

Praxis: changing world, changing self

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In his *Theses on Feuerbach* Marx wrote, 'the question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question'.¹ His assertion's relevance to the question of the relationship between academics, donors and implementers is clear: the goals of critical scholarship on development hinge on *practice*. Beyond interpreting the world, the point for critical development scholars is to change it. Beyond thinking about the world, we must act. We do not produce knowledge for knowledge's sake, but for the sake of making the world a better place.

How critical scholars go about this obligation is a personal decision, for praxis, or theoretically reflective action, is a process of reflection and action. As the world is changed, the self is actualised; as the self is actualised, the world is changed. Praxis is inherently political, so the manner by which the political and the practical come together is complicated and perilous. The obligation, however, is unavoidable.

For me praxis takes the form of a commitment to ongoing feedback and dissemination with the communities, organisations and governments with whom I have worked. Returning to the field for feedback and dissemination is a luxury in terms of time and funding, but it can become part of a research programme committed to taking action when findings demand it. Offering new information and analyses to communities involved in the research gives them an opportunity to reflect and take action of their own if they choose. New information, however, may be met with hostility. Reflection may not be welcome. Inaction may be desired.² Grappling with this process of theoretical reflection and action has delivered on its promise of stretching me (politically, professionally and personally) as I have acted for change.

For example, I recently applied successfully for a grant through Texas A&M University (TAMU) that was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF). The TAMU grant is minor compared to the sizes of other grants given by the BMGF Global Development Division. Of 85 such Water Sanitation and Hygiene grants, 16 were non-technical (ie 19%). Of these 16, two were for conferences and 14 for research or interventions. All but three of these grants ranged in size from \$1 to \$17 million. The three under \$1 million were to

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research institutions in North America (ie TAMU), South America and the UK. The grant to TAMU for the study of successful sanitation habits in rural India was the smallest of all the non-conference, non-technical awards (\$353,000). I suspect that the project's low cost was one of the reasons it was funded – as one Division programme officer later told me: 'I'm glad we were able to sneak you in there'. Perhaps one small indicator that the proposal had an impact on the BMGF was that it was funded at all, given what an outlier the project was in terms of ethnographic methods and research questions.

The reasons for the proposal's funding notwithstanding, it has opened up opportunities for engagement through networking, presentations and discussions with prospective and current grantees, including researchers in engineering, economics and public health. Following Birn, I have argued to these scholars that technical solutions are seductive in their detachment, but public health's technical aspects must not be isolated from its political and social aspects.³ Decisions at multiple scales affect local conditions. The problems we seek to solve require political and structural changes, and the more equitable distribution of safe water supplies and sanitation resources.⁴

At the time of this writing my team and I are in an intensive period of dissemination of research results to stakeholders, practitioners and scholars – ranging from the World Bank to water, sanitation and hygiene consultants to rural *panchayats* (local government councils). We have organised our own dissemination workshops but also attended a variety of water and health conferences that bring together public health scholars, government officials, water engineers and donors. In some ways responses have been what we expected: public health scholars who wanted more rigorous methods than ethnography; engineers who wondered what technical fixes appeared promising; and donors who wished for a programme of implementation based on the findings. These experiences have also taught us that government officials and donors may be smart people, but they are often making decisions with incomplete knowledge and under great pressure to deliver results. Trying to convince others of the 'differences that make a difference',⁵ ie the findings of critical development research, is like being a lobbyist (see Bebbington below) or a salesperson–proselytiser. It takes energy and conviction. A commitment to praxis, coupled with endurance, enhanced by opportunity, may change the world.

Notes on Contributor

Kathleen O'Reilly teaches in the Department of Geography at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas. She studies the social and environmental impacts of development projects, especially those working toward improvements in drinking water, sanitation, poverty, and gender relations. She is interested in the ways that interventions and the work of NGOs restructure social, environmental and spatial relations in South Asian communities. Her work has been published in such venues as: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*; *Geoforum*; *Development in Practice*; *Signs*; and *Human Organization*.

Notes

1. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*.
2. O'Reilly and Dhanju, "'Your Report is Completely Wrong!'" ; and Dhanju and O'Reilly, "Human Subjects Research."
3. Birn, "Gates' Grandest Challenge."
4. Ibid; and Santos et al., "Demand for Sanitation in Salvador, Brazil."
5. Clifford Nass. Personal communication.

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