot be reduced to “movements”’, what then is the role for movements in the creation of knowledge, of theory, of social meaning and practice, of political action?

Movement is an exceedingly troublesome construct. In today’s context there is no coherence or consistency in the use of the term and what movements signify in various contexts. The qualities ascribed to movements are ever-shifting and functional. Often when movements are described and analyzed, they are perceived in terms of historical ‘waves’ and ‘surges’ of social movement and political momentum. What we observe are the waves, the action on the surface; but the real movement is actually below the surface, invisible and uncontrolled and uncontrollable in the currents, the undercurrents, the undertow, the lateral flows. To understand movements, we need to delve beneath the waves.

Movements are today everywhere seen as the agents of change. But they need to be understood first and foremost as the *result* of changes – complex, unseen and often unforeseen – and only secondarily as a *cause* of change. To fully apprehend the significance and trajectory of movements, we need to understand the changes that they manifest and from which they emerge.

In a profound sense, movement is a locus of self-actualization and self-expression, as much as – sometimes *instead* of – a locus of collaboration for directed change. The specific and concrete change goal at any moment is often a proxy for an ongoing assertion of identity as well as a quest for self-expression – that is, social, political and economic participation – and for personal, communal and political self-determination. In the end this is an existential quest.

In spite of this genesis, movements are usually seen as creations born of theory and action, of vision and will, of dynamic vision and leadership.

They are described as purposefully authored and identified with personalities. But in fact their history is always written backwards, ordered to serve the purpose of movement identity, whose genesis is already obscure once movements become institutionalized. In actuality, movements emerge from the flux of dynamic reality, experienced dynamically and ‘multitudinously’ (as Berger says). The process is a flow in time and space:

flux → [change] → emergence of identity and ‘cause’ → [change] → affinity and association → [change] → social critical mass → [change] → movement/proposition → [change] → the ‘Movement’ institutionalizes → change slows → change stops → the Movement becomes part of the flux.

The ‘fact’ of an emergent movement – its place, space, power – is a new fact-in-reality. This emergent moment is its most dynamic and opportune moment, the moment of greatest opportunity. Most often, once it becomes a ‘fact’ a movement’s energy is soon diverted into protecting this fact – the very fact of its emergence and its existence – and whatever changes this fact symbolizes, its own existence and place, protecting the group, and its leadership. In this sense, established movements are intrinsically conservative, instrumentalizing issues, constructs and subjects to preserve their space. Once formalized, movements quickly become evangelical and are closed and exclusionary of all who do not profess and defend the identity and symbols of the movements whose self-perpetuation has become the collective mission.

Movements emerge from concrete experience and knowledge recuperated and shared; rarely do they create new knowledge after the movement is institutionalized, and often they inhibit new knowledge that threatens the facts of movement itself. Knowledge becomes theory becomes dogma and theorists take over leadership from the practitioners as dogmatists and gatekeepers of the movement’s truths.

Jean Piaget (1976) famously said that ‘to learn, is to invent.’ He believed that people do not learn by acquisition, by being taught what others know, but that each person develops understanding only by inventing knowledge anew, personally. There is considerable evidence that the same is true for people-in-groups, in community. It is not the answer that is important, but the question itself, and that those who originally ask the question invent the answer. Only thus will the answers be applicable in real-life situations; and only thus will new questions arise.

Power is centralized and controlled in all societies and most movements, through a system that assures that there are privileged people who have the ‘answers’ – which are the real collateral and capital in any society – and who also establish the questions. The answers come first; the acceptable questions are those that justify and verify the revealed, prescribed answers. The keepers of knowledge programme and frame the questions to lead to the prescribed answers. Anyone posing new questions, or questions that the elect cannot answer, is marginalized, censored and often obliterated.

The person, or group, that is able to pose even one new question that falls outside the established unified frame and conventional discourse, and engages and excites the consciousness and imagination of people, undermines prevailing power and, momentarily at least, creates the possibility of revolution and change.

