

Challenges and dilemmas of the public intellectual

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Excerpts from acceptance speech at the Outstanding Public Scholar Award Panel, International Studies Association, 49th Annual Convention, San Francisco, California, March 27, 2008. Bello was the second recipient of the award, the first being Dr. Susan George in 2007. Members of the panel honoring Bello were Dr. Richard Falk, professor emeritus at Princeton University; Dr. Robin Broad, professor at American University, and Dr. Barry Gills, professor at the University of Newcastle.

Truth is not just there, it is made real and ratified by action, but although to realize it and bring about a more just order one needs power, the truth cannot be allowed to be ensnared by power in the process. This is the role of public intellectual: to point out truths that are not convenient from the point of view of one's politics.

I would like, first of all, to say that I am very grateful to the International Political Economy Section of the International Studies Association for this award. I am very, very honored by the generous comments of Barry [Gills], Robin [Broad], Richard [Falk] and Susan [George]. And it really is an honor to be in the company of Susan, the first person to be given this award. Let me just say that, especially in comparison to Susan, I am not really sure that I am the best person to be named ISA's Outstanding Public Scholar for 2008, though I think I would consider myself a public intellectual or, as the French say, *intellectuel engage*-that is, one who marries analysis to action, or at least tries to.

I have been asked by Barry to share some of the lessons I have learned in my work as a public intellectual. This is not easy since although my views about things are very public, I am not used to speaking about my life in public.

Thinking over Barry's assignment last night, I would say that there are three key lessons I have learned:

- The first is that truths only become true through action.
- The second is that to get at the truth, one must sometimes resort to unorthodox research methods.
- And the third is that one must accept that there is an inevitable and permanent tension between theory and practice, between thought and action, between truth and power, and thinking that this tension can be eliminated is one of the worst illusions a public intellectual can fall into.

Truths only Become True through Action

Let us take up the first, that truths need action to become true. This was perhaps brought home

decisively to me by the events in Seattle in late November and early December 1999. In the decade prior to Seattle, there were a lot of studies, including UN reports, that questioned the claim that globalization and free market policies were leading to sustained growth and prosperity. Instead, the data showed that globalization and pro-market policies were promoting more inequality and more poverty and consolidating economic stagnation, especially in the global South. However, these figures remained “factoids” rather than facts in the eyes of academics, the press, and policymakers, who dutifully repeated the neoliberal mantra that economic liberalization promoted growth and prosperity. The orthodox view, repeated ad nauseam in the classroom, the media, and policy circles were that the critics of globalization were Luddites or, as Thomas Friedman disdainfully called us, believers in a flat earth.

Then we had the massive anti-globalization demonstrations in Seattle that led to the collapse of the Third Ministerial of the World Trade Organization. It was not just a ministerial that collapsed but a creed that had been believed to be true. After Seattle, the press began to talk about the “dark side of globalization,” about the inequalities and poverty being created by globalization. After that, we had the spectacular defections from the globalist camp, such as those of the financier George Soros, the Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, the star economist Jeffery Sachs. Then came the widely publicized findings a year and a half ago of two independent sources—a study by American University Professor Robin Broad published in the *Review of International Political Economy* and a report of a panel of neoclassical economists headed by Princeton’s Angus Deaton and former IMF chief economist Ken Rogoff—that the World Bank Research Department, the source of most assertions that globalization and trade liberalization were leading to lower rates of poverty and less inequality, had been deliberately distorting its data and making unwarranted claims. It is now the partisans of corporate-driven globalization and liberalization that have the burden of proof.

What made the difference? Not so much research or debate but action. It took the militant anti-globalization actions of masses of people and the spectacular collapse of a WTO ministerial to translate factoids into facts, into truth. Truth is not just there. Truth is completed, made real, and ratified by action. Like Columbus’ voyage in relation to the theory of the earth as a sphere, Seattle was a world-historic event that made the truth “true.” Now I know using Columbus does not sound politically correct, but bear with me because it was the best analogy I could find.

Unorthodox Methods

The second lesson of public scholarship that I would like to talk about has to do with research methods. One of the conclusions I have come to is that often, when it comes to analyzing really big issues, our normal research methods in the social sciences, like qualitative analysis or quantitative analysis, are not applicable. They don’t work because power is often involved, and the powerful want things to be non-transparent. This became very clear to me when it came to studying the World Bank.

Let me take you back to 1975—ancient history to many of you—when I had just finished my PhD at Princeton. At that time, an academic career was something that I had no intention of pursuing. The task at that time was quite clear to me: to overthrow the Marcos dictatorship. I became part of an international network connected to the Philippine underground and a full time activist. I went to Washington and helped set up an office that lobbied the US Congress to cut aid to the Marcos regime. Soon we realized that in order to do an effective work, we had to look at all the dimensions of US support for the dictatorship. For example, the largest part of US aid to Marcos was channeled through multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the problem was that the lack of transparency of the Bank meant that we couldn’t get any information about the Bank programs. The only information that we got were sanitized press releases. It became clear that to show what the Bank was doing and expose it, the only way was to get the documents from within the Bank itself. At

first, we slowly formed a network of informants within the Bank. These were acquaintances, liberals with a conscience. Our work was part of a process of building what was effectively a counter-intelligence network not only within the Bank but also within the State Department and other agencies of the US government.

