

**Ranting and Silence:
Contradictions of Writing for Activists and Academics**

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It is not easy to be both an academic and an activist. The values, the audiences and the constraints are different. Sitting down to write, you can feel yourself pulled in two different ways. The result is often muddled thinking and murky prose. There is too much ranting for an academic audience, and too much gobbledygook for the activists. In many cases, there is no prose at all, only silence, and pages crumpled in the wastebasket or erased on the screen. This chapter is about how to cope with the tensions that work to silence the activist academic, and offers some suggestions about how to write up fieldwork.

I originally trained as an anthropologist, and there is some anthropology in this chapter. I have been an activist for over thirty years, and there is a lot of politics here. However, I am also a professional writer and a university lecturer in creative writing, so this chapter is mainly about writing. It is a 'how to' piece. While some readers may find the tone too left-wing, I think it is appropriate to my aim – to address directly the problems of radical anthropologists. My hope is that it will also be useful to other graduate students in the social sciences and teachers on the left. I have presumed a good deal of common ground with this audience.

I begin in traditional anthropological fashion with my fieldwork. My purpose is to explain the desperation and suffering of the people I studied, and the rage I felt. I then follow my career back to London, and the ways I found it difficult to turn pain and anger into anthropology. After that, I look at the differences between writing for activists and for academics, and consider the forces that confuse and muffle radical voices in the universities. Finally I suggest ways of coping and turning out good work for both the movements and the universities.

Fieldwork and Writing Up

Between 1971 and 1973 I did fieldwork with Afghans who had once been nomads, but had fallen on hard times and become yoghurt peddlers in the city. By the time I came back to London to write up my thesis, I was filled with sadness and rage. I could not write. My head was full of memories.

The people I studied were poor. I remembered Shin Gul, a teenage boy, so proud to have his picture taken astride his father's bicycle. Father and son worked together every day, loading that bike with yoghurt cans and pushing it to shops all over the city. When the yoghurt was unloaded, his father let Shin Gul ride the bike back, a hero hurtling through the busy streets to their camp by the animal market on the edge of town. Father and son were gentle with each other. Shin Gul was noisy, enthusiastic, his father always in the background, as tall as his son, quietly proud.

Shin Gul worried about girls, constantly checking his face in the small mirror on his snuff tin. All men did that, but Shin Gul more than most. His family was so poor he might find it difficult to marry. Nomads, even impoverished former nomads like these, commonly paid a bride price as high as thirty thousand Afghanis – a labourer's wage for five years. Other, more wealthy nomads with flocks would defer part of the payment or take it in kind; often, continuing political links between their families were cemented by marriage. The people I knew had no such links, and the money was everything. They paid all of it in cash before the wedding. Even though they were poor, the bride price for a pretty young woman remained as high as among rich nomads, because a family's vending income now depended on a wife's by flirting with truck drivers and other men on the street.

Shin Gul had a younger sister of about eleven, a beautiful, laughing child, a desirable future wife. Shin Gul's parents had arranged an exchange marriage. When all the children were old enough, Shin Gul's little sister would marry a neighbour's son, and that boy's sister, Pkhe, would marry Shin Gul. This was how poor people coped when they could not afford marriage payments. Pkhe was old enough to marry already. Shin Gul showed me a secret picture of her. We both looked at it, thinking – beautiful. Pkhe did not fancy Shin Gul at all and

spoke of him dismissively. And if even I knew this, he must have known it too. I guessed it was because he was so poor, and gauche. He was always embarrassed by what he did not have, and so boasted of unimportant things like his bicycle, and seemed more gauche. No wonder he kept checking his face in the little mirror.

I liked Shin Gul a lot. We chatted at other people's homes or on the path, never in his family's white canvas tent. For a long time he did not invite my wife Liz and me to his tent. Hospitality was important to these people, proud of their nomad and Pushtun heritage. But it was also an anxious moment, because only the richest families among the yoghurt sellers could afford to treat us with a single fried egg, or proudly place a potato in my bowl of stew. Shin Gul's father was not that rich. But after some months, they finally invited us to their tent. I expected tea, which his father offered and we accepted. He handed me a small cup with flowers on it. Then the father looked at my wife and remembered it was his only cup. He hit his son, hard, with an open palm across the side of the head, and told him to go to the neighbours and borrow a cup. The eyes of both father and son filled with tears held back - the father, over the humiliation, and the son, because his father hit him. Shin Gul scuttled from the tent and was back in no time with another cup. We made quiet conversation.

I remembered their shame as I tried to write at my desk in London. And I remembered what poverty did to Shin Gul's uncle, Khodai Nur. He was the oldest of three brothers whose shared household was the third richest in the yoghurt sellers' camp. The two richest households among the yoghurt sellers still had sheep; Khodai Nur and his brothers did not. But their yoghurt peddling did well, they owned one camel, they had married off four sisters and they had a good sideline in lending money to poor farmers. The main reason they had managed so well was that they had kept the joint household together thanks to Khodai Nur, with his trim white beard, his dark skin and kindly face. The next brother was a big man, loud, fun, a joker, sometimes a bully, sometimes a fool, and a good friend to me. A newcomer not 'in the know' would think he was the head of household, not Khodai Nur. The youngest brother was big too, with a fierce temper, wild. He would crawl through the alleys of the camp at night on

his belly, sneaking towards his lovers, edging his family towards feuds they could not possibly afford. It was Khodai Nur who kept them together because he did not compete with his brothers and did not pick fights. He's kind, his sisters said, a good man. He never beats his wife, they said. There was no honour in his quiet goodness, no renown or reward, but the women noticed.

Each brother had two wives. Khodai Nur's brothers had many children, smiling, running, boys and girls in bright clothes. They were here one minute and had vanished the next - to watch a traffic accident, steal a caged bird, pick clover for stew, roll a hoop. Khodai Nur's first wife had had many children, all stillborn except one daughter whose hips were broken at birth; she could move only in a squat. People said such a daughter could not satisfy his desire for children, but would then correct themselves, because of course she was a human being, and he loved her. Yet her injury meant she could not marry, they said; somehow she was not a full person and could not fill the hole in his heart. Khodai Nur took a second wife, a young woman. Neither was she able to give him live children. One night he was sitting by the fire with his first wife, and something went wrong between them. He plucked a burning branch out of the fire and hit her with it, saying things about the dead children. His sisters said it was very wrong of him, that he had never done anything like that before; it was a sign of his pain and desperation. After this night his first wife left Khodai Nur and went to live with her relatives in Baluchistan four hundred miles away, taking their grown disabled daughter with her. Khodai Nur did not know if he would ever see them again. Maybe she would come back, or maybe her relatives would eventually send a couple of men to negotiate some small compensation for divorce.

The secret police would not let me live with the yoghurt sellers, so I visited them near the animal market every day. One summer morning I came to Khodai Nur's tent on the edge of the city. Khodai Nur was sitting by the empty yoghurt pans, alone. He told me his brothers had gone into the city to sell yoghurt. His second wife had given birth the evening before, and the child had died. 'I am capsized,' he said. His brothers had told him to pray: God gives, they said, and God takes away. Khodai Nur told me he had prayed each time a child

of his had died. God gives, God takes away, blessed be God, he had prayed. But this time he could not. 'Does God want me to have no children?' he said. There were no tears, and his voice was steady. Not flat, not empty - steady. I had no idea how to console him. So I said a few polite things and left, not to intrude further. I went back to my rented house and wrote up my notes about attitudes to death.

Then, and later, I could not bear watching pain and only writing notes. I was growing angry too. Every manual job paid the same 500 Afghanis a month, just enough to buy bread and nothing else for two adults and two children. Sharecroppers got a third or a fifth of the crop, which came to the same thing. The fear of the secret police was everywhere. I hated them, because they kept disrupting my fieldwork. The people I worked with feared them. A jerk of the head or quick finger tapping the nose would alert me to the entrance of an informer. Some years before, after a man had been robbed and killed near the nomad camp at the edge of the city, the police came to the tent of Khodai Nur's sister and took her husband away for questioning. He had not done anything; it was just general suspicion. The next day they brought his body back and simply dropped it on the ground in front of her. It bounced a bit. The stomach was ripped open and the whole front beaten black. They told her he had died of eating bad watermelon in the police station. Years later, what she minded, and feared, was not that they had beaten him to death. It was the disrespect they had showed towards his body, and the joke about the watermelon.

Other things made me angry too. I managed to get one of Khodai Nur's nephews into the TB hospital. Once he was there, he had to bribe the doctors to get the medicines, and the nurses and orderlies insisted on small bribes before they would feed him. He and his fellow patients, thin angry men sitting around his bed in the summer sunlight, told me about this. I asked why such things happened. 'Afghanistan, Zulumistan,' they said, a proverb: 'The land of the Afghans, the land of tyranny.' Then they smiled – what else could you do.

