New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry
Vol.2, No. 2 (May 2009) Pp. 12-17

Transforming Swedish Social Work with Engaged Anthropology

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ABSTRACT: This paper is a reflection on anthropological tools and perspectives used during the past 6 years teaching in an intercultural and international social work program in Northern Sweden. An anthropological critique of power, informed by postcolonial and critical race perspectives, contributes to an engaged analysis of the policy applications of terms such as culture and multiculturalism. The author examines how broadened definitions of social work advance understanding of the history of social work in welfare societies such as Sweden and transform social work practice from normalizing instances to praxis with an eye on social change and justice in global perspective.

Key words: engaged anthropology, experience, social work

Introduction

Writing this article as a contribution to a conversation about activist teaching among colleagues who continue to work as teachers and activists has been an interesting way for me to reflect on my graduate experiences in the anthropology program at the University of California, Santa Cruz and to think about how these years shaped how I now, nearly a decade further along, work as a teacher in a social work program located in Northern Sweden. People travel and with them specific ways of understanding get translated into new contexts. Looking back, I now recognize how much of my learning around issues of power happened in a strange, sometimes painful, and other times invigorating way that provided a link between the theories we were introduced to in graduate school and the ways that personal experiences of class, racial, and sexual politics shaped the university classroom, campus, town, and indeed country during the early to mid 1990s. Questions of the relationship between engagement and theory have been central to critical socio-cultural anthropology debates throughout the last fifty years, yet in the early 1990s these debates resurfaced in many education programs around the country.

Thus this reflexive paper, grounded in the specifics of my own graduate educative experience and teaching practice today, aims to open up, rather than provide definitive answers, to thinking about the relationships among experience, engagement and theory. I want to suggest that experience and our ways of making sense of the world are already framed by "theory," and one of the transformative roles that education can have is to help us and our students critically reflect upon this relationship. Theory is not something "out there" but something we all do as we interpret the world and our practice. Understanding this link makes it easier to address why and how teaching should be a key moment of "practicing what we preach."

Graduate Studies in Culture and Power: "…and some of us were brave"

One of the most useful tools I gained from my training as an anthropologist came from the way anthropology was presented as a contested and political field of knowledge production. From feminist as well as postcolonial perspectives, I learned that "canonical texts" and their authors were contextualized as formed by, as well as negotiating, specific historical debates and understandings about the anthropological project, and we were pushed to acknowledge and engage the relationship between the personal and the political. This is to say that, individual anthropologists' personal interests and projects informed the ways they "did" anthropology and how they positioned themselves in relation to their research. Yet, alongside reading compelling and invigorating texts, much of my learning process also happened outside of the classroom as I and a few other graduate students tried to tie in the theories we were learning with our own lives and experiences of the classroom to the town of Santa Cruz and US politics during the early 1990s. While Foucaultian, Gramcian and other post-stucturalist understandings of power could be debated and argued in the classroom, just how we could use these theories to make sense of, or, better yet, contribute to positive social change, were all too often marginalized or silenced in the classroom.

What stands out in my mind about those years were some of the micro, seemingly insignificant moments of academic bravery I was able to muster and that I saw some others, braver than I, exhibit. What I remember most is the courage some grad students exhibited in challenging the micro-workings of power within the graduate school educational setting and how these moments involved the recognition that these were spaces constructed around specific understandings of learning. Some of us were frustrated by very heady theoretical discussions disconnected from ourselves, our bodies, and our experiences in the world. I remember one student in particular pushing the boundaries of academic learning and in resistance one day presenting her reading of Derrida by mounting the seminar table and performing a tap dance to express how she understood this work. Yet I also remember when some of us, with shaky voices, spoke up about the possible exclusionary aspects of all the postmodern language being used in the classroom to talk about power, and another time how a few of us discussed with frustration how the lectures and discussions that day seemed so disconnected from what was forefront in our minds at the moment: LA was on fire, a black man had been beaten to a pulp by the police, and people all over the country were taking to the streets and we fumed "Who cared about the difference between Bourdieu and Foucault, or De Certeau?" We wanted connection: connection of theory to the way power was being so violently manifested (almost) in front of our eye. We wanted an institutional recognition of these events, realities, and experiences, which that day seemed so central to defining what anthropology was "really" about as a body of knowledge. I remember that after consultation with a few other classmates, we passionately suggested to the teacher and the rest of the class that we needed to connect theory with practice or else "what were we really doing?"

