

## Chapter 3 – The Historicity of Understanding

My question about understanding was born in a situation of despair when, in 1984, I encountered famine. It was a situation with which I had no experience. I had no resources to help me explain why such senseless suffering could descend on so many innocent people, apparently without warning. I asked many Sudanese people to explain the famine, but I could not comprehend their answers. I tried to be helpful and I tried to understand causes and effects, to find blame, retribution and solutions. It was only when that excoriating time had itself become history that I came to see my misunderstanding as an expression of historicity, of my being thrown into life in a certain time and culture which defined the parameters of what and how I could understand. In this chapter I explore how my historicity formed the foundation of the questions I asked in Sudan in that fateful year. I aim to trace some of the roots of the question that I am asking in this thesis, and also to illustrate the inexorable workings of history on my consciousness.

### ***The famine, the rich girl and the goat***

History belongs to each of us and there is no getting beyond it and no decision can overcome its influence. This story is an initial point of departure. The experience it describes awakened in me a question about understanding that demanded to be answered. It was 1984. I was 22 years old, newly emerged from university where I had studied agricultural geography of Africa and Asia. I had been in Sudan for nine months, doing field research with farmers and pastoralists for a large World Bank agricultural project. I had ideals, ambitions, curiosity and optimism. In the intensity of the encounter that I now describe I was confronted with the enormity of my ignorance. The encounter serves as a point before which my prejudices about understanding were invisible because what I knew about

knowledge seemed self-evident and universal, and after which they were called into question.

1984. Quite suddenly, it seemed to me, the whole of northern Sudan fell into famine. Harsh, harsh famine. The sky turned brown, the grass brown, everything was brown. Children turned to sticks, old eyes in tiny bodies, and died everywhere. Grandparents stopped eating and faded away. Men disappeared to Khartoum or the cotton fields in the east promising to find work and send money, food or whatever they could. I was shocked. I joined an international agency to help with food distribution. I tried to be useful, working long hours organising trucks, warehouses, waybills, loaders and un-loaders. A handful of foreigners took charge of thousands of tonnes of sorghum shipped from the USA and delivered it to stores in hundreds of towns and villages up desert tracks and muddy rutted roads. We handed it over to government there and monitored it.

We began to realise that we did not understand famine; we thought there was no food, and so we brought it, laboriously and late. We learned afterwards that there had been food in the region all along, in merchants' warehouses waiting for prices to rise, but people had no money to buy it. I read Amartya Sen who had written eloquently about how this happened in the Ethiopian famine of the early seventies (Sen 1981). No one I met had heard of him.

I went out with a colleague to look for nomadic livestock herders to see if they needed and had got a share of the relief food. It was late afternoon when our team reached a small camp 30 miles south of El Obeid. There were some sticks and bits of old plastic sorghum sack that made up the house. A thin woman came and greeted us with her children behind her. We explained our intent, asked questions and measured the children's arms for our nutrition survey. We talked about what they would do now and after the drought. They showed us their supplies, three kid goats, and a pan of *mukhet* soaking in water, a wild berry that tastes foul<sup>7</sup>. Whenever I see that plant now I think of those days. The savannah sun was going down. Her husband and older sons appeared bringing no animals with them. So there were only three young goats. I asked if we could camp with them that night. They were very welcoming. I said, "don't give us food, we have some rice and beans in the car, let's share it." They said they would certainly give us food, we were their guests. We turned to each other, embarrassed and frightened. 'We should have gone; we shouldn't have imposed ourselves.' The father killed one of the family's goats for us that night.

We brought our rice and beans and together we had a feast. The food was good, the company cheerful. They said we should not worry about the goat: it had to be eaten sometime, we were a good reason. It was a fine

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<sup>7</sup> *Boscia senegalensis*

party. We did not talk about what to do. Neither they, nor I found questions to ask or suggestions to make about the famine.

