

Standpoint

A Note on the Grammar of Intellectuals

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I want to say something about struggle: as activity, as something we do and are committed to, as an outlook into ourselves and the world, and most of all, as a grammar of practice. By grammar, by way of Ludwig Wittgenstein, I mean that which tells us what kind of thing something is, the very thing - if you go by way of Michel Foucault - for which and by which there is oppression and struggle against that oppression. I still think one thing a commitment to struggle is supposed to teach is to question both the social and political order and one's own practice. Having taken this to heart, one always asks what being something is or doing something means. This leads to questioning what an intellectual is, a question which encloses or is enclosed in another question: "What do intellectuals do for or against society?"

I read a set of related struggles in the feature articles of this launch issue of Feminist Africa. The struggles are around psychic and material integrity, around politics, and of course, around intellectual work. More specifically, they are about bodily, sexual and social recognition and about the many daunting challenges of life as an engaged African scholar confronting local and institutional transformation in a globalising world and insisting on thinking about our being-in-the-world as men and women. They are about the rights of girl-children to choose, and about resisting misogyny, sexual violence, masculinisation, patriarchal lies of history, independent routes to being.

The reason for the need to continue to speak about struggle is that universities, like other parts of society, are sites of struggle. And here we must caution that getting the point accepted that the university is a political site does not mean that the battle is won, as evinced by the multiple, overlapping well-known and often not so public fights in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent. Unless one is satisfied that there is fairness and justice about who has access to higher education, there is a struggle to wage to bring about equity; unless one is concerned about who gets into which classes and into what professions, who gets jobs and to be professor in the academy, who produces knowledge, what that knowledge says about and to the world we live in, and what the languages of that knowledge are, the struggle is not yet over.

Let me make a point about the practice of exclusion: something I learned early on is that if you are taken seriously by those around you in your daily life because you are funny, or can be relied upon by friends and colleagues, or are not afraid to show your emotions and speak your commitment, these qualities do not serve you well as a social scientist. Science has its own culture, its own societies, its languages. (For example, numbers are supposed to tell most of the story, and the better story, that is the problem). I learned (that is, to the extent that one can talk of an episteme and method of everyday practice) that if my position was one of radical engagement, showing true colours and living honestly and freely, I had better forget it. If I wanted to be taken seriously as a social scientist, I needed to know that I couldn't be funny or reveal my-self. The epistemological posture to take was that of detachment and an avoidance of taking sides, and the preferable methodology, that of hypothesis-testing (one should learn to speak of multiple regression quickly).

These assumptions about the social sciences are based on distinguishing between the context of justification, of "science proper", and that of discovery, which is what we do as social scientists in our personal lives as men and women. Most importantly, these contexts

are seen as a hierarchical separation: it is believed that it is only what happens in the context of justification that leads to true knowledge. This definition of understanding, this way of understanding, of looking and being looked at, of writing and of living, is what must be taught to students, what must inform our intellectual work, what must be written and reproduced, what should be incorporated into our selves, culture, and politics. If you don't believe this, you struggle.

If you are a student or someone who doesn't get paid to do research or teach at a university, you may have asked yourself what scholars have actually done for you of late. You may also have reached a point where you wonder why, since detachment, neutrality, objectivity, and getting to measurables lead to better knowledge of the human world, social scientists do not practice these positions in their lives. You may have asked why those they relate to do not remain as impressed by them as they are by, for example, one-minute management theories, the movement of cheese, planetary metaphors of intimacy. Is it because many across the continent have little use for this kind of knowledge (or at least its grammar)? Is it because this knowledge or at least its grammar tell us little of use about real (and a great effort went into not marking that term) life?

I see the challenge here as part of that political and cultural desire to grasp the ever new contradictions faced by male and female intellectuals (it doesn't even sound right, because intellectuals don't have a sex), African intellectuals - from this hut, this shack, this flat, this house. In these personal, national, and continental struggles (and many small battles), we seek to resolve our roles as educators, researchers, and administrators, and, as has been said in relation to Zachariah Keodirelang Matthews, "to awaken to our responsibilities". So we increase the numbers of students in all disciplines. But we also figure the parts this increased talented tenth serves here.

Many have little use for the incomprehensible, inward-looking grammar of intellection because, more often than not, the work of intellectuals is seen to have little use in the world we live in as social and political beings. This may not always be well-informed or correct. But what should be heard, and what I have suggested in different voices here, is that those who question the words of intellectuals may be saying that social scientific explanations are failing the very society they are supposed to think, to help to think, and that the authority of this science is questionable. What this means for radical scholars is that the task to domesticate - I think this is a most suitable concept - the intellectual project goes on. So we must grapple with what it means to step in front of a class of women and men students, one of whose homes was razed the previous night, another whose husband did not feed their children because she came home late after a class, a third who "demanded" sex from his partner over the weekend... And we search for a language of what it is we do. Only having found it do we speak our society.

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