From the 1950s to the 1970s King Zahir Shah's dictatorship was backed by the United States and the Soviet Union. In Kabul we kept meeting refugees from the famine in the north of the country. My friend Michael Barry, half French

and half American, was writing a travel book (Barry 1974). He rode his horse through the villages of the north. There was food aid going north, and Barry found the district officers making great piles of grain in the centres of the towns, surrounded by soldiers. They sold the grain at many times the customary rate. The farmers sold their land to the rich merchants so they could eat, and the people without land died. Barry asked some peasants why they did not simply storm the piles of grain. The king has planes, they said, and they will come and shoot and bomb us. This was true. Those planes were Soviet MIGs, and the pilots were trained in Texas. Barry went and told the head of the US aid mission what was happening. The man did nothing.¹

The eyes of a five-year-old boy stay with me still. He was not a famine victim, just one of the nomads. I saw him one morning carrying an empty oil tin full of watermelon rinds on his back. Khodai Nur explained to me that the boy's father was dead and his mother had gone mad. She just sat in front of her tent all day, staring into space doing nothing. That depression, that giving up, is a common madness among the Afghan poor. So the boy was the only support for his family. Every day he went to the melon sellers in the fruit bazaar. They gave him the rinds that were left after they scooped out all the fruit for their customers. Then the boy took them round the camp and sold them to anyone with a goat. Khodai Nur had one goat. He said he bought a load off the boy most days for one Afghani. The goat did not really eat the rinds, but the child needed the money. I watched the child, and he watched me. I have never seen such blankness behind the eyes. I came home to London and sat down at my typewriter to write up my thesis. Nothing happened.

Writing Up

My silence was overdetermined. The secret police had interrupted my research several times, so my fieldnotes were thin. Liz had left me just as the fieldwork ended, so I cried every time I tried to read my fieldnotes. My sadness at the desk was also the sadness of the people I had studied. I was consumed by a rage at their suffering, and at the global system that caused it. There seemed no way to fit that rage into the narrow bed of mainstream anthropology. I wanted

to change the world, and I could not even write my thesis.

It would be a mistake to ask whether the causes of my silence in 1973 were political or personal. That kind of silence is always produced by many forces. The question is not whether your difficulty is your fault or the system's. In practice, it is always both. However, it is hard to remember that from inside an anxiety storm about writing. When graduate students sit down to write they often feel worthless and inadequate. One has to wonder about an education system that produces students who feel that way. But they do, as do so many other writers. That feeling of uselessness, the personal problems and the holes in your life – these are normal. People who write have to write through them.

But I had other difficulties too. 'My people' did not fit with how anthropologists wrote about the Middle East in 1973. They wrote of tribes, power and honour. In the months I listened, my people used the word 'honour' only once. They used the word 'shame' every day. 'We eat shame,' they said. And 'my people' were not 'a people' like those of other anthropologists. Although they had a tribal name, they were really a collection of human beings of various ethnic origins, trying to get by. I wanted to write about poverty, suffering, the world of those with nothing - the world of the majority of Afghans. I wrote a seminar paper on poverty. My teachers and fellow students seemed to like it, but let me know it 'wasn't anthropology'. It was more like journalism, they said. It was too angry.

Times have changed. Now I would be allowed to write a whole thesis of reflexive self-obsession about how I could not cope with the poverty of others. I might be encouraged to whine about my white guilt. It would probably even be possible to write about the global economic forces that impoverished the people I watched. These days, I would only begin to run into trouble if I talked about American imperialism, or said I hope the Afghans drive the Americans out. A lot more topics are open, but not if the writer is too angry. Even today, the reflexive turn allows some feelings and forbids others. Indecision, guilt, confusion, identity politics and moralism are encouraged. The key injunction in the reflexive turn is to make the native other, and then wallow in discomfort about difference. Commitment, identification with the oppressed, solidarity, rage and political

economy are discouraged.

Academic Marxism

I struggled with my thesis and lost, but I did not stop thinking. I was in a Marxist study group with other graduate students in anthropology. It was 1973, and we were young veterans of the 1960s, the antiwar movement and the student occupations. All of us had recently returned shaking from fieldwork in the third world. We wanted to do something, so we studied Marx, trying to apply his ideas to our theses.

The study group were nice people, and we had a good time. Kate had some friends with a villa in the Chianti vineyards of Tuscany. In the spring, they let us use it free for two weeks. In the mornings we read Marx's *Capital* together,² taking turns reading two or three paragraphs aloud. Then someone would say 'I don't understand this'; someone else did not understand that. We would chew on it together till we did understand, and then another person would read the next passage. It was a good way of learning. We took turns making lunch with olive oil and strange Italian vegetables. We had red wine with the meal, and some dope. All this was new and cool then. In the afternoons some of us would drive to see old Sienna or Arezzo. The international athlete among us stripped to his sarong and practiced throwing the discus amidst the vineyards while the farmers watched in fascination. Of the eight in our group, six were couples falling in love. Then we read some more *Capital* in the early evening. The local communist party officials admired us for being Marxist intellectuals. They were middle-aged, serious men, mostly workers in the hat factory before they became party full-timers. They loaned us their car, and came over one night and showed us the slides of their holiday in Cuba.

Back home in London, we finished *Volume One* and went on to read the French Marxist philosophers Althusser and Balibar (1970).³ They were much harder to understand than Marx, partly because Marx is just very clear, but also, I think, because Marx is honest. We were looking for revolution in Marx, we found it, and we understood him. We were looking for it in Althusser too but couldn't find it, so we had difficulty making sense of what he was saying.

Balibar's work was easier, partly because he was also an anthropologist. He focused our attention on a problem in anthropology – how to understand 'the articulation of modes of production'. We had started out trying to understand capitalism. Now we were looking at the relationship between capitalism and the social relations anthropologists had traditionally studied – what used to be called 'primitive society'. Now we called it 'pre-class society', or 'classless society', or a 'tribal mode of production'. These meant roughly the same thing. The idea was that we would study how one mode of production – the traditional economic system – was linked to the capitalist mode of production.

I realized later that there was an intellectual flaw in this project. When theorists like Balibar wrote about how the capitalist mode of production articulated with the tribal modes of the Nuer, the Afghan peasant or the hunter in the Kalahari, they wrote as if capitalism confronted these tribal economies on equal terms. But that was not how it really was. Capitalism dominated and structured every detail of their lives. There was no hiding place by 1973. We all lived under capitalism, except possibly several dozen people on South Andaman.

The idea of modes of production was reproducing, in another form, the common idea in imperialist sociology that there are modern and traditional societies, the West and the rest. This approach ignores the fact that what happens in 2006 in a Kashmiri village, to yoghurt sellers in Kabul, in Detroit or La Paz, is all happening in the same year. None is more modern. All are products of the same length of history and the same global system. From one point of view Texas is the centre of capitalism; from another point of view it is Saudi Arabia. You may think New York is the future, if you have not seen Dubai. Capitalism has never been a pure system originating in the north that then spread over the world. It has always been a world system, born in a system of global trade and exploitation, the slave trade and colonialism.

That is what I know now. But back then I liked Balibar. We hardly noticed that we were suddenly dealing not with the global system and how to fight it – Marx's project – but with how to understand primitive society, anthropology's project. However, I was beginning to feel a bit apart from my friends. We had

decided, as ambitious young graduate students will, to found a journal. I argued with them about the title: the rest of our group liked *Critique of Anthropology* while I wanted *Radical Anthropology*, something punchy and fighting. I thought 'critique' sounded pretentious, like French philosophy, which was why they wanted it.⁴ I did not really understand the core of the argument we were having, but I do now, looking back. For a critique of anthropology, anthropology would be the subject, and the aim. For radical anthropology, the subject would be the world, not the discipline.

While we were arguing about the name – in a friendly way – Kate said I would be going in a different direction from them. I was surprised and upset, as I was very fond of my friends. 'You are the only one of us who's truly angry', Kate said. 'You'll do something different.' She was right. I went and joined the largest far-left party in the country, the International Socialists. They are called the Socialist Workers Party now, and I am still a member. The socialists changed me. I had been an activist for years, but they turned me towards trade unionism, where I found a solidarity and a decency I had not known before. The socialists also showed me a different way of being a Marxist intellectual. They directed me towards reading the classical tradition of Marxism – Marx certainly, but also Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and above all, Lenin (Lenin 1969, 2004; Trotsky 1971, 1979, 2004; Deutscher 1970, 2003a, 2003b; Luxemburg 1986, 1989).⁵ These gave me my first model of how to write for activists. Writing for activists was quite different from writing for academics. It was not just that the theory was different – it was a different kind of theory. The academics treated Marxism as a theory for making better social science, whereas the activists treated it as a tool for liberation. In both cases, the object of the theory was different.

I gave up on my thesis in 1975 and went to work in hospitals for many years as a porter, technician and counselor. I became a union shop steward and slowly began to recover from my silence by writing short pieces for the left press. Then the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. The left had to make sense of what had happened and choose sides. In 1981 I wrote a long piece on Afghan politics for a socialist journal (Neale 1981; see also Neale 1988, 2002). I

had found a voice, and suddenly I wrote well because I could say the things I wanted to say. The need to make sense of a difficult political choice meant I had to take the task of analysis seriously. That work gave me the confidence to write more. In 1983 I published my first book, *Memoirs of a Callous Picket* (Neale 1983), which was about hospital workers and their unions, written for shop stewards and activists. We had all been through a series of national one-day strikes the year before, and the book was an attempt to make sense of that experience for other militants. Reading it now, however, it was also clearly an ethnography informed by a long anthropological training. That book, in turn, gave me the courage to become a professional writer, and to go back to graduate school and write a thesis in social history. This experience taught me a lesson. If you want to write out of rage and a desire to change the world, write for the social movements. While this must not be confused with writing a thesis, using rage in the right way can give a writer the confidence to write good academic work as well.