Some talk of human society moving towards one unified planetary culture and political system as an inevitable outcome of globalization.³ While that might be something that emerges gradually over time, it need not be a goal, nor an indispensable means towards whatever goal people share or might create together. A unitary planet, with a global ‘language’,⁴ culture (and government) is not an inevitable higher order of human potential, or one to which ‘history’ – or biology – is naturally striving. Indeed, there is reason to believe that the planet is heading in other, more complex directions, which perhaps should be a relief to us all given the high crimes of idealized universal visions over the past few hundred years and more.

When it comes to acknowledging diversity we need to respect and take into account not only diverse pasts and diverse current realities, but also the distinct and concrete possibility of diverse futures. We will do well simply to acknowledge and embrace the broad diversity of place, history and culture, and accept this diversity in and on its own terms, in its own place. In such organic processes the new – or more likely, enhanced – consciousness(es) that emerge are organic and diverse, as are the emerging values and visions of the future. And integral to all are differential experiences and aspirations rooted in ethnicity and religion, in gender, race and class.

This is not a technical process and it cannot be directed; it has to be engaged and the more authentically and inductively (subjectively) engaged, the more auspicious will be the outcome. The future will be built on a dialogue among these heterogeneous experiences and visions rather than through the creation of one homogeneous insight about who we are, and how we all want to be.

Dilemmas of making theory into practice and bringing practice to bear on theory

Here, it is useful to look again at the perspective we bring to social change action. Perspective is not so much *what* we see, but the *way* we see. It is where we stand to view something, and it is a way of seeing things.⁵ Perspective is a way of seeing, and a way of representing. It is an aid to understanding, but it is not knowledge, and it is not ‘true’. It is a relationship assumed – or imposed – between a viewer and the reality viewed.

This is where knowledge starts, with the subjectivity of the active knower, and our ‘perspective’. But it is not where knowledge ends. Knowledge gains its real edge when perspective itself is revealed in all of its subjectivity and implicates the knower with the known. Such knowledge reveals our own place in the reality we are trying to understand, allowing the details of the concrete to emerge from the shadows of the abstract in such a way that it actually matters to us and implicates us in the situation we are trying to understand. Active knowledge is personal. It is subjective. And we are the subject, both in the sense that we create knowledge, and that we ourselves are its ‘subject’.

These notions are critical because social change agency depends critically on knowledge created, recuperated and shared. And the dynamic interaction among knowledge, action and the actual world is the crucible of change.⁶ The most important knowledge we have always takes place in a situation. It begins with people in-a-situation. It takes place with people in-a-situation-together. It almost always begins with action, with work, with the business of living and with our reflection on that action; it begins with our attempt to understand our situation and our actions in a situation.

Active knowledge is not a product. It is not fixed. It is a dynamic relationship between our situation and our reflection on that situation, to make sense of it, and to conserve it or to change it, to consolidate it or transform it. Such knowledge is *understanding in flux*, in an ongoing dialectic interaction – an interaction referred to in some frameworks as ‘praxis’ – between our actions in a situation and our reflection on ourselves acting in and with that situation. Because we live in a situation with others – who are both with us in the situation and also integral to the situation itself, upon which we act together – the act of knowledge is intrinsically social. Our action in reality is social action. Our personal reflection on reality needs also to be a social reflection, taking place in dialogue. To the extent that our reflection takes place in isolation from others, remote from social action and dialogue, our knowledge is increasingly remote from reality, inverted, static and reified.

Active knowledge is key to the problem of building and participating in movements for social change. And in particular it is key to the ongoing problem about the competing roles of theory and practice in guiding the social change action of such movements. As Walden Bello (2008) stated in the quote that heads this chapter, ‘there is an inevitable and permanent tension between theory and practice, between thought and action, between truth and power,’ and within this tension – which is a creative tension – are revealed the dilemmas and the pathways to authentic social change action, defined as a social praxis of action and reflection in work and dialogue with others with whom we share a common situation.