We left in the morning and they waved us away in the bleak harsh light of the famine sun. Who died, who survived? I don't know. I sensed that those people knew how to live and we, with our clipboards and arm measurements were at a loss. Our way of organising everything, directing and controlling, distributing and monitoring seemed nowhere near as powerful in the story of people's survival in that famine as was their own way of managing it. I thought that we contributed, probably, to saving some lives, but I felt that we also contributed to a subtle loss of humanity in that place. Because, I thought to myself, our questionnaires didn't have a box marked respect. They only had food, medicine and control.

Coming from a generation and a place where famine had been pushed to the back of our memories, I believed I could find a rational explanation and provide a technical solution to the situation. The family, co-existing with the drought-scarred earth, seemed to have some other perspective that I could not fathom. I expected them to understand my presence and they, clearly, did not. I felt that we should have found a way to co-operate. We managed to eat and smile together, but I wanted to make a difference to them and to the overall direction of the famine, a situation for which I felt some responsibility as a rich Westerner. I believed that one day we would be able to understand each other because we would push aside veils of misunderstanding that created the distance between us.

A few months later, standing in a windy famine camp on the edge of town, watching US Senator George Bush (senior) dispensing platitudes to thousands of gaunt women and a pack of journalists, I resolved that I would try to find an answer to the enormous questions raised by that famine. I had tasted a bitter realisation of the differences in culture and understanding between me and people I was supposedly working to assist. My mind was full of questions: about why it had happened, about my role as a foreign helper and about my inability to come to understandings with the people. Something was terribly wrong and I was neither able to comprehend nor act on it in ways that seemed fitting. All I could do was set out on a search for an answer to a question that at the time I could barely formulate.

Because of our membership of a greater power and our alignment with the political elites of the country, we owed no hungry person a real account of our actions. In my heart we wanted to give an account, but no one would hear it, least of all the victims. The relief system asked only if we had delivered the North's surplus grain into the clamouring mouths of millions. It did not question our responsibility for stamping on people's self-respect or for helping lay the foundations for wars. In our ignorant liberal colonialism we encouraged the worst behaviours of the new elites, advising and supplying them in their games of patronage and exploitation. Our work admitted no real commitment to the possibility that the answers to the questions of food, livelihood and social organisation might lie within

the people's own vocabularies, within their best version of humanity and that which would fit with the changing world around them. It did not admit to something that needed to be created between us, built out of the soil and history, rather than extracted from a text book.

### **The first telling – putting things to rights**

I first put this story down as part of a chapter I contributed to a book on international aid (Hinton and Groves 2001). The book was concerned with questions about including people who are the subjects of aid into the process of its decisions. It was concerned with how all the players in the game could interact in beneficial and co-operative rather than harmful and competitive ways. My chapter was about understanding ourselves and it was framed as if understanding ourselves was the opposite of understanding others. I talked of our tendency to pretend that we, the aid workers, were not really part of the equation; we stood aside with our clipboards, our papers and our smiles and ignored the effect of our culture, power and emotions. The part the story played in making this argument was intended to be dramatic. I was saying, 'look at this well-intentioned, self-important young white fool going about in a culture far from her own, getting involved with matters of life and death where she has no hope of coming to understanding!' I wanted to point out how useful it would be to have self-awareness. I explained how the shock of the famine led me to wish to know more, so that I would eventually be able to work out what to do. I noted dryly that I, like many others before and after me, became obsessed with understanding these exotic situations, but paid little attention to ourselves as bearers of a virus of dominance. I maintained the priority of action. The purpose of returning to the story was to know what to do.

The telling of the story at that time was heavy with theory. Between 1997 and 2003 I was part of a group at the Institute of Development Studies that focused on participation of poor people in processes and institutions in which they might have an interest and yet from which they were excluded. We had a political agenda of responsibility, egalitarianism and righteous empathy and a theoretical grounding in materialism, power and conscience that drew on Marx, Foucault and Freire. I believed that I could remove myself from who I was and what I

represented by studying it and railing against it. I believed this would make co-operation work better. It was not until 2008 when I retold the story again, and attempted to look at it with phenomenological eyes that I saw it not only as a straightforward proof of the unrestricted hubris of our profession, but also as an expression of historicity (my place in history) and as a source of the presuppositions and the questions that I later took up in this thesis. The earlier view of the situation as hubris was a way-station on my road of understanding. The hubris explanation was simply inadequate, there was something more to be understood.