I am contrasting activist and academic writing here. However, I am not saying there is anything wrong with spending half of - or all - of your time writing anthropology. Anthropology and other forms of human knowledge have their own worth. Radical anthropologists, against all the odds, have in fact contributed a wealth of good books.⁶ Moreover, that kind of work makes for better teachers, and a good teacher is always useful in this world. Indeed, this chapter has two purposes. One is to encourage intellectuals to write for the social movements. The other is to help radicals to write for the academy. I will return to say much more about writing for activists later in this chapter. For now, I turn to the academy.

Ideology in Universities

To understand how to write in universities, a radical needs first to understand the forces that try to silence her. So here I will not start with the confused student at the desk, comfort eating to avoid writing. Instead I start with the roots of her anxiety, which I believe lie in the contradictions in university education in a capitalist society. Anthropologists often write as if they worked for a discipline

and their job was called anthropologist. In fact, the great majority are teachers in universities and colleges. To understand how they have to think, we need to look not at the discipline, but at the job. The analysis that follows is asserted because there is neither time nor space here for detailed proof. However, my analysis is based on wide reading⁷ and a lifetime of experience – my own and that of my nearest and dearest, including my father, a professor of economics, my mother, a linguist, my partner and my sister. As I said at the outset, this chapter is written for radical academics. Those who know universities well can weigh my analysis against their own experience.

Universities do three central jobs in a capitalist system. First, universities and schools justify the division of labour in the whole society. Most people have the innate skill to do most jobs. Almost anyone who went to Eton can become a surgeon or an airline pilot. But the structure of the economy means that the best-paid and most satisfying jobs are in short supply. There would be a revolt if jobs were simply handed out on the basis of who your parents know and how much money they have. Instead, jobs are rationed on the basis of education. In practice, how well people do in education is more dependent on who their parents are and how much money they have than it is on anything else. But there is also an element of personal talent and hard work, so exams and grades serve to turn an unfair class system into one based on the notion that lack of success is the individual's fault. Many people hate their jobs but know they are trapped because they were not smart enough or did not work hard enough in school.

This rationing and justification works at every level of the system. It is often particularly confusing for graduate students who, having done well in exams, now find it hard not to believe in the validity of marks. From their point of view, it was not money or luck that got them an A. It was an inner something wonderful. Then they come to graduate school, where the odds are they will fail. The PhD is a preparation for a small number of jobs, much smaller than the number of people writing theses. So there are many unnamed pressures on all candidates not to complete their thesis, or to disappear once they have done so. For people who believe in the system, it can be shattering when the system

says they are stupid. The insecurity in the system runs deep and wide. I believe professors of history or English at Oxford and Harvard lie awake in bed at night worrying that the professors at Cambridge and Yale are smarter.

This insecurity has consequences for the activist who is also an academic. It means that when her seniors disapprove of her work politically, they need only tell her she is not smart enough. She will internalize that judgement, just as she internalized the earlier As. I will return to how this process works in more detail later. For the moment, let me turn to the two other main functions of the university in capitalism. The second job universities do is to interpret the world and train new professionals in ways that will be useful to business and governments. The third job is to confuse people about reality in order to keep the capitalist system going.

Ideology and Disciplines

The second and third jobs pull in different directions. Their relative importance depends partly on the nature of the discipline. The mathematics and engineering of building a bridge, for instance, must not be overloaded with ideology. No one wants the bridge to fall down – the people on the bridge, the government, and the corporations all want honest mathematics. The same is true of most chemistry, physics and geology. The necessity of justifying the system bears more strongly in other areas of science. Genetics, for instance, is torn between opposing forces. On the one hand, there is a large amount of money to be made out of good genetics that produces new products. On the other, these days a great deal of inequality between individuals in society is justified by the idea that some individuals are born different. Genetic science is under constant pressure to find genes that underlie various forms of inequality. Thus scientists who produce nonsense genetics will be rewarded along with those who make money; meanwhile a constant tug-of-war is waged within the discipline between money and nonsense.

Also relevant is the question of funding in science and engineering. There is a lot of money for nuclear physics and surgery, little for wind power and tropical diseases. Over time, this structures the questions that can be asked

and the things that can be known. However, because capitalism was born as a system for accumulation, for producing with ever greater efficiency, so on balance and in general those who control capital want serious science.

The social sciences are a different matter. Here, it would seem, the capitalists' need to control people is more important than their interest in accurate descriptions of society. This means they are greatly concerned to invent ideologies that sustain their privileges. These exist in tension with the need for understanding. The elites of capitalism, the actual human beings who run the system, need others of their kind, new blood, as well as a clear understanding of their society, economics and politics. They need universities to prepare new rulers and assistant rulers. Without these props, their companies will go broke, their country lose power to others and their whole system come under strain. To simplify a complex reality, the powerful would like universities that train smart people to work at the top and stupid people to do what they are told. But this is difficult. The people who study economics at the University of Texas El Paso can, and do, read the same books as economists at Harvard and Columbia who go on to run the World Bank. So the powerful have to lie to themselves about reality in order to lie to the rest of us.

The balance of these forces varies from one discipline in the social sciences to another. Sociology, for instance, makes a lot more sense than economics. Sociologists largely study the troubles of the poor and the problems the poor cause for governments. The people who run the system want most people to blame the poor themselves for their troubles. But because they also need people and systems to control the poor, they need social workers, parole officers and housing administrators. Those professionals have to treat the troubled with kindness while rationing what they need. At the top, the people who run the welfare state have to understand the poor in order to govern them. Sociology reflects this contradiction, producing books and articles blaming the poor, but also books and articles trying to make their lives understandable. Many sociologists try to reconcile these two approaches. One way is to write of 'social problems' – this allows the sociologist to understand individuals' pain while still seeing them as a problem. Another way is write with empathy for the

oppressed, but always to privilege the pains of identity, race, gender and sexuality over the pain of class. This contradiction at the heart of the discipline creates a space for radical sociologists. The contradiction is played out not simply inside the head of each academic, but in the contest between pieces of research. And on the edges of the liberal school, there is a contested and defensive space for the radicals.

Economics occupies a different position from sociology. Economists study capitalism itself. Almost all those in the mainstream are the custodians of the key deception in the system, the one about exploitation. The reality is that we all work, and the employers take more than their share, and the growth of the system depends on this exploitation. The surface appearance is that the boss provides the job and everyone gets paid for the work they do.⁸ Mainstream economists typically must defend this surface appearance. The cost, however, is that much of university economics makes almost no sense, which has gained it a reputation as a difficult and challenging discipline. It is hard to understand nonsense, and even harder to write it.

The trick with modern economics is that it studies something that does not exist, the world of abstract economic theory. This abstract world is quite apart from the one where we work and eat. However, the people who run corporations and governments do need some understanding of the economy. Businessmen do not use university economics. They use the thinking that comes from the *Financial Times*, *Business Week*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the Harvard Business School. Of course these writings have their ideological bias too, but they can be used. This is why *Socialist Worker* and the *Financial Times* often seem to have the same understanding of issues, even if from opposite sides. They are both edited by people who want their readers to understand the world. Still, business and corporations pay a real price for the nonsense of university economics. They mystify not only us, but themselves.

Political science lies between economics and sociology. Here too, something close to the heart of the system is being concealed, but it is not quite as central as economics. Most of political science is trivial or empty, but it touches base with reality more often than university economics. However, the

people who run the world rarely read political science, and for good reason. They read history instead.

Anthropology and Ideology

The position of anthropology has changed over the past forty years. Once it was more honest than sociology, but no longer. This is because the people anthropologists study are now more important to the world system. In the first half of the twentieth century, anthropologists mostly studied 'primitive people' who lived in huts and tents in the mountains, deserts and swamps of the colonies. These were people on the periphery of the periphery of the global system. This was true even of the Native Americans on the reservations. The global system still had an enormous, often shattering, impact on the lives of the people anthropologists studied, but those lives were unimportant to the rich and powerful in the West. Meanwhile, people like mine workers in South Africa still mattered to the system. The rich and powerful cared deeply about how to exploit them, as they did with the autoworkers of Detroit. But the anthropologists rarely studied South African mine workers; they were off in the Kalahari instead.⁹

Hence, the concerns of anthropology were far from the fear zones of power, making it possible for anthropologists to think holistically and with some clarity. Ethnographies showed how everything related to everything else. Anthropologists argued that kinship could not be understood without knowing about land ownership, nutrition, magic, gods, myths, war and chiefs. Economics, politics, psychology, society and religion were all intertwined. Most of this writing was functionalist, not Marxist or radical. It was usually backward looking – anthropologists were often writing, explicitly or implicitly, about what the society was like before colonialism, or about what they saw now, minus what they guessed were the effects of colonialism. These ethnographies were comprehensive and connected, and therefore longer, often extending to several volumes.