In scrutinizing the relationship between theory and practice, reflection and action, we need to discriminate among the terms we use. Theory is not reflection; theory is a *product* of reflection. And practice is not merely action; practice is a product of theory – theory applied in the concrete. So ‘theory and practice’ do not signify precisely the same thing as ‘reflection and action’, which are entirely possible – and common – in the absence of theory. It is in its prescription of practice that theory gains its power, over both action and reflection. This relationship can be productive or destructive; it is usually both. The question of how theory is made, therefore, and by whom, and for whose end, is critical to social change movements and social change action.

What is often not considered in this dynamic is the role of experience and the place of experience – personal and collective – in the tension among theory and practice, reflection and action. Experience is what we do, what we perceive and what happens to us – the internalized incorporation of the cumulative events and actions of our lives, their implications and their consequences.

Experience is memory. Experience is knowledge, the most direct and competent knowledge possible. Experience is the ground of our existence. The paradox is that there is often a direct contradiction between our experience and the socialized knowledge and formalized social theory that is the currency of prevailing social and political interaction. And in social movements too, there is often a tension between experience and the theory that guides collective discourse and social action, and in the processes through which direct experience is shared and acknowledged as the basis for creating knowledge and theory.

Open space as a construct of collective praxis

A useful starting point to explore this tension in a contemporary context is the significant debate that has been taking place in the last decade, especially in the context of the history, role and future of the World Social Forum

(WSF), about the construct of what has come to be called ‘open space’ and its place in the social praxis of movements.⁷

It is not within the scope of this essay to elaborate this concept or the ongoing discussion about its primacy and significance, which is intense and intricate.⁸ I will simply make some personal observations about the notion of political and discursive ‘space’ and its relevance to movements and to theory.

The basic notion of what is now referred to as ‘open space processes’ is not new. It has been at the heart of critical social literacy processes for almost a century, and was popularized internationally in the 1970s as ‘participatory research’ and ‘research-action’, building on the work of Paulo Freire (1972, 1973), Ivan Illich (1970), and others. It has been mystified considerably in the interim and even quasi-commercialized for mainstream applications as ‘Open Space Technology’.⁹ But in principle it is a rather common sense approach to dialogue and collective reflection and action¹⁰ that has been deployed in various cultural settings in the absence of any specialized theory for millennia.

The emergence of a new preoccupation for the creation of open spaces of collective, internationalized reflection is significant because of its recovered insight that resistance and social action are rooted fundamentally in personal experience and knowledge, which is created at the most local level of people in their actual lives, places and communities, and whose significance in the first instance is precisely its concrete locality and specificity.

In May 1993, not very long after the visit to El Salvador described earlier, I was in Peru, again investigating conditions of people uprooted by violence and poverty. One day we drove to the outskirts of Lima to one of the many marginal communities that began as an urban land-takeover in the desert surrounding Lima. To get to the community we drove past miles upon miles of the sand dune slums that surround the city. Everything is grey and brown and dust, sand and gravel. It goes on forever, stretching to the sky, up steep hills of sand and stones and rock and across the never-ending dunes. It never rains and water is purchased from tankers that pass by every day. The dust never settles and the coarse feeling in the throat and on your skin never leaves.

On this day, while meeting the women of a sewing workshop we sat inside one of the dusty, crowded one-room shacks that serves as a home for a family of six or seven. While we were there a teenage girl returned from school, clean and sharp in her school uniform of blue wool and starched cotton; she bowed and obediently kissed us all lightly on the cheek, and kept her thoughts hidden behind secret eyes.

I reflected that it is for this that the people endure: to offer her a little more, so that she can offer her children a little more, so that the family can

slowly over generations move across the sand towards the city and its promise of escape and prosperity. The adults devote their lives to scratching the smallest advantage for the best and the brightest that will manage to survive the blight that is their home. The dream of millions. Immigrants. Class immigrants, trying to migrate across a sea far more daunting than any sea crossed by my own ancestors travelling to a new world they knew actually existed at the end of their journey.