Well, these people started to occasionally bring us some documents, but this was a tedious—although necessary—process. The information was not enough, so we thought that it was necessary to resort to more radical means. So, my associates and I investigated the patterns of behavior of Bank people and we realized that there were some times in the year when there was nobody in the Bank: Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year, July 4, Memorial Day, etc. On those days and over a period of three years, we went to the Bank pretending that we were returning from a mission, with our ties askew, and that we were just coming from Africa, India, etc. The security guards always asked for our ID's and when we pretended to fumble for them and as we looked so tired, they said "ok, just go inside". It always worked. As you can imagine, security was quite lax on those days.

Once we were inside, we were like kids let loose in a candy store. We took as many documents as we could, and not only on the Philippines, and photocopy them using the Bank facilities. This happened over three years!

The documents—some 3000 pages of them on practically every Bank-supported project and program in the country provided an unparalleled look at the workings of a close relationship between two non-transparent authoritarian institutions, the World Bank and the Marcos regime. First, we held press conferences to expose the documents piece by piece, to the embarrassment of both the Bank and the Marcos regime, and eventually, we came out with the book in 1982 entitled *Development Debacle: the World Bank in the Philippines*, one of whose authors was Robin Broad. According to many people, this publication contributed to the unraveling of Marcos regime. I hope they were right. As for what I learned, well it was that accepted or orthodox methods have their limitations, that to do really effective research sometimes you need to break the law. And you have to be utterly professional in the process. But we were quite careful about going about it and we were not able to tell the real story about how we got the documents until after 10 years (1992), when what was called the statute of limitations for criminal prosecution in the US had lapsed. My associates and I could have gotten 25 years in jail had we been caught breaking into the Bank, though Robin told me to make it clear here that she was not one of the people who went into 1818 H Street NW.

But on a less lighthearted note, the decision we had to make was not easy. It is never easy to decide to break the law not only because of the penalties involved but because we all are so deeply socialized to follow the law. But we felt that we had no choice. Otherwise, the truth would have been buried for a long, long time.

Theory and Practice

The third thing I'd like to talk about is the tension between analysis and action, between truth and politics. Managing this relationship is not easy, since our moral side is very demanding, especially when it comes to dealing with unpleasant truths. I first experienced being caught between the divergent demands of truth and politics when I was doing my PhD dissertation.

In 1972, I started my doctoral research on the topic of political organizing was in shantytowns in Santiago, Chile, during a revolutionary period. At that moment, I felt a great deal of sympathy for Salvador Allende's government and its so-called "peaceful road to socialism." In fact, I think that this was the moment when I became a progressive. However, after three months in the shantytowns, what I realized was that what the country was experiencing was not a profound revolution but a

rising counter-revolution. Allende's revolution was beleaguered.

At that point, I felt that if I was to do a relevant research, both politically and intellectually, then it was important to study the counter-revolution. So, I shifted my dissertation topic to the dynamics of counter-revolution and ended up interviewing middle class right-wing people who couldn't understand why a brown skinned person like me was asking them the questions that I was asking. Often, they were really hostile and I was nearly beaten up twice. Some thought that I was a Cuban agent and they pointed to the left-wing newspapers that I was foolishly carrying with me along with the more conservative newspapers. They laughed angrily and told me to get lost when I explained I needed to follow what both sides were thinking.

By mid 1972, it was clear that these people, many of them young people affiliated with the youth wing of the Christian Democratic Party, controlled the streets of Santiago, something that I thought was similar to what had earlier happened in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Eventually, I finished my research and returned to Princeton and got involved in solidarity work against the Pinochet dictatorship after the September 1973 coup. By then, I was both an activist and an engaged intellectual trying to understand class conflict in revolutionary times. The thesis, titled *The Roots and Dynamics of Revolution and Counterrevolution in Chile*, ended up as a comparison of the counterrevolutionary role of the middle class in Chile in 1971-1973 and in Italy and Germany in the 1920's.

Two politically inconvenient truths, to borrow from Al Gore, became quite clear to me while doing this dissertation. First, contrary to the prevailing explanations on the coup pointing to Pinochet's success as something that he owed to US intervention and the CIA, the counterrevolution was already there prior to the US destabilization efforts, that it was largely determined by internal class dynamics, and that the Chilean elites were able to connect with middle class sectors terrified by the prospects of poor sectors rising up with their agenda of justice and equality. In sum, the US intervention was successful because it was inserted into an ongoing counterrevolutionary process. CIA destabilization was just one of the factors but not the decisive one. This was not something that progressives wanted to hear then, since many wanted a simple black and white picture, that is, that the overthrow of Allende was orchestrated from the outside by the United States.

