

The endogenous scholar: porous boundaries and travelling ideas in development

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The title of this symposium begs many questions: “what is development,” what is “critical,” what constitutes policy and its implementation, and finally what is the justification for the implied separation of something called “policy and implementation,” and the domain of scholarship and critical thinking. I pose these questions not as part of a ritual nod towards deconstruction but to highlight the extent to which we can become prisoners of our own terms and our own ways of framing problems. In this instance I suggest that the separation of scholarship and policy/implementation is more imagined than actual, as also is the presumption that “critical thinking” is almost always by definition done on and from the outside of “orthodox” organizations. As always seems to be the case for me, I make these observations in great debt to my Latin American colleagues and friends.

I have long been struck in Latin America by the absence of any clear separation between scholarship, policy and public service. Ideas, people and resources flow across these presumed boundaries with relative ease. Friends, colleagues and acquaintances from the worlds of research and civil society organizations have cycled in and out of central and subnational government positions as well as in and out of donor agencies. One friend, *un intelectual nato* (a born intellectual), has done research, turned down a tenure track job in the US in order to work with peasant organizations, worked for the World Bank, led a regional initiative closely associated with a prominent global foundation, continued his political activism and is one of the sharpest thinkers I have known. His “critical perspectives” are there for all to see and have accompanied him in his travels across the worlds of research, activism and policy.

Friends who have done important research making visible the obstacles to indigenous peoples’ access to territory, land and services, or research on the political ecologies of forest resurgence, have become Ministers and Vice-Ministers (... and this is before we get to the ostensible governments of twentieth century socialism where you find a Vice-President, such as Alvaro García Linera of Bolivia, steeped in critical social theory and social movement writings and coming from backgrounds at once academic and militant: García Linera, 2008; Walsh et al., 2006). To be sure, the exigencies of *realpolitik*, macroeconomic constraint and public

bureaucracy mean that not all that these critical thinkers have previously written and said becomes public action – but nor do they park their intellectual pasts at the door while donning the robes of a neoliberal priesthood. Moreover this is to talk only of the domain of public policy – civil society organizations and movements of all hues also have policy that they implement and there the space for critical thinking can be greater.

Many readers of *TWQ* probably have similar friends – or have lived these same political and professional journeys across institutional domains. So there is nothing novel about such observations. Sometimes, though, we perhaps separate the worlds we live and the worlds we read and write about. If one were to reflect on the lives of some of these people, it might become more obvious that policy is politics (indeed the Spanish word “*política*” means both policy *and* politics) and that development is a “battlefield of knowledge”, to use Norman and Ann Long’s (Long and Long, 1992) memorable term. All actions in this field of development imply embodied knowledge, and so the critical issue is which ideas, what forms and ways of knowing, become embodied and dominant in ways that structure public action. Some of these struggles over ideas occur in the public sphere, some in formal and street politics, some within those epistemic communities surrounding policy definition and some inside the offices of particular public and private organizations (Haas, 1992; Bebbington et al., 2006; Alvarez et al., 1998). Wherever they occur, the ideas at stake in these discussions, some more critical, some more reformist, map back at least partially onto the sorts of institutionally structured processes of knowledge generation invoked by the title of this symposium.

Of course, not all ideas travel to policy and implementation, which begs the question: what determines whether ideas travel, how they get filtered and reworked *en route*, and where they travel? Thinking again of colleagues who have travelled with their ideas into public office, one lesson I hear repeatedly is how important it is to understand public management and how political bureaucracies operate. The sub-text of these comments is, generally, that “we” didn’t understand well enough how to operate in those environments and smuggle in our ideas in such a way that they affected actions. The call for scholars, critical or otherwise, to pay more attention to understanding such processes is an old one and in development studies goes back at least to Hirschman (1967) and his student, Tandler (1975).

Capacities to negotiate the rules, practices and booby-traps of organizational environments – be these ministries, NGOs, social movements or academic departments – are therefore one important determinant of how far ideas become embodied in policy and implementation. That these capacities matter explains, also, the existence of specialized lobbying and advocacy groups (from whom researchers might also learn a few tricks). Another factor – one that has come up repeatedly in my own research with different colleagues as well as in conversations with those trying to smuggle critical perspectives into bureaucracies – is the presence of external pressure from social movements, the press, advocacy organizations, elected politicians and others. Such pressure can “open space” that insiders with similar

commitments can exploit to influence policy and practice. This is a phenomenon we have noted in research on social movements and the politics of poverty policy and on social conflict and change in the governance of extractive industries (e.g. Bebbington et al., 2010; Bebbington, 2012).

The nature of the perspectives and ideas at stake also matters. On this topic, and though it is a literature with which many critical researchers feel uncomfortable, the sustainability science writing on knowledge and policy is potentially helpful (Cash et al., 2003; Clark and Dickson, 2003). That literature argues that knowledge is more likely to influence policy when it has the qualities of salience (relevance to the actors involved), credibility (through having followed knowledge generation procedures that these actors consider adequate) and legitimacy (through having respected actors' opinions and adjudicated fairly across divergent views). The implication for "critical" research and knowledge generation is that, for these ideas and perspectives to become part of policy discussions, and ultimately to become forms of knowledge embodied in the act of implementing policy, then those who produce and frame these ideas need to consider the conditions under which they will be salient, credible and legitimate. Of course, such qualities are not generic – different political actors have different ideas of what is salient, credible and legitimate. This does not mean that critical scholars' knowledge should be all things to all people, but that there will be different ways of framing, presenting and producing such knowledge depending on who the scholars want to enter into conversation with, and the types of policy and practice that they hope their ideas will influence.

Both the historical record and contemporary experience show that critical perspectives have existed in policy and implementation, and continue to do so. The challenge, it seems to me, is therefore, not to ruminate on *whether* this can happen, but instead to analyze the conditions under which it *has* happened. Part of that exercise revolves around challenging some of ways in which we think about – and in many cases invent - boundaries and divisions that cast the scholar as "outside". The scholar has never been outside, all action and policy is constituted by embodied knowledge. The question to ourselves is how to operate recognizing that we are endogenous to the issues about which we write.

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