However, anthropologists have been running out of isolated or recently discovered people since the 1960s. Now the median informant is a peasant,

part of the global market, often in a country that matters to Washington. Many of the people studied now are workers, sometimes in the United States itself. To study these people in a holistic way would be to mount a serious challenge to the prevailing ideas that support capitalism. Indeed, the division into disciplines is perhaps the most important way that ideology confuses social scientists and makes many of their observations trivial and irrelevant. Disciplines create blinkers, and disciplinary boundaries justify ignorance of vast areas of knowledge, prohibiting crucial questions and hiding connections. Marx's insight was that work, power and love are all part of the same system. There is no economy separate from class and the state, no family insulated from power and money.

The old anthropologists were mostly not Marxists. But like Marx, they thought about wholes. Now they leave holistic thought behind when they study peasants or workers. Instead, they study a theme, or a problem, and they write about it in isolation from the rest of life. In an old ethnography, for instance, it was taken for granted that religion could not be explained without understanding the production of crops and the role of the chiefs. To say the same thing in the United States today is to say that if we want to understand what a 50-year-old working woman feels in a Baptist church in Baltimore, we also have to understand her job, the power of the corporations in the country, the federal government and American foreign policy. Moreover, we cannot understand what religion means for her if we ignore the religions of George W. Bush, Martin Luther King and Osama bin Laden. However, to put all that together would be dynamite, and not only in the United States. As Nancy Lindisfarne says in her chapter in this book, every shepherd on an Afghan hillside has a well-developed model of American imperialism in his head. He has argued about it with friends and on buses, listened to the radio, and watched carefully. It is as much part of his folk view of the world as is his classification of plants, or his experience of Islam.

Not only Afghans and shepherds, but everyone thinks about imperialism. Taxi drivers in Tahiti, auto workers in Lagos, toddy makers in Kerala, municipal officials in Taiwan and indigenous slash-and-burn farmers in the Amazon all

have their own personal analysis of American imperialism. They need one, because they think it affects their lives, or it might, or it influences the people who do control their lives. Imperialism is not, however, the only problem anthropologists face outside the United States. To join up all the dots in India or Argentina is also to mount an ideological assault on the ruling ideas of the globe. This is not just a matter of what is said; it is a matter of how it is done. Making the connections is in itself a challenge.

So nowadays anthropologists mostly study topics, not wholes. Wherever possible, they also study peripheries - the Amish, the homeless, the elderly and the Arctic. They study ethnic minorities more than majorities, and farmers in overwhelmingly urban countries. Moreover, they increasingly study parts as if they were a whole. Once anthropologists studied an Indian village. Now they may study one caste in that village, as if a caste were a society, not a job. Again, an anthropologist will study, for instance, gay men in Seattle. Built into that study is usually an assumption taken from identity politics that being gay is the most important thing about those men. However, it is easy enough to imagine any gay man in Seattle who is also a father, a Methodist, a machinist at the aircraft factory, a union steward and a bird watcher - and whose central identity, for himself, inside his head, is perhaps that he's a jazz musician at weekends.

The anthropologist, studying parts, bits, identities and peripheries does not follow the man he meets in a bar to the union hall, the bird watching club, the jazz rehearsal, or to MacDonald's with the kid on Saturday. The anthropologist does not join the dots, but stays inside the box. Somehow anthropology has changed without anyone noticing, with little public debate: it has just happened, as is the way with ideology. Some sort of disembodied capitalism, an ectoplasmic ruling-class ideology, has floated through the air into people's heads. Actually, however, people do things. They fight for ideas, control them and bend others to their will. They may do it without seeming to do it, but that is how people make ideologies work. We will return to the question of just how that happens in universities later.

Negotiating Ideology

For the moment, we need another intellectual tool – the idea that ideology is negotiated. Ideologies are built up and refined to justify the system. However, they are useless to the ruling elite if they do not become part of the thinking of the oppressed. An ideology must offer a plausible interpretation of lived experience. To be effective, it must simultaneously hide and illuminate. If it does not hide, it will not disarm them, and so it will not serve the uses of power. If it does not illuminate, the oppressed will simply discard it. Moreover, since the oppressed are not homogenous in their employment, their position in society, their experiences or their politics, a system of domination needs different ideologies for different people.

This can be seen in the national newspapers in England. The *Financial Times* serves the powerful. The *Daily Telegraph* serves the people who work for the powerful, combining a cranky resentment of the powerful with a hostility to working people and human liberation. The *Guardian* provides lies that can be adopted by teachers, social workers and journalists, lies full of compassion for the less fortunate, and liberal outrage at the failures of the system. The main lies here are that teachers and social workers are among the elite, and that as bad as things are, nothing can be done. The *Guardian* also reports all strikes with hostility, except those by teachers and social workers. The *Mirror* and the *Sun* provide two different sets of lies to manual workers.

In a similar way, sociology is directed mostly at people who will work face-to-face with the needy - sometimes revoking their parole, sometimes helping them fill out rent rebate forms. So sociology has to mix compassion for suffering with blaming the victim. Economics majors are mostly people with a fantasy that they will become rich businessmen, so the discipline can glorify greed. But economics hides the monopolies that crush small businesses and the cruel hierarchies within corporations. It also conceals the class privilege built into an ostensibly meritocratic system. Thus the creation of ideologies in universities is a complex, confused and opaque process that is easier to understand by starting with how ideologies are negotiated and policed in the media.

Another bit of ethnography will be helpful in this discussion. From 1997 to 2002 I worked as a sub-editor (or copy editor, in American English) on magazines and newspapers in London. I was a casual (or temp), brought in to replace people off sick or on holiday, so I saw a lot of publications. I thought I had a Marxist cynicism about the media, but several interconnected things surprised me. First, I was surprised at how brazenly the publications lied. This was partly by omission – there was much, in every field, that the journalists knew not to cover. Likewise, every politically unacceptable headline, photograph caption, fact and adjective was edited out. I knew this, because my job was to edit the journalists' copy as it came in and then to pass my copy to the chief sub-editor, who sent it to the editor. If the chief sub did not take out some controversial point I had left in, the editor would cross it out. This happened not only with articles on education policy for a teachers' magazine, or Palestine for an encyclopedia, but also with reviews in a show business magazine and articles on soap operas for a TV listings magazine.

I was also surprised that the editors above me had the same political understanding I did. We agreed on the precise political implications of every adjective. What I understood about the politics of any subject was what they understood. This was just as true when they were right-wing; that is, we shared an understanding of the politics but took opposite sides. The journalists mostly understood the politics too. They censored themselves by omission and commission every day. But part of my job, and the jobs of the editors above me, was to catch what the journalists were still trying to sneak through after they had censored themselves. I was prepared for editors to delete and censor uncomfortable facts. I was surprised, though, when they deleted passages and replaced them with sentences and paragraphs containing facts they had just invented, which both they and I knew not to be true.

We were all lying, and knew it, and knew how we were doing it, in detail. I found this appalling, scary and exhilarating all at the same time, because I had never met such a smart group of people. Journalists were wide open intellectually and enormous fun to talk with. What really unnerved me was that unlike in every other job I had done, the bosses were not only hands-on, they

were better at the job than we were. The editors read every word in every article, and when their changes came back they revealed acute intelligence. I think this is because to lie really well, as we did, one has to know what the truth is. This is true in personal life as well, where people who cannot distinguish reality from fantasy make very bad liars.

Knowing the truth and still lying makes journalists cynical. Cynicism is not fun to live with or carry inside, so many journalists drink too much. There were days at work when I sat at my computer, saying to myself very quietly, over and over, 'I never kiss them on the mouth, I never kiss them on the mouth.' Every time I tell a journalist this, she laughs. They know. This tension explains a paradox. Journalists are the most left-wing group of people I have ever worked with, as becomes obvious in conversation. Over the past twenty years the most left-wing unions in the country have been those of the journalists, the firefighters and the mineworkers. Even in the dark days of the 1990s, when almost no proprietors recognized the National Union of Journalists, half the journalists in the country paid their union dues in secret every month - for nothing, really, except loyalty to an idea.

This seems odd at first sight, because journalists churn out right-wing garbage. But the reason for this paradox is that they know reality. They have to know reality to lie well, and because they know reality they tend to be left-wing. In a way, for many, their politics are their personal piece of integrity, the sign that they do not kiss on the mouth. However, there is a constantly negotiated space between journalist and editor, because a publication's ideology is constantly negotiated with the reader. Magazines and newspapers have to sell. They have competitors. Tens or hundreds of thousands of real people have to want to read those words in their own free time. This is true even if the publication depends mainly on advertisements: without the readers, they won't get the ads. So there is always a tension between the values of the publication's owners and those of its readers. The space created by that tension is where journalists, sub-editors and editors argue over copy.

For instance, I worked on a magazine for schoolteachers owned by a multinational corporation. The corporation's politics were conservative on all

issues, and aligned with Tony Blair and New Labour. The editor had to push this, but at the same time everyone at the magazine also knew the politics of most teachers, whose social attitudes were somewhat left of centre. At least half of teachers voted Labour, but they were also consumed with fury over what the government was doing to their working lives. They particularly hated school inspections, the management dialect they called 'New Labour bollocks', and the petty rules and paperwork that ate their lives. Thus any news story or opinion piece that attacked management or the government would attract readers. Putting it on the front page sold still more. If the adjectives of rant and spleen were left in, the readers would warm to them. All this went against the corporation's politics but made it money.

