

Personal is Political-Keynote speech at First Sociology Conference at Kwantlen Polytechnic University on May 6, 2011

Personal is Political: the dialectic of personal experience and theory formation

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As a preamble to my speech, I would like to say that my life, as is the life of all social animals, is a tapestry of intersections, a logarithm of the personal and the public, and a tributary of history, social structure, and biography. My life is an ongoing negotiation of intersections of socially constructed categories of race, class, and, gender. By this, I mean my identity (better still my identities) as a "Black" or African-Canadian or Ghanaian-Canadian male professor is not inherent in me, encoded in my genes or natural to me. I was not born a Black male professor, to paraphrase Simone de Boviour, I was made one by a "conspiracy" of factors, including history, society, and the current of world events and happenings, both fortuitous and planned. These intersections, not surprisingly, have and continue to shape and refine my vision of the world. What theories I formulate or which theories I adopt, what academic or community activities I engage in are all informed by these intersections.

My topic is "Personal is Political: the dialectic of personal experience and theory formation" I would like to tweak the topic a little bit to read: "The personal is political and the political is personal" to completely capture the dialectic nature of the sub-title.

In my speech, I intend to answer the following four questions:

- Is the personal political and how political are personal choices and actions?
- How can personal experience be the starting point for research in sociology?
- How have my experiences been influenced by the political and social factors in various parts of the world?
- How can sociological knowledge help us to go beyond personal experience and account for the wider social, political, and economic, factors, structures, and relations and their influences over individuals?

To adequately answer these questions, it is important to briefly explore three interrelated sociological concepts: Intersectionality, the Sociological Imagination and the Global Sociological Imagination. In addition, I will invoke three important observations made by Karl Marx on the individual's place in society and the theory of the duality of structure and agency, observations which illuminate two ongoing debates in academia on whether humans are mere victims of circumstances or captains of the ship of their destiny and the whether scholars should be solely concerned with the production of theory or with the enterprise of practice or engage in both at the same time.

Two important sociological concepts will illuminate the discussions: the objectivity-

subjectivity and the theory-praxis nexuses. I will first quickly define the terms and concepts and finish with a short slideshow to illustrate how my life and academic career has been shaped by my own agency as well as forces and collectives both, near and remote, present and past.

The first concept I would like to define is intersectionality? Simply defined, intersectionality denotes the cross-influence of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability / [disability) and other categories. Crudely put, everyone of us is at the same time afflicted by and blessed/endowed with constantly changing and fluid multiple personalities, opportunities, disadvantages, power and powerlessness as we juggle our life chances and navigate our life course in the maze of deeply entrenched social forces, structures and institutions.

According to Paula Rothenberg, "The best way to understand the full meaning of using" the intersectionality approach is "to recognize that there is no gender without race, no race without class, no class without gender."ⁱ She insists that the intersectionality approach provides a holistic and multiple lenses to see and appreciate the dialectical relationship between self and society; the individual and the collective.

Rothenberg observes that, "Taken together, these lenses shape our understanding of how our society functions. By focusing on new and constantly changing ways of defining difference, an intersections approach explores the multiple layers of social inequality and allows us to see how the layers play off each other to complicate rather than simplify the complex nature of personal identity (p.2).

Several assumptions undergird Intersectionality: First, that our individual life chances are affected and shaped either positively or negatively by our birth assignments-as men, women, blacks, browns, whites, heterosexuals or homosexuals, able-bodied or disabled bodies.

Second, these intersecting and interacting categories are fluid, changing, and contextual. At any given time, place, or circumstance one or a combination of these categories may work to our advantage or disadvantage, since they are not immutable or cast in stone.

Third, each individual may be a beneficiary or a victim of a single or a combination of these categories. In other words, these categories come with multiple advantages and disadvantages, depending on the circumstance, time, and place.

An offshoot of intersectionality is positionality, a term coined by Anthony Giddensⁱⁱ. Positionality is based on the assumption that our positions on the social ladder and in the social fabric come with cultural, class, race, gender baggage. In other words, the decisions we make and the actions we take are all informed/influenced by our race, gender, class, and other categories. This makes all of us ideological animals.

In other words, no one can ever be objective. Thus related to positionality is the objectivity-subjectivity nexus. Can the scholar be or should be objective or subjective? From the

positionality perspective, objectivity in scholarship, as in real life is an impossibility.

As I have stated elsewhere, objectivity, belongs to graveyard; it is only when you have lost your five senses, when you cannot see, hear, feel, smell, touch.., that's when you can hope to be objective. However, as long as you breathe this culturally and ideologically polluted air of ours, there is no escaping being subjective, taking sides.