While there is little space to elaborate how and what we actually discussed that day, what sticks out in my mind was my own frustration and sense that learning was often disconnected from my own experience and everyday life that was and continues to be shaped by the facts of inequality and privilege. Even in intellectually exciting graduate programs it seems there still were (and perhaps are) unsaid teaching norms and practices, which unnecessarily shrouded all too many of us, especially and specifically, students from working class and minority communities with a sense of inadequacy, shame, and fear in sharing our/their own truth. And the result is that a few bright (and oftentimes activist) students are "pushed out" (rather than dropped out) from these settings. As such, moments of academic bravery performed by anthropologists with passion, other students and faculty, who took risks to "rock the academic boat" and stretch the norms, modelled how to envision an anthropology that could make a difference in changing power relations.

Thus, it was more than merely the interesting theories as introduced in graduate school that informed my understanding of activist anthropology. Rather, the ways that theories helped us to understand our

own experiences of the world, of institutions (such as academia) and the subtle mechanisms, and possible resistances to structural/institutional power were most profound. Such moments in my own experience, and more often occurrences in which other students' (and faculty's) bravery within that particular institution and specific historical moment, are now vivid snap-shots in my mind, where we with shaky voices took a leap, a risk, stuck out our necks and challenged some of the micro-workings of power visible within academic settings.

Crossing the Pond: From a US Anthropology Program to a Social Work Department in Sweden

My move from US anthropology to Swedish social work happened out of necessity—along with a post-PhD, transnational move, I found it easier to find a job in social work in a country with (comparatively) few anthropology departments. Yet it also spoke to my activist aspirations—to work in new ways with the relationship between theory and practice. If my experience of anthropology under-emphasized practice, social work has focused on practice—and doing. However, if anthropology can be said to have had a major reflexive turn in the 1970s, owing to contributions by feminist and non-white anthropologists, this has yet to happen in (Swedish) social work. While there is a focus on practice and the "doing" of social work, there is often very little linking of students' understandings of their experience and theorization of the world. And this has in part to do with the Swedish social work disciplinary investment in positivism and social engineering.

Among the many disciplinary complexities shaping the social work curriculum in Sweden, what is important to point out is that the origins of Swedish social work are closely linked to the emergence of the Swedish welfare state and grew out of the identification of "social problems" by a growing cadre of middle class (mostly women) social workers in the early 1900s. Their work focused mainly on the urban poor whose marginality emerged from wage labour arrangements in the cities due to rapid industrialisation and rural-urban migration. Historically characterized by some researchers as growing out of a workers' "struggle for social rights" based on "a morality of wage work and performance," feminist researchers have also pointed out the ways, historically at least, many of the policies were structured around notions of a nuclear family.[1] What is clear, however, is that since the 1990s the Swedish welfare state is, like many other welfare states in Europe, undergoing differentiation and privatisation as neo-liberal economic discourses have begun to challenge earlier discourses of solidarity, universalism, and egalitarianism.

Professional social work educative training programs emerged in the 1920s and were intimately linked to the implementation of Social Democratic ideals of "The People's Home" that took form in the 1930s. Here social workers were key implementers of social engineering policy aimed at ensuring citizen's access to the "the good life" and where those identified as "vulnerable" and/or as "deviating" (from middle class ideals) were provided with social welfare interventions aimed at normalising and bringing them into the fold of the national "family." It is a field that in Swedish social work literature has been portrayed somewhat contradictorily—that is, as an arm of state discipline, normalisation and control, and also as possessing the possibility to assist in positive social change and social justice. Yet there is room for social workers *to manoeuvre* in relation to state social policy in European welfare states: as Walter Lorenz describes, "social workers in turn represent and interpret these systems through their methods of intervention, and the whole time widen or narrow the boundaries of solidarity" (1998:254).