I wonder now about that young woman. Today – if she is alive – she will be a little over 35 years old. She probably has children of her own, and is making the same sacrifices that her mother made. And she may well be living in the working-class barrios of the city, and her own children in a proper school, with prospects still modest but ones that their grandmother could only dream about. This is the real project of the poor and the project in which we must engage if our rhetoric about transformation and justice is to be meaningful.

John Berger (2007: 98) declares: ‘The poor are collectively unseizable. They are not only the majority on the planet, they are everywhere and the smallest event speaks to them.’ Less lyrically perhaps, but no less acutely, Chinua Achebe (1987: 90), in his novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, makes the following observation:

There is no universal conglomerate of the oppressed. Free people may be alike everywhere in their freedom, but the oppressed inhabit each their own peculiar hell. The present orthodoxies of deliverance are futile to the extent that they fail to recognize this.

If we wish to learn together and create movements based in experience and knowledge, we need to first create spaces where this experience and knowledge can be shared. And in their essence these spaces have to be open in the sense that they welcome all experience and knowledge, and provide open opportunity for the expression, sharing and acknowledgement – that is recognition and affirmation – of this experience.¹¹

It is from this dialogue and sharing that a common reflection can be built that will often lead to a synthesis of experience and learning that may eventually generalize from the particular some principles or learnings that are shared among those in a collective open space. The space, however, is not justified on the basis of this product. It is justified in the act itself: the expression, the sharing and the mutual affirmation through respectful attention to the specificity of our conditions and actions. The emphasis is not primarily on *generalizing* from this experience – creating theory – but in providing the space and the ground within which the local and particular can be socialized.

The significance of the specific does not lie in the generalization; rather, any generalization that emerges derives its significance from its recognition

of the concrete experience and knowledge of those who contribute to and participate in the general insights that emerge.

At the same time, when applying open space principles to creating knowledge for action, paradoxes emerge that reveal the tensions inherent in collective praxis, reflection and action, theory and practice. Within an open space, individual (interior) space coexists within a shared (exterior) space. An authentic open space will be defined by the extent to which it is open to the meeting of these two, the interior and the exterior, the private and the public, the personal and the political. And it will be qualified by the extent that formal and informal relations of power are acknowledged and mediated.

Open space is defined by the many. It is largely about subjectivity, actualization, freedom and liberty. It is only a little bit about ownership and democracy; and even less about horizontality, which is one-dimensional and comes from nowhere and leads nowhere. Open space promotes dialogue not between, but among. It searches for understanding, not truth.

In a remarkable series of radio documentaries developed by David Cayley and first broadcast for the CBC radio programme, *Ideas*¹² in 1993, British environmentalist, Nick Hildyard struck a chord that has become a refrain in my mind:

The groups on the ground reject the idea that the solutions can only come from those institutions like corporations, like development agencies, which have been primarily responsible for the crisis. They say: No, the solutions lie with us; we have the solutions; we don't need to invent alternatives; in our daily lives we are working them out, we are innovative. We don't need to be empowered; we don't need someone to empower us. What we need are people to get off our backs....development...is actually enclosure, expropriation, taking away people's land, enclosing knowledge, denying access to resources, creating the notion of resources, and then denying people access to their water, to their forests, to their land, using those lands for others, transferring control to a small minority. These are the issues that really matter on the ground and, unless those issues are addressed, I don't see much hope for either the planet or for social justice. And I think that social justice is now the key issue, the key issue. The idea of saving the world without social justice is for me...simply not worth considering. I wouldn't want to live in a sort of world that was a technocratic, ecofascist, but safe world.

The relationship between theory and open spaces of shared experience and reflection

How does all of this relate to the processes of theory? The formal spaces for making theory are largely closed and theory itself, once formalized, is a closed space. It allows participation in discussion and elaboration only to

those who accept and operate within the confines and conventions, the structure and syntax, of the theory itself – those who are initiates in the field and the fold.