The second, related but equally politically inconvenient truth that came out in the thesis was the role of the middle class. Among both liberals and progressives, it is common to portray the middle class as an ally of the working class and the lower classes generally and that it is by and large a force for democratization. The thesis showed that contrary to this assumption, the middle classes are not necessarily forces for democratization in developing countries. In fact, when the poorer classes are being mobilized with a revolutionary agenda, the middle classes can become a mass base for counterrevolution, as in Germany and Italy in the 1920's, when the middle class provided the foot soldiers of the Fascist and Nazi movements.

But progressives really have a hard time accepting this characterization of the middle class, and part of the subliminal reason for this is that this is oftentimes the class that they come from. In fact, I've recently had to restate my position in a review of Naomi Klein's bestselling book *The Shock Doctrine*. Naomi is a great progressive writer and she is a good friend, but I had to point out that her portrayal of the overthrow of Allende as a product of a plot between the military and the Chicago Boys, an alliance that was without a mass base was not only simplistic but wrong. It would have been like saying that the overthrow of Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand in September 2006 was solely the product of a conspiracy between the military and some people in the Royal Privy Council, without reference to the role of the Bangkok middle classes in creating the political conditions for the coup. Like the Thai middle class in the case of Thaksin, the Chilean middle class was instrumental in the overthrow of Allende. It is the role of the public intellectual to point out such

truths-truths that are not convenient from the point of view of one's politics.

The tension between truth and politics becomes greatest when the public intellectual is part of a political organization. What happens when the demands of truth and the demands of the organization begin to diverge? This has been the greatest fear of intellectuals of the left, for, as I said, our moral or political side is very demanding. In the interests of the bigger battle against the right, against reaction, and against imperialism, it is a very great temptation to ignore, rationalize, and defend abuses committed by our side and close ranks...

[Owing to a study I did of human rights abuses by some progressive organizations in the Philippines] I was labelled a "counterrevolutionary." That I continued to view and struggle against US hegemony and neoliberal policies as the main obstacles to the Philippines' economic and political development was of no account. I was now, "objectively," an agent of US imperialism. I felt I was in good company, though, since one of the figures I have most admired, Nikolai Bukharin, was, during the Moscow Trials in 1937, also judged as being "objectively" an agent of Nazi Germany.

Now, my experience is not unique. Engaged intellectuals at other periods and other circumstances have found themselves coming to the same juncture, when they have to make their decision on whether to toe the line or break with an organization or even a movement. They often come to the point when they realize that they must either stick with a movement despite its abuses because its ends are worthy or to break with it because they believe that the objective of change cannot be divorced from the process of achieving it. That is the moment of truth-when they finally have to decide whether to be faithful to the [organization] or remain faithful to their role as engaged intellectuals. It is not an easy choice, and one is never certain one made the right choice. And certainly, one finds it difficult to be judgmental of those who have gone the other way.

Let me sum this up by saying that intellectual work and political work are complementary. But they also exist in tension with each other. Living this tension is the challenge, and, in my view, one of the engaged intellectual's worst mistakes is to subordinate truth to power in the belief that this is the best route to justice. One needs power to realize truth and to bring about a more just order, but one cannot allow truth to be ensnared by power in the process. What I have done here this afternoon is to illustrate the challenges as well as the dilemmas of public scholarship from my own experience. As I noted earlier, I do not have 100 per cent certainty that I have made the right choices. Indeed, my enemies-and I unfortunately have not a few, ranging from the World Bank and the WTO to the Philippine military and...-are betting I have not and will have my come-uppance, hopefully in the near future. In this regard, someone once said-I think it was Sartre-that one of the certainties about being an engaged intellectual is you create more enemies than friends, and, may I add, what few new acquaintances you do make, such as Hugo Chavez, Hamas, and the Hezbollah, are precisely the ones calculated to create even more enemies.

The demand for public scholarship is great today, given the accumulating problems of climate change, globalization, financial meltdown, and the universal crisis of democracy. These are times when everywhere—in the United States, the Philippines, Thailand, China—it is getting to be impossible to do orthodox research, in which there is a comfortable distance between the observer and the object of study. As we all become more engaged, it is useful for us to remember that the public intellectual is faced with the multiple and contradictory tasks of marrying truth to power, speaking truth to power, and opposing truth to power. How to balance these conflicting demands is the challenge and the dilemma we face.

Let me end by taking this opportunity to compliment the ISA for instituting this very important award. It represents a recognition of the path that not a few have taken, one that does not have the security and rewards of academic life and all the pitfalls of a radical political trajectory but which is

just as critical for the public interest as the work of the professor and the analyst. I do not think that I have been a better public scholar than others. Indeed, I think that in a world filled with contingency I have merely been more lucky, having been spared the really, really rough situations and really, really tough choices. To the less lucky but more deserving public intellectuals I dedicate this award.

P.S.

* From TNI Newsletter and website.

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