### **The telling today – provocation as the point of departure**

I was provoked. My expectations of easy solutions to poverty were brought up short by the incident. I had expected to be able to solve problems, learn from and about people and come to agreements with them. The incident pulled these expectations forward from where they had been hiding under the mantle of the development worker's innocent helpfulness. I remember the sensation of desperation, not just because of all those inexplicable deaths, but because I expected to be able to find out what to do.

Gadamer says, of provocation, that it is a starting point for a question, a point of departure: *'It is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked. ... For what leads to understanding must be something that has already asserted itself in its own separate validity. Understanding begins ... when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics. We now know what this requires, namely the fundamental suspension of our own prejudices. But all suspension of judgments and hence, a fortiori, of prejudices, has the logical structure of a question'* (TM 298).

The thing under discussion, the famine—the reason for it and the way to deal with it—was understood differently by the people suffering it and me in my attempts to resolve it. For each of us it meant something, but our meanings felt disconnected. The aid agencies and the people who worked in them assimilated the part that involved making claims for solving it; it was this part that then

affected all our futures as interventionists. Since the famine had proved less than permeable to my assumption that such events could be eradicated and could be explained in a universal sense, I was provoked by the lack of understanding.

This provocation arises from something being recognisable but distinct. I notice a distance between the thing, as it is presented by the other, and the thing as I see it myself. There was what Gadamer calls the 'play of strangeness and familiarity' in what I was hearing from the Sudanese people (TM 295). I was familiar with the outlines of what they were telling me, about rain, crops, livestock and food. These things had somehow failed and were not being replaced at anything like the speed that I expected. Children, mothers, sick people and old people were dying before our eyes and the Sudanese did not look surprised, just sad and resigned. The extreme unfamiliarity of the situation brought forward two questions – what is famine, and, why don't we understand? I wanted to strengthen the argument of the people themselves, because it must be they that understood famine, they must be right in what they are saying. But I could not find a way to do it, what they were saying made no *sense*. It was not that they were wrong about famine, or stupid about it, they just did not, could not, or did not care to explain it *to me*. My self-evident certainty in the superiority and communicability of our institutional and technical explanations was provoked. I could feel my history as it encountered something foreign. I could feel the weight of culture orienting my direction.

I was disappointed. I asked questions and got answers, but the answers did not lead to places I could follow. 'Why did this happen? What can we do?' To neither did I get an answer that I understood. The gift of the goat only served to underline the strangeness. I understood that Sudanese people are profoundly hospitable, but I could not understand how a family could put themselves at risk to fulfil their moral obligation. I caught only a glimpse, through my western European eyes, of what they were addressing to me with that goat; its meaning in the great tradition of nomadic pastoralism—of solidarity, hope and holding the world together.

The encounter did not challenge my belief that underneath the obscurities of the situation I would be able to find a way of understanding what was going on. It challenged my expectation of immediate knowing and easy communication with others. The incident brought my simplistic notions of fact-finding and communication into the foreground and into question. I adjusted my expectations to accommodate the new notion of taking time and making an effort to find out more. I interpreted the provocation as a call to learn more broadly and deeply. I directed my questions to the processes of famine, the language of those people, and the political and economic forces impelling us. But, (as I will relate in later sections) learning more about people, politics, cultures, technologies and institutions generated repeated solutions that did not stop famines or increase understanding with others. Theories of famine only distanced me further from famine as a reality. The efforts did not lead to clear resolution of the question raised on that day. The provocation remained, waiting to be given its due. It was in its continuing failure to be properly resolved that I noticed it. It irritated me.

Now, in the second telling, I am returning to it once again. Following Gadamer, I am not looking for a new solution, but for an understanding of how my question came to be. I look now at the history of my prejudice that formed the conception of understanding that I brought to that situation. I am looking at the presuppositions that were the ground for my interpretation of the event and the rising question that I then worked on, in one way or another, for 20 years, about coming to understanding with others.