In the exchange between experience and knowledge, between theory and practice, theory more often governs practice than the obverse. In so doing, the norm is to move from the abstract to the concrete, from the general to the particular. The inductive process of collective reflection and action are subordinated to the deductive – and often reductionist – logic of applied theory. Theory – and those in a position to ‘theorize’ – tend to dominate and instrumentalize those who are the objects of theory and the targets of practice. Key issues include the power of the ‘academy’: its role in thought control and social engineering; its role as gatekeeper of the correct perspective and methodology; its role as protector of the established ‘consensus’ and of dominant interests.

At one and the same time, theory is a *discipline* (of thinking), and a *disciplining* (of thought). In this context it is critical to acknowledge that theory is a tool of ideology. Theory is never neutral. Theory is a competitive discipline, and tends to be justified by its political efficacy and practical utility, rather than by its validity and objective veracity.

Almost all theory is built on an invisible foundation of unchallenged givens, assumptions, conventions of diction, syntax, grammar, as well as embedded rhetorical and polemic norms. Theory of how things work, or how things happen or happened, is not a description of reality but a way of describing reality. Much analytic or descriptive theory is rooted in the notion that if something happens, there is a discrete and identifiable cause, and a reason; and it is in the capacity of science and ‘theory’ to uncover it. This is a phenomenologically questionable premise, one which I challenge in some depth elsewhere.¹³ There is not one, perfect method for reading the world and interpreting it. Rationalism and Western scientific method, are only one way among many.¹⁴ The logic intrinsic to any specific theory more often forms a labyrinth than a path: the deeper in we go, the harder it is to find our way out. We often end up describing the maze, not the world outside its gate. Theory is the labyrinth; the theoretician – the expert – is the minotaur who protects it. The dissenter escapes on wings of feathers and wax.

In the field of social development, of movements, of change theory, the expert is the guide and the gatekeeper. It is telling that the degree to which we are considered experts is very often a function of how far away from home we are. The status and authority that we are afforded as guests would rarely be proffered at home where we are just one more confused denizen trying to make do.

In trying to adjust our perspective critically and consciously the first step needs to be to ask ourselves not what our theory predicts, or what

our politics desires, but – on the basis of our experience and what we see around us – what we actually think will happen in ten years or one hundred, and what we think the world will look like. We need to share these ‘hunches’, and then begin to adjust our theory or our politics. In such open processes we can derive a deeper shared critical awareness that will enhance our capacity to influence what actually happens in a progressive and transformative manner, rather than simply accede to the trajectory already established.

Similarly, in seeking understanding of a situation we wish to transform, we should focus on the most important knowledge of those who are often seen to be least knowledgeable – those living the situation – rather than as we so often do, seizing on the least important knowledge of the ‘most knowledgeable’ – usually experts from away – bringing their systems and models and excuses to obscure specifics with their generalities. Douglas Dunn (2003: 138) writes, ‘Politics softens everything / Truth is known only to its victims.’ To which we might add Imamu Amiri Baraka’s (1993: 662) insight from his *Political Poem*:

Luxury, then, is a way of
being ignorant, comfortably.
An approach to the open market
of least information. Where theories
can thrive, under heavy tarpaulins
without being cracked by ideas.

An aspirational universe

Heroic global social action is carried out by uncountable persons around this planet who in their own places, their own lives, and their own work – over decades and long lifetimes – envision another future and try to promote it, and share it, and live it day after day. They do this in many ways, working with thousands more, and each of them with more thousands still. In this sense, each of us can be seen as an extension of an intangible ethical movement, and what I would call an ‘aspirational universe’; and this movement can similarly be seen as an extension of each of us. Much of the action is in what we each do every day; the action plan is in our (collective) praxis. The future is always inchoate, over the moving horizon of our ever-evolving experience and the visions that this experience affords of the possibilities inherent in ourselves and in the world we share.

