

The 'Realpolitik of reason' meets the symbolic world of politics

Bourdieu writes about the 'Realpolitik of reason' or the 'Realpolitik of the universal' as the form of politics engaged in by the public sociologist -- in other words, the struggle to defend the social conditions of the exercise of reason, and expand access to its fruits. What might this mean in a country such as South Africa, emerging from a long history of colonialism and apartheid into a world order still dominated by the West?

As we noted in Reflection 5, Bourdieu understands the 'ambiguity of reason': on the one hand, it is a form of symbolic capital which serves 'as an instrument of domination and legitimation' for injustice and inequality; on the other, it is the basis of emancipation, democracy and human rights. Bourdieu argues for mobilisation and struggle through which those who are denied access to the universal can claim and realise such access (2000:70-2, 77-80), but his formulations are elliptical. What might they mean in practice? And what might they mean in a country of the global South?

Bourdieu's text conveys a sense of the social scientist whose scholarship provides a unique access to the truth, which, as public intellectual, he conveys to society from his lecturn -- but at the same time the symbolic weight of the lecturn and of his professorial knowledge serves to legitimate the existing authorities and hierarchies of society. There is little sense here of knowledge gained through concrete practice, which is consistent with Bourdieu's distinction between the logic of theory and the logic of practice. The impression is reinforced by the closing scenes of the documentary film on his life and work, *Sociology As a Martial Art*, in which he attempts to persuade a militant meeting of immigrant community members in France that they cannot understand their own situation, and should read works of sociology -- which they angrily reject, asserting the clarity of their own understanding of their oppression as they do so.

This is almost the public sociologist as parody. Any sociologist in South Africa who, in the times of struggle against apartheid, attempted such a role would have been met with a similar response. The inability of either side in this interchange to hear the other illustrates the breakdown of language that occurs at the interface of sociology and the public or political sphere, and the profound challenges confronting any project for the realpolitik of reason. The discourse of reason encounters in the public political sphere a symbolic order, or a symbolic contest, which demands a distinctive discourse of its own, and the sociologist who fails to translate her thought into this symbolic contest and its discourse literally cannot be heard.

While both Bourdieu and Mills wrote in the context of right-wing ascendancy and the demobilisation of mass society -- a context which posed the question 'what public' to the would-be public sociologist -- in South Africa in the 1980s we lived and worked in the context of an increasingly polarised and mobilised public. Apartheid on the one hand and the democratic movement on the other posed us as intellectuals and social scientists with stark choices: whose side were we on? Which power would reason serve -- that of the apartheid regime, or that of the emerging popular movement?

While many progressive white scholars desisted from entering this terrain, and concentrated on their research and teaching – through which generations of white and black students did indeed gain access to historical and political knowledge, which constituted an important resource for those who went on to participate in student and popular struggle – others chose to engage in a more organic relation with popular politics, working with trade unions or the UDF, often through NGOs. A handful straddled both roles¹. Here we found sharp clashes over ‘truth’ and the meaning of reason., both within the popular movement and, often, between ‘organic’ intellectuals and the more ‘traditional’ intellectuals in the Academy.

Take for example the case of the re-emergent trade union movement. In the early 1970s radical white students, rebuffed by the black consciousness movement, turned towards the working class and played a significant role in the formation of the new black trade unions. They did this as Marxists, many of them with a strong critique of previous periods of black trade unionism in South Africa, in particular, the history of alliances between trade unions and the African nationalist political movement. There were different currents within the new trade unions, but the biggest and strongest formation, FOSATU, was characterised by an aversion to such alliances and an allegiance to ‘working class politics’ and, many suspected, to the formation of an independent workers party. When, in the early 1980s, the question of trade union unity rose to the top of the labour agenda, fierce struggles broke out between the different factions.

On the one side were the ‘workerists’, strongly influenced by the perspective of the white Marxists described above, who rejected the ANC and the UDF, and their guiding document, the Freedom Charter, as a petty bourgeois, populist movement that was bound to sell out the working class, and on the other were the ‘populists’ who supported the liberation movement, advocated a multiclass popular alliance against apartheid, and argued that workers were being misled by white agents of liberalism and imperialism. Both sides imagined reason was on their side. Both were economical with the truth. FOSATU newspapers avoided naming or referring to the UDF, at the time a massively growing movement with hundreds of affiliated organisations and hundreds of thousands of supporters. On the other side, I remember a seminar in one of the populist unions where the leading white intellectuals of a rival workerist union were denounced as agents of the CIA. In the end, the popular insurgency in the townships drew in entire working-class constituencies, and the trade union movement swung into alliance with the UDF and the ANC, albeit with a strongly independent stance.

This is a schematic representation of a complex series of political contestations and shifts in the politics of the trade union movement, but the point is to consider its implications for Bourdieu's idea of the realpolitik of reason, and for the role of the public sociologist. Firstly, oppression was not opaque to workers, and it was not social science that opened their eyes, but the interaction between the daily logic of practice and the symbolic world

¹ To those that did had, perforce, to engage the political, developing what Burawoy in his study of Eddie Webster's sociological life calls a ‘political imagination’, in contrast to Mills’ idea of a ‘sociological imagination’ (Burawoy 2010).

of politics. Social science (knowledge of history, economics, corporate analysis, etc) could of course play an adjunct role, but what workers needed most was organisation, and in those early days white intellectuals brought important organisational, legal and negotiating skills to the fledgeling movement. Education programmes were important, but many of them were technical and organisational. When education became more political as the movement grew, it was precisely the critical line on alliances and the Freedom Charter introduced by white intellectuals which aroused resistance.