The next concept is the sociological imagination: the term was coined by the American Sociologist, Charles Wright Mills. The SI is alertness, the capacity, an ability, a quality of mind that allows an individual to understand and connect her or his life with the forces and dynamics that impact it. It means the ability to see one's one life as an intersection of biography, history, and social structure.

Simply put, the sociological imagination is the keen awareness that our lives have been and continue to be shaped by our own actions (and inactions, if you will), what happened in the past, i.e., the decisions made and actions taken by others in the past and our place in society today-as men, women, poor, rich, heterosexuals, homosexuals, blacks, whites, etc. It is premised on the notion that our biographies are not written by us as individuals alone, but in conjunction with legions of people, individuals and collectives, the majority of whom we may never see or meet.

The last concept is the Global Sociological Imaginationⁱⁱⁱ

The Global Sociological Imagination is an extension of Charles Wright Mills' Sociological Imagination^{iv}. Having the global sociological imagination allows us to develop an understanding of our globalizing world, where willy-nilly, for better or worse, we inhabitants are increasingly becoming integrated, intermixed, and interconnected. What happens at one corner of the village has almost instantaneous repercussion on other parts of the village. Our actions, and indeed our inactions, affect and are affected by the actions and inactions of legions of people, most of who live in far flung corners of our global landscape, and whose paths may never cross ours in our lifetime.

Related to all three concepts, is Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's Theory of the duality of structure and agency^v. The central premise: while individuals act on things, their actions take place within the context of social structures.

There are two parts to the structure-agency nexus, which reflect the crude/simplistic and mechanical structure versus agency/determinism versus free will formulations. The structure part divests individuals of any power and casts them as mere puppets, bereft any free will or agency and manipulated by powerful social institutions. It takes a fatalistic view of human beings, seeing them as victims of circumstances. Thus human failings are blamed on social institutions, giving some people the excuse to invoke the saying "the devil made me do it." At the same time, the structure approach acknowledges the limits of human power. While the structure approach may invest too much power in social institutions, it is important to be guided by the aphorism "Man proposes, but God disposes." Sometimes it is not the lack of trying or inaction, or laziness that is the problem.

The agency part invests individuals with the power of agency, positing that people are not

puppets, that they possess free will who exercise their agency. "We're captains of the ship of our destiny and do make choices for good or for bad. But some are better able to make choices than others. Those who make poor choices have themselves to blame. The fault is in themselves, not in society. This approach is likely to engender a blame-the-victim mentality.

Seeking to address the deficiencies in the crude free will versus determinism debate in Social Philosophy, structure versus agency dichotomy in Sociology, Berger and Luckman propose a more nuanced and dialectical formula by suggesting that while individuals act, their actions do not take place in a vacuum, but that human actions are circumscribed social forces beyond their control.

What this also means is that while social forces may seem all powerful, entrenched, and unalterable, they are social constructions, human creations and hence can be unconstructed by the same human beings. The dialectical relationship between social institutions and human agency has long been acknowledged by Karl Marx when he made these two observations:

1) Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.^{vi} "

2) Man is a product of circumstances, but man in turn modifies those circumstances^{vii}."

Simply put, people create that which creates them. In short, Marx proposed that men are influenced by circumstances, but can change those same circumstances.

Now let me move quickly to Karl Marx's statement, which neatly ties all the concepts discussed so far together:

"Philosophers have merely interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." This statement relates to concept of praxis—the blending of theory and action. The concept is based on the premise that it is not enough to propound academic theories, but translate theories into action, that the worth of the scholar is to descend from the ivory tower to the real world and to put his/her theoretical knowledge to work to bring about change in the lives of people, especially the disenfranchised, the impoverished, and "disprivileged."

As Kwame Nkrumah reminds us "Thought without practice is blind, practice without thought is empty."^{viii} Praxis allows the scholar to engage in community work, bring his/her valuable academic knowledge to the service of fellow citizens and bringing back to the classroom or academia the folk wisdom and practical lessons learned from the ground and the grassroots, from the community.

The slide show should illuminate all I have said so far and more.

ⁱ ***What's the Problem? : A Brief Guide to Thinking Critically: Paula ...***

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- ii Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis by Anthony Giddens
- iii I coined this term, borrowing the now popular Charles Wright Mills' Sociological Imagination to capture the global dimension of the concept.
- iv Charles Wright Mills' Sociological Imagination and why we fail to ...
- v PETER L. BERGER AND THOMAS LUCKMANN - THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ...
- vi **18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. Karl Marx 1852**
- vii **Marxism as Action**
- viii **Kwame Nkrumah's Philosophical statement of Purpose - Assata Shakur ...**