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The Language Question in University Education

Hitchhiking through Africa stimulated an outlandish mission in the summer of my second year at university. I traveled to India to discover whether universities should teach in Hindi, the regional language, or English. Hindi was the national language, spoken by some 30 percent of the population, mainly concentrated in northern India. At that time there were fourteen official regional languages, including ten that were each spoken by more than fifteen million people. English was still a language of the elites, inherited from the erstwhile colonizers who had departed some twenty years earlier. I had hatched this project on a whim after reading a pamphlet put out by the Fabian Society. Being of the view, at that time, that education was the key to development, it seemed like an important question to study.

I had still to learn the limits of the possible whether they concerned my own exploits or the amelioration of the world. This was how I first came in touch with sociology. Although there was no sociology department in Cambridge, there was an American sociologist in residence at King's College every spring. His name was Edward Shils. They said he knew a lot about India, about its intellectuals and about its universities. He was the editor of a journal called *Minerva*, devoted to higher education and science policy. I plucked up courage and knocked on his impressively

thick door, that opened into a no-less-impressive chamber. A squat man, avuncular in disposition, beckoned me in and sat me down amid piles of manuscripts. I told him of my plan to travel to India in the long summer vacation and study the problem of the medium of instruction in university education. He looked at me over his glasses to make sure I was not an apparition, then chuckled at my audacity and naïveté. He was amazed that I should have read the tedious reports of Indian Education Commissions – a sign of misplaced seriousness. He gave me a stern lecture on how to comport myself in India and sent me on my way, saying fools march in where angels fear to tread.

No doubt he thought he'd never hear from me again. No doubt I never expected him to dog my career for many years. I had no idea he was one of the most influential sociologists in the US, a close collaborator of Talcott Parsons, or that he was a well-known figure in intellectual circles in England. At that time, I did not know him to be the most learned man that I would ever meet, nor one of the most dangerous. Nor did I have any idea that he was a leading figure in the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) front organization, especially active in Third World countries.

I was not deterred. In those days, access to British universities was the prerogative of a small elite of school leavers. Unless we came from a wealthy background, we were all on some grant or another, whether from local authorities, the state, or the university itself. I was on a state scholarship from which I saved money the previous year for my trip to Africa, and then for my trip to India. My college supplemented my savings with a travel fellowship. With the four-month summer vacation ahead I set out to explore India – a place about which I had read much but had never visited. It would prove to be quite a shock.

I had spent my second year at Cambridge preparing, attending courses in the history of India, reading everything to do with Indian higher education that I could lay

my hands on. Accordingly, I all but failed my maths exams, but I left before the results appeared and before anyone could recall me. I had secured a letter of introduction from a professor of education, resident in Cambridge, who had sat on the Indian Commission of Education. The letter was addressed to J. P. Naik, the Undersecretary of the Minister of Education – a revered freedom fighter, humanist, and educator.

I assumed there must be a scientific answer to the question of which language of instruction would be best, so I proposed to conduct a “field experiment,” although at the time I did not have the grandiose term to describe what I was doing. I adopted a short and simple essay by Chester Bowles, a famous US ambassador to India, on economic development and taxation policies as the basis of a comprehension test for economics students. I proposed to have the essay and the multiple-choice test translated into Hindi and various regional languages and I would compare how students performed in the different languages.

That was the plan. But it was only J. P. Naik’s letter of introduction to Vice-Chancellors of universities in Bombay, Ahmedabad, Chennai, Bhubaneswar, and Lucknow that made this preposterous scheme possible. So that is what I did, traveling third class on trains the length and breadth of India, staying in student dormitories, discussing language issues with anyone who would talk to me. Wherever I went I persuaded some college teacher to translate the Bowles piece into the regional language. I would enter economics classes, randomly divide the students into two groups, and test their comprehension in English as opposed to the regional language. I discovered that in Orissa and Gujarat students performed better in the regional language but in Madras (Tamil Nadu) and, marginally, in Uttar Pradesh (where Hindi is the regional language) they did better in English. A confounding factor was the type of college students attended: whether it was an elite college, like Madras Christian College,

where all teaching was conducted in English, or a public state university, as in Ahmedabad, where instruction was already largely carried out in the regional language.

It didn't take long for me to realize the absurdity of the field experiment that took the whole issue out of its social and political context. No field experiment, no matter how sophisticated, could reveal a simple solution. Regional language has the advantage of familiarity, but would there be the resources to develop appropriate terminology, textbooks, journals, teaching materials, and so on? And who will be the teachers in the regional language, potentially cutting themselves off from international developments? If Hindi became the language of instruction, that would have given enormous advantage to the 30 percent Hindi-speaking population, largely in the North. Finally, if English continued to be the medium of instruction, then the low levels of competence among both teachers and students meant that the latter will actually learn very little. At the time I endorsed a compromise solution that seemed to be the best – the creation of “autonomous colleges” where English would be the medium of instruction, but reserving a quarter of the places for students taking exams in the regional language. This would create a bifurcated educational system, differentially resourced, supposedly catering to different talents.

In pursuing the technical function of education – maximizing learning and the dissemination of knowledge – I overlooked the social and political consequences, specifically the reproduction of inequalities. The two-track system might allow for some upward mobility, but it advantaged those with economic and cultural capital, those who came from the professional and upper classes who would have privileged access to the most prestigious education and thus the most prestigious jobs. It was not only a matter of class inequality but also of regional inequality that endowed populations with linguistic capital. What languages one spoke and understood shaped occupational and economic opportunities.