### ***The aid worker begins***

I turn now to the neophyte participant in the aid business that I was when I reached Sudan at the beginning of that first famine year, 1984. I want to flesh out a little this prejudice that we found above – knowing, communicating and positively resolving problems.

I chose geography as my field, and within that, development in Africa and Asia, because it supplied the right mix of science, certainty, pity and world-changing potential for me. At the age of 22 I finished my degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and was offered a junior

research position in Sudan. I was to investigate the spread of the desert in Darfur. I travelled there with my boyfriend, now my husband. We took the long way round, taking in Morocco, Algeria, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Central Africa and Sudan on the way. We were entranced, entertained and occasionally very frightened by the people, animals and landscapes that we came across on that journey.

I arrived in Darfur in western Sudan for my first job in the aid business in January 1984. My task was to help establish whether or not local farming practises were causing desertification. It was a big World Bank project involving agronomic trials for higher yielding crops, supplies of fertiliser and deep wells. I spent a happy time roving about the woods, fields and villages of that beautiful place, learning from farmers how they made decisions about crop rotation and knew about soil fertility. The farmers were kind and hospitable. They gave me fizzy drinks and I took samples of the different soils they pointed out, sands, clays and sandy clays, cropped and fallow. I spread out my satellite photos of the region and matched what they said to what I saw. I concluded that the farmers knew their ecology, a fact that the World Bank experts had questioned and I wanted to prove. Around each deep well there was a village and around that an area of near-desert about four miles across. They could crop that land one year in ten. There was a sinister plant called *usher*<sup>8</sup> with white irritant sap that showed the poor state of that soil. Beyond that zone were the real fields, which the farmers cropped for five years and fallowed for fifteen or twenty in what seemed to be an organised equilibrium. A fallow had done its work when a certain hardwood, *babanus*<sup>9</sup>, re-established. It was a useful wood, the farmers told me. Beyond that zone was savannah forest, through which nomadic pastoralists moved. Their ecology seemed to involve the adaptation of their whole society to the natural world. While the farmers and pastoralists and their various communities were each managing elegantly, there was indeed a problem. The more deep wells that were drilled, the more villages appeared and the more their spheres began to overlap. And who was putting in the wells? We were. I wrote it up. The project administrators filed my report.

The seduction of our gifts (or cheap loans in this case) was palpable. Local politicians gained power, as we did, from the sinking of those wells. And the water was good, cool, clear and clean. But later I saw a slow-acting poison in that water, in social terms. I heard that in 2000 during a drought, people in northern Kenya stopped the government from drilling new wells. Apparently they lined up in front of the rigs and refused to move. The people knew by then the rough science and politics of deep wells and they wanted water on their own terms. Studies by Leach and Fairhead (1998) show that while the accepted orthodoxy among experts is that people in the Sahel are degrading their environment, actually in Mali and elsewhere in the Sahel, people plant more trees than they use.

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<sup>8</sup> *Calotropis procera*  
<sup>9</sup> *Dalbergia melanoxylon*



Nonetheless, I became a part of the poverty eradication paradigm. I learned to fill in a planning format called the logical framework, in which we laid out our goals, purpose, activities and indicators of success. We did not consult with villagers when we put these together, only with technical advisors. We implied that by drilling a well we would create health, wealth and convenience, which was our goal. As time went on I began to realise that no project *ever* turned out as outlined in those forms. Where wells were drilled, some people got healthy, others dispossessed, conflict broke out, the immediate environment degraded, a vegetable garden flourished for a while. The dynamic complexity of the result of any action seemed much larger than these papers could ever encompass and yet we are still using them today. We thought we had control, with all our systems, but we had no such thing. Darfur is now torn apart by an appalling war. The seeds of that war were being sown deep in the soil even as I was there. Even those wells were part of it. I had stepped, innocent and complicit all at once, into the world of aid.