However, job advertisements for teachers were a key source of income. They were placed by middle-level and senior management in education, managers who resented government policy but would be uneasy if the magazine was too radical. This tension made for constant dialogue between journalists and editors, between junior and senior editors, and inside the head of each editor. The most important conflict was over the headlines used for critical stories. Angry, shouting, simple headlines would attract teachers but alienate their managers and ours. The working compromise tended to be balanced headlines on the front page, with more space for rage inside. In short, the magazine represented a negotiated ideology. The background to that negotiation was the power of the corporations, the teachers and the managers. The consequence was a constant deferential struggle on the newsroom floor.

This example deals with material – educational policy – that those involved consciously see as political. But similar processes worked in a TV listings magazine aimed at a working-class audience, in a family encyclopedia of history, and in magazines aimed at the acting profession, doctors, nurses and the airline industry. Most of the readers probably did not see these articles as inherently political. Both my editors and I, however, understood the political implications of the personal and mundane. In each case, the ideology was negotiated, and negotiated in a different way, for a different audience, with a different balance of forces.

This balance of forces is not static, of course. Public opinion changes. People learn from experience. The British public largely supported the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and then opposed the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Teachers voted for Blair, hoped for change, and came to hate New Labour. The balance of forces is not only determined by experience. Political organization matters. A small opposition has to rely on the media for publicity and usually gets none, while a large opposition with its own organization has militants who can speak to people directly. When that happens, the mainstream media have to recognize that their audience is hearing another voice in the other ear. So, for instance, French intellectuals and newspapers alike have traditionally written in the knowledge that all of their audience is familiar with basic Marxist ideas, because the communist party in France has been a real power. In the United States, the media and universities are free to pretend class does not exist. In the same way, teachers in Britain are partly able to think against government policy because they belong to unions that constantly argue against it. Opinion about the war on terror in Britain changed between 2001 and 2003 partly because the Stop the War Coalition organized the largest demonstration in British history.

Another example comes from the United States. The historian Linda Gordon has traced the politics of social workers in Boston in the twentieth century by going through case notes (Gordon 1988). She found that through most of the century the social workers usually blamed the poor for their own problems. The exceptions were the 1930s and the 1960s, when there were mass movements of resistance in the United States. In those years, the social workers tended to side with their clients explicitly and to blame their problems on the system. The same process happens in universities, where teachers can, and sometimes do, force students to regurgitate the mainstream political opinions of the discipline. This is generally known as 'learning theory' or 'learning anthropology'. Teachers also have a good deal of control over what the students say in the class. But they are not the only people in the classroom. It is a human situation, and the teacher wants the respect of the students.

In militant periods, like the 1930s, 1960s and 2000s, that respect is conditional. The students may not contradict the mainstream teacher, but even

if the teacher does not allow himself to know their contempt and alienation, he senses it. The radical teacher, in such times, takes heart and courage from the exuberance of a classroom where opposition ideas are openly discussed. In the 1960s, for instance, Marshall Sahlins became the anthropologist of his generation with the greatest impact on American life. This was not a result of his anthropology; it was because while he was a graduate student at the University of Michigan he suggested the first teach-in against the Vietnam War (Neale 2003: 126). The opposite is also true. In times of deep reaction, like the 1950s and 1980s, the mainstream teacher takes heart in the classroom and the radical teacher loses hope. The hegemony of postmodernism in the 1980s has to be understood in this context. Ideology, then, is negotiated, and constantly renegotiated. The right, the corporations and the government can lose ground. When they do, they try to recoup it by designing a new ideology that incorporates the experience of the opposition, but still sets limits to what can be thought.

How Ideology Is Policed in Universities

I will now return to ideology in universities, and the pressures that bear on radical graduate students and staff. The ruling class need clarity in their thought, and they need good teachers. So there must be some space for clarity and intellectual honesty in universities. That opens the door to radical thinkers. At the same time, because ideology is negotiated, there is an ideological range in the university. The radicals enter and survive on the left of one wing of that negotiation. The larger the independent struggle in the wider society, the greater the space for radicals. This space is real, but it also defensive and beleaguered. Universities are run by the government, by the church, by boards of rich people, or by some combination of the above. More important, in Marx's phrase, 'the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class'. This is true in every society, and happens in a thousand ways.

It is reasonable to expect some space for radicals in anthropology, and to expect to be taken seriously. It would be mad, however, to think that the mainstream of anthropology would become radical. Radical anthropologists

must also realize that they are always under pressure. Like women, or people of colour, they always have to perform better – particularly if they already are women or people of colour. One of the keys to survival in this situation is to realize just how heavy is the weight of mainstream ideology on radical shoulders.

Moreover, there is a difference between how ideology works in the media and in universities. In universities students have to read what they are assigned. It does not matter if the prose is arcane, thorny, confused or incoherent. These prose styles can be taken as signs of difficulty, and therefore complexity, sophistication and intellectual worth. If a magazine is similarly incomprehensible, people will simply stop reading. Journalists and editors do not have to write simplistically, but they have to be clear and make sense. In the universities ideological problems can be papered over with sentences that are hard to understand because they do not make sense. Journalists cannot do this. Instead of muddying the waters, they have to lie clearly.

In the media there is one insider knowledge, and another thing that is said to the public. This is unimaginable in universities. Senior professors do not take young lecturers aside at the beginning of their careers and explain to them that there is the sociology we tell the students, and then there is the secret true knowledge we talk about in the bar after work. What happens in universities is something altogether more confused and confusing. People lie to themselves and each other, behind their own backs. This does not mean that there is no enforcement and management of ideology in universities, but it means that the process of management is more complex and muddled, and less visible. For the university system to work as it does, it is necessary for the teachers to believe they are speaking their own thoughts. It is also necessary for senior scholars and management to act as if they are allowing people to think their own thoughts. It is even necessary for most senior scholars to think in their own heads that they are doing this. However, it is also necessary to the ruling class that some kinds of thinking are encouraged, and other sorts are silenced or humiliated. So how can ideologies be enforced without anyone noticing?

The example of discrimination in universities is helpful in understanding

this. Most university teachers, and probably most managers, are genuinely in favour of equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities. But take a look at any department of English or anthropology. The majority of undergraduates are women – in English, a large majority. A smaller majority of the graduate students are women. But by the time we reach junior lecturers and assistant professors, there is usually a majority of men in the anthropology department, and in English more men than there were among graduate students. Look at the heights of each subject, and you see receding hairlines. The same discrimination happens to people from ethnic minorities, and particularly to students from abroad. Class, although seldom referred to in an equal opportunities context, matters even more. A private education, a family with money, good manners, a smooth voice and fluent English grammar will carry one through a lot of interviews.

For many years, friends and family from American universities told me that such things happened in Britain because the law was weak. In the United States, they said, the deans were terrified of the courts and forced everyone to practice equal opportunities. But when my partner got a job at an Ivy League college for a year, we quickly saw the same pattern as in Britain.

Yet no one, at any stage, is publicly prejudiced, and almost no one is privately a bigot. One possible explanation is that invisible evil fairies fly into the ears of the panel and crawl up into their brains. Another possible explanation is that panels tend to select people they like, because those people are like them – or, to be more precise, they choose people who resemble the most powerful person in the room. For the powerful person, this process feels benign from the inside, and quite unlike bigotry. For the less powerful people on the panel, it feels confusing.

The point of all this is that university teachers are accustomed to deceiving and mystifying themselves, yet power is still exerted. This happens in several ways. Funding, for one, is crucial. A small number of funders, particularly governments and a few foundations, control what kind of research is done, and within what framework. Young scholars may start out by applying for that money with a deep cynicism. They fill the form with words they regard as

waffle and lies. They tell themselves, I will get through this and then study what I want to. But their monographs eventually come out and validate the existence of a new, funder-created field like 'social exclusion'. The required language of the forms leaks down through committees, introductions and reading lists, until 'multiculturalism' and 'civil society' are everywhere. Soon, students are consuming as knowledge what everyone knew was hypocrisy ten years ago. I remember one staff meeting where a senior colleague grew increasingly agitated in her chair, squirming and fidgeting. Finally she burst out, 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't say this, I know that, but this is all New Labour bollocks'. We all told her that yes it was, and it was all right to say that, but we had to do this. Then we went back to doing it.

It is not only funding that controls research. Visas are particularly important for anthropologists. If you tell the truth about Egypt, or Syria, or even India, you will not get research permission again. More important, neither will your students or other people from your institution. For this reason anthropologists have traditionally censored themselves in reporting national politics. This produces students who have read the monographs and think that national politics, corruption, the American embassy and the secret police are unimportant in understanding village life.