No wonder the language question proved to be such a volatile political issue. The national (trans-regional) elites defended elite colleges, many of them run by Jesuits, inherited from the colonial era, to perpetuate their domination. They did not mind the adoption of regional language as the medium of instruction in provincial universities, so long as they and their children had access to English education, either at home or abroad. They argued that if India wanted to be a modern democracy, integrated into the modern world economy, then Hindi could not replace English as the national language. In this they were supported by elites in the South whose languages were unrelated to Hindi – the possibility that Hindi might be the language of the civil service examinations led to violent protests in the southern state of Madras (Tamil Nadu). If they could not secure the legitimacy of their own regional language, then non-Hindi speakers preferred English. In short, the language question was and has always been far more than an educational issue. It was a political struggle of intersecting class and regional interests, often conducted in the idiom of nationalism.

It was in India that I lost my naïveté, recognizing how technical questions are never simply technical questions, that they are embedded in a wider set of social forces. Even if policies can be manufactured in relative isolation, their implementation will run up against a constellation of shifting interests – in this case the interests of students, parents, teachers, divergent classes as well as real and imagined nations. The language question promoted the centrifugal forces that threatened the unity and viability of India's democracy, but curiously, at the same time, it was through such struggles that compromises were forged, protecting India's unity while reproducing and even deepening social and economic inequalities.

I present this story of my earliest foray into sociology to underline the limits of naïve utopian idealism, but I do not wish to disparage more sophisticated policy advocacy. Let me offer two examples. Matthew Desmond's *Evicted*

(2016) became an instant classic, pointing to the ramifications of housing insecurity for deepening poverty. Based on a participant observation study of low-income white and Black communities in Milwaukee, Desmond explores in captivating detail the causes and consequences of eviction both from the side of the evicted and the side of the landlords. It is a searing exposé of life in the inner city, underlining the necessity of housing security for a minimalist existence. Without a stable home, jobs are difficult to find and retain; without a job rents can be impossible to pay. And yet the policy proposal, like my own in the above case of the language question, fails to address the context within which the housing crisis has developed. Ruling out increasing the supply of public housing, Desmond proposes the expansion of housing vouchers, a market solution that misses the source of housing insecurity in the machinations of developers, real estate, and banks, aided and abetted by municipal government and an abstentionist federal state. When it comes to policy sociology, the danger of participant observation is a misplaced determinism: blaming immediate agents (the exploitative practices of landlords), while projecting a benevolent causality onto unexamined abstractions (expanding markets).

The distinguished and influential sociologist William Julius Wilson – who would also be my supervisor at the University of Chicago, and we’ll get to that later – would not pin his hope on the market but on the state. His career shows both the limitations and the possibilities of policy sociology and how closely it has to be connected to public, critical, and professional sociology. Wilson lit a fire of controversy with his second book, *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978). Here was an African American scholar at the University of Chicago, seemingly trumpeting a very conservative thesis. His book might as well have been titled “the increasing significance of class,” but that would not have stimulated the ferocious debate that followed its publication. Wilson traces three

successive racial orders, starting with slavery and ending with the postwar period, which he characterizes as class polarization within the African American community. The civil rights movement, dominated by middle-class Blacks fighting for inclusion through such policies as affirmative action, largely overlooked the impoverishment of an increasingly marginalized and destitute population of African Americans. He is not denying racial discrimination but insists class increasingly determines the life chances of African Americans.

Defending his claims against African American critics and repudiating the embrace of neo-conservatives, Wilson's next book, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), advanced a research program directed at what he provocatively called the "underclass," a term used by conservatives to blame the poor for their own poverty, handicapped by an inherited "culture of poverty." Liberal sociologists and African American critical race theorists, being allergic to victim blaming, were aghast at Wilson's willingness to give credence to the pathologies of the ghetto – criminality, drug abuse, female-headed households, gang warfare, and so on. While recognizing cultural factors, Wilson argued that structural factors also played a role in the persistence of poverty, such as the exodus of middle-class Blacks and the disappearance of working-class jobs, which emptied the ghetto of its means of survival. His research program expanded into what became known as the neighborhood effects literature – how neighborhood characteristics affect poverty. In his next book, *When Work Disappears* (1996), his policy proposals became clear – job creation through an active labor market policy. It was not that African Americans had developed a dependency on the state and thus a disinclination to work. It was not an absent work ethic that explained their destitution. It was simply a shortage of decent jobs.

This was the period of President Clinton's welfare reform. Wilson's ideas were twisted into support for workfare – welfare tied to work, to the search for work,

or to job training. Wilson insisted on the contrary: forcing people into lousy, precarious, poorly paid jobs was no answer to poverty. He lost the policy battle but he did ignite a public debate about the sources of poverty. He understood that if he was to be successful as a policy sociologist it was necessary to drum up public pressure behind his proposals. His sensitivity to the multiple interests in the political field led him to advocate universal as well as targeted policies, but he was under no illusion as to the uphill battle he faced in a period of neoliberalism. If the political winds were blowing against his proposals then not even all his fame, distinction, influence, and research could move the state.