## Prejudice

Gadamer says of prejudice that it means a 'provisional verdict.' It is not a confirmed judgment, but a pre-understanding without which we would not be able to recognise what we encounter, and so be available for new understandings (TM 270-276). We need to rehabilitate our definition of prejudice so that it is not seen as a negative state, he suggests. It is in fact largely positive in that it is a thing that builds. It is the sum of our previous understandings and the fore-projection of the moment. It is a thread among threads of understanding that carries along its intertwining way as we live our lives. It is not rigid but provisional, the proviso being that it needs to be constantly challenged to keep it from turning to stone and becoming what Sartre calls a 'disposition', a state of being which is accepted as a tendency both by the self and by society (Sartre 1972; quoted in Moran and Mooney 2002:395). That challenge comes from provocation and provocation comes from the existential nature of learning and connecting, an observation brought forward by Heidegger that I will examine in more detail in later chapters.

What were the prejudices that were at that moment with the Sudanese pastoralists suspended before me and what was the question that arose? I came to Sudan thinking that I would be able communicate with people of a very different culture, if I had enough empathy to do so. It appeared that we were indeed

communicating, but we were coming to only the most elementary of understandings. I was attempting to discover rather than communicate, because my prejudice was to *find things out*. I now want to learn more about the provocation and make my question more transparent by looking into the consolidation of the prejudices that emerged. These prejudices came from my tradition. I need, then, to go back further into my history.

## ***A London childhood***

Turning to experiences that had a hand in creating the expectations of ‘knowing’, ‘finding out’ and ‘communicating with strangers’ in the first place, I explore some of the foundations to how I came to understandings in Sudan. In the story below, I give not an incident but a general impression of the fusion of my tradition and me as I was growing up. I endeavour to tell it how it was for me then – fragmentary and contradictory. I was absorbed in the historical effects of language, expectation and consideration of material things. This was life as I lived it. I made provisional sense of it.

I was born in London in 1962 and grew up there among the jostling races and classes of Britain’s capital. My home was wealthy and I understood that it embodied in its formality and elegance the ideals of earlier powerful generations and the hopes of our own. My mother’s grandfather was a successful Irish wine merchant, my father’s forebears were earls, Foreign Secretaries and other pillars of the British establishment. My relatives, when they came for weekends and lunches or when we went to their country houses whose roofs leaked and whose dining tables sparkled with engraved silver and delicate china, would talk about their relatives, the eccentrics, diplomats and dissolute heirs. They wove webs of family, status and place in the world. I also went several times with my mother to visit Mrs Lane in a tower block in South London. She had worked for us as a cleaner in our house. We would cross the concrete car park past half-burned mattresses, the wind blowing litter across our path. We would go up in a lift that smelled of urine to the 15<sup>th</sup> floor. I expected it to break down and we would run out of air. Her flat had big views, a pastel fluffy carpet and a warm gas fire. We perched on neat armchairs with lace covers on the headrests, and Mrs Lane offered us cake and tea. I remember the mutual admiration between my mother and Mrs Lane for their exquisite politeness to each other. I understood that vast houses with leaking roofs and opinionated people connected themselves to superior social status, while cavernous tower-blocks, however perfect the fluffy carpets and politeness inside, were indicative of danger. I admired but worried about Mrs Lane.

My first remembered books were adventure stories, tales of giants, fairies and tangled forests. I travelled across their vistas and felt the excitement of their possibilities. But I feared their dark uncontrolled places, their uncertain moralities and dubious outcomes, and so I attached myself to a hero, a safe one who embodied the ideas that I hoped would take me where I wanted to go. I selected Tintin, an intelligent little person who travels the world sorting things out through a mix of being polite and being right. At school I took courses in science, languages and geography, all in a vein of sorting out the troubles of the world through the technology and intelligence of man. I wanted to manipulate outcomes on a broad scale. Heroes and scientists found out facts and changed the world. I would do so too. Our focus was on scientific progress, economic growth and intellectual if not sexual freedom (we were ambivalent about that). My grandparents pointed out the warmth of it all after the cold and dull post-war years.