I currently teach in one of three—there are 17 in total—social work educative programs in Sweden that have a special focus on *intercultural and international social work*. The university I work in is situated in the north of Sweden, in a region called Jämtland; a part of the nation often linked with words such as "under-population" and "under-employment" but also "resistance" to both the nation, and more recently, the EU. My students come from a variety of backgrounds; some are from cities that lie in the south,

1 See for example, Hernes 1987. On heteronormativity and Swedish state family policy see Dahl 2005.

some are "locals" and come from Jämtland, and still others come from stigmatized and marginalized "immigrant" housing areas that lie in the "peripheries" of cities (that often are) in the south of the country. Many come to social work with an explicit interest in, and often considerable experience, working for social change in a variety of transnational, national and local NGOs, networks, and organisations. This means for me that there are many resources available throughout the course, including perspectives and experiences of power to be accessed and addressed in our collective discussions of what constitutes theory, social work practice, and how this relates to the kind of social workers students hope to become.

Social Work as a Discipline and Practice Formed by, and Negotiating, Global Power

The presentation of anthropological theory as emerging from specific historical periods and contexts, and authors as negotiating specific positions of power and privilege, is a perspective that I use in my own teaching. If many of the social work students I work with come to the classroom wanting to better the world, one of the things I try to do is to get them to think critically and to develop a more complex, historical understanding about some of the key concepts (sometimes unproblematically) used in social work. For example, when I introduce "social problems," "vulnerable groups" and "addicts," I attempt to show students how these categories have emerged at particular historical moments and bear with them specific ways of understanding the world: They can be linked to the will to transform existing power relations but they can also be used to maintain and normalise these relations.

For example, social work students preparing for their six-month student practice period with NGOs (often) located in the global south, sometimes have a very idealistic view of NGOs. I try to push them to interrogate the connections between institutions and global power—how the (sometimes small) NGO office they will be working with during their practice is complexly tied to, and negotiating, national, regional, as well as international discourses. NGO discourses must be understood in relation to global processes of neo-liberalisation, colonialism, and imperialism; to how particular organisations are placed (unequally) in relationship to each other, and to how actors within these organisations negotiate power relations in sometimes contradictory ways. In particular I use readings which encourage students to think critically about what social work constitutes. Specifically I juxtapose how seemingly "hip" international social work discourses (such as "partnership," "empowerment," "capacity building" and "transparency") have been formed by uneven processes tied to economic globalisation with particularized accounts demonstrating how these discourses are being creatively translated and recontextualized. Critical discussions about the ways that modern ideas of progress and evolution are built into social work theory and ways of practicing when connected to their/our own experiences of education have also been useful for initiating an examination of the relationships among experience, theory and practice.

There exists a growing post-colonial critique of social work which calls for the "indigenization" of social work and is another useful educative tool in that it contextualizes knowledge production.[2] Most often produced by authors situated in the global south, the indigenization literature argues that the expansion of professional social work (i.e. the employment of trained social workers) around the world has been a form of imperialism and is Eurocentric in its theoretical and methodological base (most visibly the method of casework). I hope to provide my students with (often internationally based) readings which situate the development of social work in a history of globalisation as well as provide them with examples and even role models of resistance. Many creative social work methods grow from a deep understanding of the economic challenges and culturally specific forms of care and welfare that stretch Swedish understandings of what social work is, can, and should be. For example, instead of individualistic, psychology-influenced methods of "case work," in some social work training programs in such African countries as Kenya and Uganda, social work students focus on methods of community mobilization, environmental

2 For example, Midgely 1981, Walton and Medhat 1988 and Yip 2005.

advocacy, and learn "practical" skills such as building latrines and wells. I try to present them with useful examples of social workers around the world, people who have been "risk takers" and faced hazards in their commitment to social change. This is where at different historical periods and contexts social workers have worked not as a controlling arm of the state, but in opposition (and sometimes with great risk) to promote social change and social justice in their contexts. Some useful examples that provide role models for an understanding of an engaged social work include Chilean social workers during the Pinochet regime, South African social workers under apartheid, as well as many others who were influenced by liberation theology and the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire.