Then there is the hierarchy of academic life. Most university teachers are not part of a social elite, and most of their students are destined for ordinary white-collar jobs. However, the most prestigious universities – Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and the like – have quite close ties to the government and the ruling class. They educate the children of the elite and they recruit new people to the elite, who might become Henry Kissinger or Condoleezza Rice. The social position, and sometimes the income, of professors at such institutions is very comfortable. The prevailing ideas suit them, feel right. The large majority of students and the majority of university teachers have a different daily experience. Teachers at lesser colleges look to the elite institutions for intellectual validation. They assign books by people from Cambridge and Yale. They gain prestige by having a book published by Princeton University Press, not by their own institution. Their work is evaluated

by journal reviewers, editors and research panels disproportionately recruited from the elite. Moreover, in any generation a large proportion of the staff at lesser colleges are recruited from among the graduate students of the elite.

All this means that the values appropriate to people close to the ruling class permeate down through academe. I have argued above that graduate students, because they did well at school and got good grades, are particularly likely to internalize the values of academic hierarchy. Then they attend national and international scholarly conferences where this hierarchy is ceremonially displayed, enforced and validated. There is also the detail of daily interaction within an institution. Here mentoring, patronage and supervision are crucial. Students are accustomed to look for an older person who will take them under her wing, encourage them, steer them, praise them, care for them as people and gently correct them. This book is evidence that the process can be beautiful when it works. But it also provides a large hierarchical space for disciplining the dissident. This can be done, and is most effectively done, by mixing a subtle indication of boundaries with praise and nurture. It can, however, also be done with cruelty.

Then there is the staff seminar, along with the other occasions when work is made public. In these situations it is not customary to say that a paper is too left-wing. Other strategies work better. There is the raised eyebrow in Britain, or the politely dismissive moderator in the United States. There are also some standard intellectual ploys. One is to say that actually the reality is a good deal more complex than that described in the paper, which, of course, is always true, of every paper. It is used when the mainstream professor cannot deny the reality, or human importance, of what has been said. The effect, and the intended effect, is to make the paper giver feel stupid. It also conveniently ignores the political truth that reality is always complicated, but the choice between two sides is simple.

Another, more confrontational maneuver, is to use comments and body language to make the paper giver feel crude, or as if they were ranting. After all, someone who is enraged, and trying to express something difficult to an unfriendly audience, is actually quite likely to find herself ranting. Then there is

the discipline ploy. 'That is interesting, but it is not anthropology,' or 'not history', or 'not sociology' or 'not my field'. This tactic seems ideologically neutral. What it actually does is forbid holistic thinking. You cannot think about connections as long as you think within a discipline. Yet this appeal to disciplinary loyalty is often met with a general chuckle.

All these rhetorical ploys work by misdirection. In most cases, it is a powerful person who takes this line, a professor or a rising star. He does so because he feels that the radical has most of the seminar on her side politically, and everyone in the room knows she has called attention to something that does happen and is important. The professor is saying, 'We won't talk about it, because we do not talk about things like that. And if we have to discuss them, we do not do it that way'.

There is also the more direct attack. Most radicals are vulnerable to this, as are most other people who write papers. There are always weaknesses in a paper, and they are mostly in sight of the seminar. It is only necessary to go for them when you want to shut someone up. There is the query of the footnotes, the savaging of syntax, the flagging up of the missed reading, and the logical error nailed down. This can be devastatingly effective. I said earlier that the silencing of radical voices is always overdetermined. Failures are always in part caused by individual weakness. It can be devastating to be attacked for political reasons by someone who does not admit the political reasons and instead zeroes in on other faults. The victim can crumple inside.

All of these pressures come together to silence some people within the academy. They are by no means only used on radicals. Indeed, these techniques are easily to hand because they are weapons in daily use. In almost every academic department, there is a member of staff who has been silenced, and usually more than one. That person was bright once, and hopeful, and is often still a dedicated teacher respected by his students. And yet he could not write the book, or cannot write, and is humiliated over and over for that. Each humiliation silences him further, and is an awful warning to the rest. Radicals can be bullied, because schools and universities are rife with bullying. There is often more kindness at the less important colleges, where people have been

hurt and do not wish to hurt each other, but those are not the places where ideologies are built and validated.

When these personal techniques fail, there is the direct sanction. This usually takes three forms. One is to fail the thesis. The second is to keep someone in part-time casual teaching forever until they give up and go away. The third, mainly used in the United States, is the denial of tenure. All of these are shattering for the person they happen to, but they are taken as a warning far more widely. The direct victim often experiences personal failure; however, other radicals may see it as punishment for going too far.

All those little quips in seminars are taken as warnings of what will happen to those who do not listen. Probably they are meant to be taken that way. In North America, the periods of writing the thesis and waiting for tenure both last longer now, typically until a person is about forty. The Jesuits used to have a saying about their schools, 'Give me a child until he is ten, and he is mine for life.' There is quite a lot of evidence this is not true. But give me an anthropologist until he is forty, and he is certainly mine for life.

The Functions of Confusion

One more piece of the puzzle needs explaining – the role of confusion in universities. Confusion seems to work in three ways. Firstly, ideas are policed in a confusing way. In a university under a dictatorship, people know what is happening. But absent the secret police, everything seems personal. There are kind supervisors and unkind ones, very smart and less smart students, embarrassing mistakes in manuscripts and people who burst into tears after seminars. Unless it is understood that what is happening is not personal, people get lost in confusion. Most people around them are already lost.

The second kind of confusion is at the level of ideas. An ideology hides and confuses reality. This makes the ideology confusing. Not only is some reality missing, but certain steps in a logical argument must be skipped. At the same time, a good ideology also incorporates and illuminates parts of reality. This makes it more difficult for the novice to understand what is illusion and what is reality.

The third kind of confusion happens with language. Lies are being told, but they are told in complicated ways, not fully understood by those who are telling them. All this must be fudged over. For that purpose, there grows a habit of dense language, which when boiled down says nothing, or is a platitude, or untrue. But that language itself becomes admired, and imitated. Much academic prose is impenetrable not because the writers are stupid, but because they are trying to conceal reality or cannot make sense of reality. So they use ten-dollar words and elephant syntax to muddy over parts of an argument that do not work. Such language is difficult to read, and very difficult to write. Thinking illogically, without being aware of doing so, is challenging. The production of such ideology is a considerable skill that confuses both the reader and the writer.

Writing for the Movement

In short, it is difficult for the radical anthropologist to make herself heard within the university. There are things I know that can help in this project. One of them I have already mentioned – to write for the movement as well as an academic audience. Let me return now to writing as an activist. Writing as an activist is a very different project from writing as an academic. One way to make this clear is to take the example of a non-Marxist theory for activists – psychoanalysis. People who write literary criticism in English departments often use psychoanalysis as a theory of the human mind. It is that, but it is mainly a theory for activists, a tool for healing. Freud's important works are mostly about particular patients, and therapists refer to them by the name of the patient, not the title of the paper. 'Dora' we say, not 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria', and 'The Wolf Man', not 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis' (Freud 1977, 1979). The theory of psychoanalysis was developed, and then extended, by doctors, analysts and therapists. It was born and grew in the practice of listening to the mad and the desperate.

For most therapists today, the test of the theory is simple. How do I know if this theory makes sense? I use it to give the client an interpretation. Does that enlighten the patient? Do they say 'Oh, wow'? Does it help them to heal? Or do

they dismiss it as boring and irrelevant? In the end, the patient is the judge. Therapists try their best to choose theories that seem to make sense of the world in a way that is useful to the people they try to help. Cultural theorists do not understand this. They treat psychoanalysis as a theory of the mind, which can then be used to explain this or that text. Unlike the patients, the texts cannot reply, so an obvious question recurs again and again in cultural theory: How on earth do you know that? The cultural theorists treat a theory for healing as if it were a theory of literature.

The difference between academic Marxism and activist Marxism is similar. When I began reading activist Marxists in 1974, I found book after book written in the heat of a particular strike wave, revolution or moment of terrible defeat for unions and democracy. These books were all about, in Lenin's phrase, What is to be done? They were part of an argument inside a movement about what the whole group should do next. But to understand what to do in changing circumstances, the men and women who wrote these books had to go back to Marxist theory. In developing that understanding in the new situation, they developed and changed that theory.

For instance, Lenin wrote *State and Revolution* in the summer of 1917 (Lenin 2004; for historical background see Cliff 1975). Academic Marxists often read the book as about the nature of the capitalist state. It is that, but Lenin did not start there. He was one of the leaders of a movement in a situation clearly pregnant with revolution, and indeed he would lead that revolution two months later. So his book addressed a pressing problem: What kind of revolution should we make?

To answer that question, Lenin had to go back to his reading and think hard about the capitalist state. He had been a social democrat all his adult life. All that time, social democrats across the world had been trying to win elections in order take control of the state. Where there was a dictatorship, as in Russia, they fought to have elections so they could then win them. But Lenin had now come to see that they had to smash the state. This was not a slogan; it was the experience Lenin was living. He was hiding underground, in a factory workers' suburb. There had been a democratic revolution six months before, and yet the

liberal and socialist government was hunting him. Most Russians wanted peace, bread and land. But the new state, like the old state, would not give them to the people.