Those who wish to promote a process towards universal global justice and economic opportunity need to engage as subject with others, not only in the cognitive domain of theory and knowledge, but also in the material

and affective domain where people actually live, and which includes their concrete material circumstances. The majority of the people on the planet are poor, and excluded from the structures of political power and economic opportunity. Their continuum of action begins with meeting basic needs. If we do not form common cause with people in transforming material reality, and the structures that underlie this reality, we will have little opportunity – let alone moral authority – to engage at the level of knowledge and consciousness and attempts to collaborate to create meaning and make fundamental change in the world.

Knowledge is aspirational. It is a concrete seeking for what is not yet known and understood, exploring what is not known, but might be, and envisioning what is not yet real in the world, but could be, if we could find our way. This is a creative seeking: creating new knowledge actively out of our experience and action in the world. This seeking is rooted in personal and communal hopes and dreams and values – the aspirations towards the future that define human beings and the spirit of our lives.

The way forward to make real in our lives, and in the world, the visions enfolded within our aspirational universe is through dialogue and shared experience. As we engage in mutual support and action in common cause with others, we seek our way forward on the frontiers of human hope and collective experience. In this journey we want to regain the authentic, the subjective, the curious attention to diverse experiences and world-view. We want to regain openness in our way of seeing and our way of being, in the deepest sense as discussed earlier in this chapter. We want to regain meaning, and the power to create meaning in our own lives, out of our own lives. Perhaps then we can recuperate and invent a collaborative politics, turning our collective experience into a politics of change that brings real transformation to the world.

Notes

- 1 See, for example: Murphy (1985, 1986, 1988a/b, 1990, 1992) and Murphy and Symes (1992).
- 2 The political construct of ‘development’ itself demands critical scrutiny that goes beyond the scope of this chapter. See discussion in Murphy (2001a/b).
- 3 This prognostication comes not merely from the apostles of economic globalization, but from significant elements within global civil society who promote actively the notion of global governance and world government as a means to regulate globalization and mediate its processes and effects to the benefit of human society.
- 4 Language is used here in a figurative sense, meaning semantic framework for seeing and discussing the world.

- 5 In the terms of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (10th edition, 1999), ‘a view or prospect; a particular way of regarding something’.
- 6 This theme is elaborated in Murphy (1999), especially in Section Two, ‘Possibilities in Process’. Also available as *De la pensée à l’action: la personne au cœur du changement social* (trans. Geneviève Boulanger). Montréal, QC: Ecosociété, 2001.
- 7 A good introduction can be found in Sen, Jai, ‘Notes on the grammar and vocabulary of the concept of open space’. Available at: http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=429
- 8 For a historical discussion in the context of the WSF, See Sen, Jai *et al.* (2004), especially Section Three (e.g. ‘The WSF as open space’ by Chico Whitaker) and Section Five.
- 9 For example, see <http://www.co-intelligence.org/P-Openspace.html>
- 10 Murphy (1999) includes a section on reference groups and learning circles, among other ‘open space’ strategies for promoting collective change processes. See also Murphy (1997). Grace Lee Boggs’ (1998) autobiography is a wonderful window into a long lifetime of learning and practice in bringing open space processes to radical community organizing and struggle at a very concrete level of post-war urban America.
- 11 Note the root of these words *ac-knowledge-ment*, *re-cognition*; recognition and acknowledgement are acts of affirmative understanding and acceptance of the knowing (cognition) and knowledge of others.
- 12 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation: available at <http://www.cbc.ca/ideas>.
- 13 Murphy (1999), especially in Chapter Six, ‘Challenging the established rationality’, 68–77.
- 14 Recommended reading on this theme: philosopher of science, Paul Feyerabend (1973). Although not – certainly not – working in the mode of Michel Foucault (Feyerabend was a mathematician and physicist, as well as a philosopher of science), his work echoes the observations of Foucault and others (see Foucault 1980) about how power is manufactured through the formulation and control of truth (‘tyranny of globalized discourse’), which in turn becomes the bulwark of power; the validity of ‘traditional’ knowledge formulated in culture; and the tension between ‘discontinuous knowledge’ and the collected knowledge and the ‘unified theory’ of Western science.

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