Which brings us to the second point: workers consciousness was not a tabula rasa on which intellectuals could inscribe the truths discovered by reason. Workers already had ideas and allegiances and the language that went with this – precisely, symbolic power or what Bourdieu would call symbolic capital (1994) – influenced as well by the long history of Communist party involvement in the national liberation struggle. Indeed, the new white intellectuals from the universities were frequently unaware of this history, and unaware too that black working class activists with roots in Communist and national liberation histories were quietly active in the new trade unions as well – showing a caution fashioned by long histories of state and employer repression against the Communist Party and black trade unions (Webster reference??). In both the trade unions and community organisations, white students and intellectuals, inspired by the New Left Marxism of the 1960s, came up against the orthodox communism of the South African Communist Party.

In other words, the public sociologist does not address a public sphere founded on reasoned debate, a point Bourdieu makes in his criticism of Habermas. Rather, in a situation such as that presented by South Africa in the 1980s, the public sociologist is confronted with an already existing politics, a terrain of contending movements and organisations and publics in which her voice may be drowned or denounced or, worse, fail to find any audience at all. What we became in the 1980s were *activist* intellectuals, deeply involved, partisan, passionate. We engaged in continuous dialogue and negotiation with our chosen, partisan publics. We negotiated truth, and we negotiated reason. Scholars who preferred not to dirty their hands or compromise their views remained in the Academy – but at the cost of choosing silence in the symbolic world of politics.

Did intellectual practice of the activist kind approximate what Bourdieu meant by the *realpolitik* of reason, or were we mere fellow travellers, as Bourdieu called Gramsci's organic intellectuals, who had abandoned the path of reason? Of course there were many variants to this practice, and some behaved merely as cheerleaders for the movement, while others pursued a role of critical engagement. In a profound way though, despite the many sordid events in its history, and despite untruths it may have uttered, the popular movement did represent Truth in our world – the truth that denounced apartheid and spoke for freedom, democracy and human rights. I well remember Dullah Omar, an intelligent, principled, steely and gentle UDF leader, telling a mass rally in the early 1980s that the liberation movement was the only beautiful thing in a land made ugly by

oppression and exploitation². The kind of truth and beauty we are discussing here belongs to the symbolic world of politics where it wields an immense power to move people to struggle and sacrifice – but it is nonetheless true, true to a vision of how people can live their lives differently. Beside them the truth of the scholar may appear paltry and threadbare. It is this interface that the realpolitik of reason has to negotiate.

Where does this leave us now? The public sphere is still undergoing a series of transformations. Processes of class formation, growing divergences within the Tripartite Alliance between the ANC, COSATU and SACP, and the many failings of the post-apartheid state, are the source of increasing contention in the public sphere. These trends, perhaps, create a greater scope for a more independent public sociology. However, the public is still sharply divided into deeply racialised partisan blocs, into those who owe a broad allegiance to transformation and therefore to the ANC alliance, and those, mostly white, who are resistant (and who have a less automatic allegiance to the political party which most represents this camp, the DA, than do their counterparts in the opposite camp).

In such a context, public criticism of the government or the ANC plays easily into the symbolism of the racial colonial gaze discussed by Frantz Fanon, can thereby be construed as pro-DA rhetoric, and is dismissed or simply not heard by the majority bloc. Once again, the realpolitik of reason encounters the symbolic power of the political world and finds itself translated or appropriated into meanings that it cannot recognise. The political world itself is divided into two worlds, the product of the colonial and apartheid experience, each of which is characterised by mutually unintelligible understandings and meanings. It is as if there are two musics composed of mutually incompatible harmonic schemas which, played at the same time, produce only as cacophony.

It is also true, as Bourdieu points out, that in this world reason is yoked to the order of capital and the order of the imperialism, and the full weight of its authority is invoked to justify the current order of things and people, and explain why economic orthodoxy defines the outer limits of what it is possible to do – that is, what problems can be admitted as problems and what may be done about them. Yesterday's revolutionaries become today's paragons of fiscal prudence, and freedom has become the right of a few to celebrate their sudden access to wealth by eating sushi off the bodies of naked women. It should no longer be possible for the liberation movement to claim it is the only beautiful thing in an ugly landscape, but old truths die hard. The realpolitik of reason, if it wishes to make its mark on this world, will be forced as before to find a language with which to negotiate its way in the symbolic world of politics.

If the situation in South Africa reveals the limits of public sociology and the realpolitik of reason on one hand, on the other it makes it all the more necessary. Bourdieu's vigorous defence of reason, scholarship and the logic of theory are attractive in a society rapidly losing its way, and where an increasingly divided and paralysed ANC becomes

² Omar was a leading figure in the Unity Movement, a Trotskyist grouping in the Cape, shifted allegiance to the Congress movement in the early 1980s, and served as Justice Minister and Transport Minister in post-apartheid governments.

susceptible to defensiveness and the seductions of control and repression. Indeed, it may over a longing to abandon the compromised truth that seems so much part of the symbolic negotiation with the world of politics, for an uncompromised and denunciatory truth freed from politics. The transformation of our society requires the defence of reason, and poses the obligation to speak truth to power, nothing less.

But what our history of practice suggests is that such truth does not emerge only from the practice of theory in scholarly fields, but also from the actions and thoughts of the people, that is, from the logic of practice, from the truth of ordinary lives. Moreover, and necessarily, it has to find an existence in the form of a symbolic power that can enter into symbolic contestation in the political field. Once again, we return to the necessity for negotiation. Only from a dialogue between these two truths may emerge a combined truth that has the symbolic force to truly remake authority.