Lenin knew that his side, his people, his party, the whole working class, had to fight back. And so, because he was a Marxist intellectual, he went to the deeper theoretical questions to understand what to do next. What he found, in the pages of Marx (1977) writing on the Paris Commune, was the idea that workers could not take over the old state. That state was not an abstraction but both an organization and a group of real living people. Those people would block workers' power. Workers would have to sack the bureaucrats and rule in a new way, from elected workers' committees, with new people running things. This was not quite how things turned out. Indeed, reading *State and Revolution* is an aching lesson in the difference between the democrat Lenin was and the fate of the state he founded and Stalin ruled.

Rosa Luxemburg's work provides more examples of the dialectical relationship between immediate politics and theory. She wrote *Reform or Revolution* in 1899 as part of a debate inside the Social Democratic Party in Germany. The SPD (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) had started out underground, illegal and revolutionary. Now that it was legal, in parliament, with open trade unions, the right wing of the SPD began to argue against the tradition of revolution. Bernstein, one of the leaders of the right, wrote a book on this theme. Luxemburg's book is a reply (Bernstein 1909; Luxemburg 1989). The argument inside the party did not end there, and the right became stronger. Luxemburg was an immigrant to Germany, originally from the part of Poland then governed by the Russian empire. In 1905 the workers of that empire rose in their first revolution. Luxemburg went back to be part of that and then wrote *The Mass Strike* (Luxemburg 1989). That book was not reportage but rather part of the continuing argument in the German movement. It addressed the problem of how, if parliamentary leadership is moving to the right, working-class revolutionaries can change the world. Luxemburg now had an answer: do what they're doing in Russia, mass political strikes and industrial strikes from below.

However, in the midst of these daily arguments Luxemburg kept finding

herself dragged back to a theoretical question. Why was the leadership of the German party moving to the right? Why were they supporting the German patriotism? She turned to Marxist economics and wrote *The Accumulation of Capital* in 1908 (Luxemburg 2003). Luxemburg argued, following Marx, that there was an inherent tendency for the rate of industrial profits to fall. Imperialism and colonialism constantly allowed capitalism to raid old centres of profit, so they were necessary to keep the whole system going.

I do not agree with Luxemburg's answer (see debate in Luxemburg and Bukharin 1972), but that is not the point here. The point is that the immediate question can only be answered by understanding the global whole. In order to solve their problems, thinkers like these had to push the general theory on. So Lenin's understanding of the state is useful every time you have to think about the effect of socialists taking government office in a coalition. Luxemburg's theory of the mass strike is helpful in understanding what happened in Iran in 1979, or Nepal in 1989, or Bolivia in 2005. In short, the Marxist intellectuals I was now reading were arguing strategy, and therefore developing a theoretical understanding of the whole system. This was quite different from what I had done as a Marxist academic, when I was trying to use Marxism to create anthropology.

There was another crucial difference between these Marxists and academic writers like Althusser. Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky are easier to understand. This is not because they were less intelligent; rather, they wanted to be understood because they wanted to convince the activists in the movement to do something. The great majority of activists and local leaders in their movements were workers who had left school at a young age. Therefore, they wrote in ways those activists could understand, treating their audience as intelligent and deeply committed, but not academically trained.

Academic writing, including Marxist academic writing, seeks a different audience, in a different way. Students do not have to be persuaded. They are assigned reading and examined on it. If they find the reading difficult, that is not evidence of the stupidity and clumsiness of the author. Instead, the student reader is presumed thick and awkward. It is sometimes assumed that the more

sophisticated the thinking on the page, the harder it will be to understand. There is no evidence for this assumption, but it is a hardy one in academic circles. Almost never is an academic heard to say, 'I tried reading that book, but it was too hard for me, so I stopped. I don't want to waste my life reading someone who can't write.'

Academic language is used to subordinate, to frighten students, to obscure, to compete and to exclude. It is often opaque, because it is not for looking through. Activist language is meant to be understood and used. In the years since I joined the socialists, I have continued to be a Marxist and an activist. What I have noticed is that other activists use theory and argue strategy in broadly similar ways. They may be autonomists, anarchists, labour activists, pacifists, greens, or feminists. They may understand the crucial forces and divisions in the world in different ways from Marxists. But they too use their theory as a set of tools to change the world.

There is another parallel here between psychoanalysis and political activism. It is often said that social scientists, unlike hard scientists, cannot conduct experiments. But political movements and parties are conducting experiments all the time. They argue over what to do. Some people say that reality is this way, and if we do this, the consequences will be this. Others say reality is that way, and if we do that, the consequences will be that. Then the activists look at what happens. On that basis, they judge who was right, and which theory worked. They take into account not only whether a strategy won, but whether the employers, the Conservative Party, the trade union leaders, the Labour Party, their workmates and their neighbours reacted in the way one theory predicted, or in the way another theory predicted. Whole populations of ordinary people judge and weigh the activists and politicians in the same way – were their predictions useful?

Of course in the short term it is not quite that simple. Many things get in the way – lies, hope, fear and denial. But the test of political thought is still to ask what happened.

How to Write

Each piece of my argument is now in place. We can see why it is difficult for the radical anthropologist to write. We can see how activists write for a movement. Now we turn to what might help in the writing. The first thing is to know what you are up against, so you do not internalize it. That is the point of my long discussion of ideology in universities. The second thing I find helpful is to think of writing as a part of class struggle. This is clear enough when the oppressed attempt to speak about politics in mainstream contexts: they are challenging power. Speaking out is in itself part of a struggle. When an oppressed person sits down to write, however, that class struggle also happens inside their own head. There is the passion to take sides and the desire to tell the truth of, and for, the oppressed. Then, too, there is the voice of the system, of education, perhaps of anthropology - the voice that says, 'You cannot say that, and you cannot say it that way. You will be punished for that. And anyway, you are not smart enough.' Once you realize that the class struggle is going on inside your head, it is possible to decide to fight. Then you can take sides inside your head, and let the subaltern speak. But never kid yourself about how hard the struggle is, or how important.

Another useful strategy is the one I stumbled on in my own life: to split, writing one thing for the academy and another thing for activists. Ordinarily, graduate students and young teachers try to write for both. In a sense, they are trying to write for people like themselves. This strategy puts them in a very tight and conflicted space. As they write each sentence, they notice it is too direct for the professors, or too convoluted for the activists - or, often, both at once. So they rewrite the sentence and then delete it. Or they write an academic paper, in academic language, while underneath there is a fury bubbling to be free. Suddenly they are ranting, and then, embarrassed, they return to silence.

The contradiction is real, and not their fault. One solution is to write for both audiences separately. That may seem like more work, but it is not. If you can write happily for both audiences, you can write twice as much in less time. Splitting your audience frees you to write for activists, in language they can use, sharing assumptions and loyalties, directly to their concerns. The academy will

not contaminate this writing. Simultaneously, it frees you to write for academics. That feeling of silence, of omission, of lack of integrity, disappears. You can write about weddings, ethnobotany, spirit mediums or land ownership. It is still possible to write with integrity, not to conceal or lie. The point is that this kind of writing is not a means by which to change the world. It is a thesis, or a paper, or a monograph. The aim is to write something you are not ashamed of in the hope that you will get a job. You need not harbour illusions: an article in an academic journal will not change the world. However, it will inform some people and be valued by those academics who think.

Other kinds of writing will help change the world. The movements of the oppressed always need intellectuals. Whereas the mainstream has bright and capable thinkers by the thousands, our side has handfuls. Many universities are also full of people who sympathize with mass movements and march on the big demonstrations, but very few of those people are organic intellectuals of the movement. We need every one we can get, to write for our publications, speak at all the small meetings, proofread the leaflets, and use their brains on our committees. Above all, the movements need theory. A movement from below must understand the world in its complexity, or be smashed. It must also know, amidst all that complexity, the simple and most important link in the chain, the place to fight.

The most useful thing a radical intellectual can do is to identify one of the key arguments in a mass movement, then think about it as hard as possible and write about it, intervening in the movement. Even the writer who gets it wrong will learn by trying. To intervene in arguments, you have to understand the movement. That means reading the articles and books from inside the movement. It also means going to the meetings, talking to people, participating. The arguments begin in the meetings, and around drinks afterwards, before they happen in print. Only by being part of a movement can you learn how to talk to activists.

Anthropologists often face a choice of movements, because their research may happen in a different country from their political activity. In this situation either, or both, is an appropriate place to start. Most anthropologists

have something to contribute to the arguments on the left in the countries where they carry out research, but there is no moral reason why that should be the main focus of your political thought. The focus could just as easily, and as usefully, be the movements in your home country.

In either case, I am not talking about intellectual work that explains the oppressed or justifies them before the academy. Rather, I am talking about writing as part of arguments among the oppressed about how to fight. Once positioned in that way, some worries that beset anthropologists disappear. The first is the problem of 'agency'. Anthropologists and sociologists can debate forever to what extent people are in control of their own world. Once you are trying to change that world, alongside them, you realize the power of Marx's formulation – 'men (and women) make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing'. The question of agency becomes a lived question, the answer to which is always partial and fought for.

Another problem that goes away is cultural relativism, or the liberal agony about how to deal with the faults and weaknesses of the oppressed. Someone who is writing something to defend the oppressed in front of the oppressors will tend to prettify the poor. But someone writing from within the movement of the oppressed is talking to people who understand only too well the weaknesses of their own side. You treat those weaknesses not as embarrassments, but as obstacles to unity.