Positioning Oneself/ Finding a Professional Position for Oneself

Another relevant perspective I take from my graduate studies among others who were committed to positive social change, is the importance of positioning ourselves in relation to power and privilege in specific contexts and how this can influence the kinds of professional roles we develop. For instance, Franz Boas, Zora Neale Hurston and perhaps most influential in my case, the work of African American anthropologist St. Clair Drake, were all crucial in my own "homing" efforts as an academic and a student of African American and Swedish ancestry. Contact with "role models" I could identify with helped me feel there *could* be a link made between what I often perceived as a distance between theory and practice—and demonstrated how it might be possible to both "keep it real" as well as "become" an academic. These anthropologists often revealed how their work was framed by their own experiences and pursued explicit commitments to producing an analysis of power that recognized race and racialisation (and in the case of Hurston also gender) as they impact especially minorities living in the US. Specifically, I introduce students to Boas's explicit critique against racial ideologies, Hurston's experimentation with anthropological literary conventions, and Drake's studies on black urbanism and expressed commitment to "aid in dissipating stereotypes about black people and in eliminating errors based on confusion between biological and environmental factors in accounting for observed racial differences."[3]

As a teacher, I attempt to challenge social work students to position themselves and their interests in becoming social workers in relationship to structural power and the (racist) history of paternalism and "development" in particular. This offers students the opportunity to think about themselves as more than merely raced/racialised, but rather, for the majority, this allows them to see themselves as white and thus privileged. This has particular challenges as Sweden in a national context that, after World War II, has cast itself as having an "exceptional" relationship to continental European histories of imperialism, colonialism and racial ideologies and has "officially" adopted a colour-blind strategy in relationship to questions of racialisation (though this has undergone significant critique in the last 5 years). Much of my own research and teaching has been around trying to situate Sweden in a postcolonial context where racial meanings have been a part of the way difference and hierarchical positions have been constructed intersectionally with understandings of gender, class, sexuality, as well as region.[4] I do this by presenting students with a variety of social work knowledge productions, ranging from social policy regarding forced sterilizations of women during the 1940s, state projects aimed at ending so-called "honour killings" to "development" projects working on reproductive health in South Africa. These are all ways to help them use and apply their theoretical skills to "the everyday."

Finally, introducing a post-colonial perspective to Swedish social work also means deconstructing popular Swedish (and also Anglo-Saxon) social work discourses on "cultural competency" by introducing students to more complex and dynamic understandings of culture that are situated firmly within an understanding of global, national, and institutional power and by showing the ways culture in Europe is often used as a metaphor for "race."

3 Citation is as he explained in a 1988 interview with George Clement Bond in Bond and Drake, 1988. See also Drake 1978 and Daniels, 2000.

4 See for example my work 2002, 2005. 2006.

"Homing"

So this is my story, one individual's reflections on her own experiences of education in anthropology and her current "homing" efforts in the field of social work in Northern Sweden. I tell this story in this biographical and anecdotal way to remind that anthropology is made up of individuals, their experiences, and their ways of interpreting the world through theory. And to stress that we as teachers need to make our own experiences visible to students, show how they are linked to the theories we use, and the choices we make as teachers, as researchers. Finding a home in academia for me has meant finding a way to make my experiences line up with the theory and practice I use in academia. It also has meant finding a way to make theory connect with my own practice by making my own experience visible in a manner that enables students to reflect and affirm their own experiences of academia. I believe we need to continue to connect anthropology (and social work) to students' experiences and understandings of power in the communities from which they come and to show how theory is not something coming from "out there" in books, but indelibly connected to their and our own everyday lives and communities. As I have argued, role models are incredibly important, not just as historical canonical figures, but also and ultimately, through our own examples as teachers of engaged praxis.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Annie Lorrie Anderson for initiating the SFAA panel and her enthusiasm and encouragement for the publication project, as well as Ulrika Dahl for reading this paper at the SFAA meetings, and for acting as my liaison in the discussions that followed.

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