Differences from Academic Writing

There are important differences between this sort of writing within a movement and academic writing. One difference is time scale. The anthropologist comes back from fieldwork and takes two years to write a thesis. In the next couple of years she publishes a couple of articles in academic journals. Five, ten or fifteen years after fieldwork, she publishes a book. This is useless to the movement. When writing politics, you write now. What is most important to understand, and to act on, is that which is changing. If you learn something in your studies, the movement needs to know that now. To reach the activists, you need to publish in their journals. They will publish an article quickly, within weeks. The academy

will pay no attention whatsoever, and it is probably even best to leave such activist writing off your CV. Notably, the left press also publishes books, and it takes only months.

A second difference is in object. For an academic piece, the object is likely to be anthropology. There is nothing wrong in that. When writing for a radical audience, though, the object is the struggle, and the background is a tradition of radical theory. Another difference is in audience, even if the difference is not quite as great as expected. In writing nonfiction, it is very helpful to pick an imagined reader - not an abstract one, but a particular person the writer knows. My imagined reader as I wrote my first book about hospital unions was my friend Alistair, who was a shop steward for engineering workers and electricians in a hospital. A union militant, he had left school at sixteen, served an apprenticeship, and come to hate management. He distrusted the left and all rhetoric, did not read widely, and was highly intelligent.

Once you select the imagined reader, the writing gets easier. You know what you can assume, what you have to explain, and what you have to argue for. You also know what style to use – not so simple as to make readers feel condescended to, and not so baroque as to make them feel excluded. As you write you can also hear the questions they would ask, the objections they would make, the arguments that must be met. There is no call to obsess over those readers who won't like the book anyway. The trick is always to pick a particular, named reader, not a representative of some category. The book need not be shown to that person until it is published. Your imagined reader might not like it, and that might silence you. Rather, the imagined reader is a useful tool to help write for an audience.

Obviously, the imagined reader for activist work will be different from the one for academic work. But they are not that different – the activist reader will be at least as intelligent as the academic reader. Activists tend to be smart. Moreover, the key in political activity is always to persuade the people who think most clearly, for they are the people who will persuade the rest. To make an argument, the best way is to assume that the reader is generally on the same side as the writer, but differs on this issue, yet still can be won over.

The selected academic reader, like the activist reader, should be on the writer's side. Fluency is spurred by writing for academic equals who are willing to accept what is said. It is a mistake to write for superiors, particularly if the writer is nervous about impressing them. Many of them dislike passionate activists, and it is fruitless to tie yourself in knots trying to please them. Colleagues who sympathize are a preferable target audience. The writing will be better and may actually be more likely to impress the professors.

There is one more important difference that people often do not notice. In writing for activists, it is usually a mistake to start with a critique of the ruling ideology. Defining yourself against something that is confused makes it hard to think clearly. It is more productive to start by putting together your own analysis. I do not mean that mainstream reading should be ignored, for of course, most of the source material will be found there. What I mean instead is that you should read radical writers you really admire and try to apply their methods to the analysis of a new subject.

For instance, in 1999 I wrote a history of the Vietnam War (Neale 2003). The book grew out of my involvement in the U.S. movement against the Kosovo War. I could see then that there were going to be more imperialist wars and bigger peace movements, although I did not foresee the scale of what was coming. I wanted my book to explain both the weaknesses and the strengths of the movement against the Vietnam War in ways that a new movement would find useful. When I began the book I took on the arguments of other writers on the war and the peace movement. I started where they did, and tried to see what I could use and what to discard. The result was that my prose became increasingly difficult, and it grew harder for the reader to understand what I was saying. I kept having to lay out one argument and then take it apart. It was hard for the reader to know what was happening in the story of the war. So I changed course. I decided to see what would happen if I told the story of the war, bearing in mind Marx and Engels' phrase that all of past history is the history of class struggle. I looked for class struggle in the American army, in South Vietnamese villages, in North Vietnam, inside the Viet Cong guerilla army and inside the American peace movement. Everywhere I looked I found it, and the story began

to make sense. I leave it to the reader to judge how well this worked – the point here is that it became easy to write.

To argue with the mainstream, from inside the mainstream, is like trying to run with a paper bag over your head, all the while tearing at the bag with your hands. Moreover, it is usually not the most effective way to challenge the prevailing ideas. The real way to challenge them is to use other ideas, and to demonstrate that they explain people's experience better. It may also make for fewer enemies in the academic world.

Bad First Drafts

One final point is that it is desirable to write shitty first drafts. I take this point from Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* (1985), the best book I know on how to write. She says that most people who try to write hear critical voices in their heads telling them they're writing shit. Those voices are right. First drafts are not good. If they were, they would be the final draft. The goal of writing the first draft is to get something down. The later drafts are for making it good. There are two mistakes a writer can make when they hear that voice say, 'This is shit'. One is positive thinking. The writer tells herself that the critical voices are destructive, and she must have faith in herself. The flaw in this strategy is that the voice is right, and positive thinking will eventually crumble before reality. The smart thing to do is not worry that it is shit, and keep going.

The other mistake is to stop and rewrite until it is good. Finishing a bad first draft is the single largest hurdle in writing a good book. Most people who complete a first draft of a thesis, no matter how bad, finish the thesis. Most people who do not finish wrote some early chapters and got lost rewriting them.

So my advice is to write shitty first drafts, and be pleased. This is good council for any writer, but it is particularly important to radicals inside a university, for several reasons. They are under considerable pressure and the critical voices in their heads are likely to be loud. They may have a critical supervisor. Both the pressure and the confused nature of much academic writing mean that their first draft is also likely to be muddled and chaotic. Some of the rest will be hysterical rant.

Moreover, any writer has trouble saying things outside what is normally allowed. This applies when writing into the unconscious, and when writing outside the political rules, for it is frightening to write in these ways. If the fear of saying the unsayable is joined to the fear of writing badly, it becomes very difficult to write. To allow the devil to speak, one must get out of his way. The result may be brilliant, or a mess, or both. But once the first draft is done and the second draft begun, then the critical inner voice is suddenly a friend: before, it shut the writer up; now, it allows him to edit. Write in fire, rewrite in ice.

Finally, the split I have recommended between two kinds of writing is a survival strategy. Splitting is necessary in many parts of life. People split between work and home, love and money, in order to stay sane and behave well. But these splits are always pretending, for the connections are real. It is necessary to act with some love at work, or you become a monster. Alienation is the price we always pay for splitting.

Splitting between activism and the academy is particularly necessary while embarking on a career. Once established, it is easier to be braver. Then the ways you have grown in political life can feed back into the social science. The work is enriched by a feel for the life of a mass movement, a clarity about power, a habit of thinking holistically, and the attention to detail and honesty that comes with debating things that really matter.¹⁰ Along the way, you will have given something of your brain and your skills to the long struggle to change the world. I do not believe that my primary duty to the people I knew in Afghanistan all those years ago is to write a good ethnography. Instead I do what I can, where I am, to stop the suffering.

- ¹ This story comes from my fieldnotes.
- ² The best English translation, although not the one we used, is Marx 1972.
- ³ We read Althusser and Balibar 1970.
- ⁴ *Critique of Anthropology* won, and has been a fine journal over many years since.
- ⁵ For the historical background, I would add now Tony Cliff's more recent biography of Lenin; see Cliff (1975, 1985, 1987).
- ⁶ In addition to those cited elsewhere, my personal favourites include Breman (1996, 2003); Lindisfarne (1991, 2001a); Manz (2004); Nash (1979, 2001); Ngai (2005); Nordstrom (2004); Rhodes (2004); Sacks (1988); de Waal (1997); Turner (1998); and Young (1995).
- ⁷ Among the books I have found most useful for thinking about the making of universities and ideologies are Rees (1998); Marx and Engels (1970); Biskind (2001); Price (1989); Schrecker (1986); Wolf (1982); di Leonardo (2000); Wiener (2005); J. Ferguson (1990); B. Ferguson (1995); Thompson (1978); Boron (2005); and Lindisfarne (2001b). The analysis here is also deeply in debt to ten years of conversations with Nancy Lindisfarne.
- ⁸ This is the central argument of Marx's *Capital*.
- ⁹ Which is not to say that they did not do interesting and useful work in the Kalahari. I think particularly of Richard Lee's landmark Marxist analysis (Lee 1979), but also of Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's very different memoir (Thomas 1969).
- ¹⁰ There are enough examples of this synthesis. E. P. Thompson's towering achievement, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968) is academic

social science at its very best, the model of history from below. But Thompson could not have written that book without the understanding of social movements and class struggle he gained from a lifetime of activism. For other examples see Bello (2005); Bond (2006); George (2004); Zinn (2003); Petras and Vletmeyer (2004); and Callinicos (2003). Among anthropologists the most striking case is Franz Boas, a lifelong socialist, antiracist and trade unionist: see Pierpoint (2004). And there are also Bourdieu (1998); Farmer (1999, 2003); Kidder (2003); Lindisfarne (2001b and this volume); Leacock (1981); Mikesell (1999); Powdermaker (1993); and Scheper-Hughes (1992).

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