At school we learned to build from a component up into complex engineering. In biology we started with the single celled amoeba and built from there. We reached a diagram of a cross-section of a plant under a microscope. And on we went to frogs, humans and global ecosystems. In chemistry we learned about elements and numbers of electrons. Learn that, we were told and then next year you will understand how they combine to make the world. In geography we divided the earth up into ecological and economic zones and learned them one by one, starting with the equatorial rainforest and ending with the tundra. Each year more of the pattern of our universally understandable reality was revealed. I went to the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum over and over again. I admired the workings of the steam engine, the Apollo rockets and the electron microscope. Science, we were told, contributed to our industry and economy, and to question it would be inimical to our progress as a civilisation. Our science gave us physical and political power and a sense of unassailable self-importance and progress. We would reach planets beyond our solar system and find new resources for our survival as a species. We would be able to predict the weather and control climate. There was a technology for every need and an administration to match it. Everybody on our planet would have a fridge, a phone, a TV and enough to eat. They would eventually all take part in the market economy, which was quite obviously superior because it allowed us to make and buy whatever we wanted.

At the University of London, where I studied geography, I made maps and extrapolations from satellite images of the earth. I learned about the green revolution in India: systems of irrigation, commodity production, salination, markets, corruption, politics, tribes, climates and ecologies. I learned that Plato posed a battling dualism between idea and reality, Kant between reason and feeling, Marx between base and superstructure and Freire between victim and oppressor. So I also came to believe in a lifelong conflict between subject and object, failure and success, right and wrong, clever and stupid, fact and myth.

I understood the world through a combination of sensation and reason. I, as a rational human subject felt myself to be at the centre of the cognitive and moral world. First I sensed something – I saw, heard, touched, smelt, felt it. Then I analysed it, categorised it, for example animal, vegetable, or mineral, possible or impossible, red or blue, cause or effect. I fitted it into a universal schema that made it reasonable. Branches of knowledge dealt with different subject matters, but all with the same basic concepts of how to understand, essentially a revealing of fundamental laws and qualities by empirical study. It applied as much to geology as to anthropology and the other human sciences. It meant that coming to understanding with someone was governed by rationality. It made almost complete sense. Any variation with what had been thought in earlier days was because of imperfections later put right. Any reliance on the sphere of common sense was something to be ironed out in due course. Where there were gaps in the perfection of the positivist argument, they were filled with the expectation of new discoveries.

The triumphant epistemology of my family and the society in which I was growing up in the 1960s and '70s was what I call logical elitism – it was positivist, authoritarian and the outcome of superiority. But the tradition had never been one of pure reason. Our culture showed an entwining of fact and aesthetic, science, spirit and humanism everywhere. It had been manifest in the book selection on my parents' shelves. It was there on the floor of the great Abbey at Westminster – a 14<sup>th</sup> century marble mosaic by Cosmati, whose intertwining and never ending circles, boundless centre, bands of blood-edged yellow, orange, pink and bluish grey onyx seem to illustrate the formation of the universe and the co-operation of god and physics (Foster 1991).

I felt that being female was a particular disability which I needed to overcome by being as scientific as possible. In the sitting room at home there was a record player and a bookshelf of novels and histories. The great composers, writers, artists and travellers seemed beguiling and extraordinary. They were the gods and goddesses of a transient, diverting and imaginary kingdom of no solid consequence in the reasoned Enlightenment society that I was determined to join.

I heard my parents talking about the way things were changing for people of our kind. They referred wistfully to the old days of the nobility. They talked about new economic and social circumstances in which legal, intellectual and administrative bureaucracies were paramount. My siblings and I were educated strategically to cross a bridge from the world of the old nobility, to which we clung because it was our history and our importance, towards the new world of professional elitism. Our family agreed with liberal values of equality and individualism, at least within boundaries where we could remain powerful according to our expectations. We valued ancient patrician institutions and we practiced ruthlessness and charity. As I saw it, we were fighting for survival of a dying aristocratic identity; as an economic class I thought of us strategically

repositioning ourselves as intellectuals and professionals; as a post-colonial nation I felt we were continuing to claim the only right understanding of all things in the face of a critical multicultural world. My family used our excellent educations and easy superiority to make a play for staying at the top of society, implying that only we could provide leadership that was knowledgeable, incorrupt, universal and true.

## Authority and opinion

When I first wrote this story of my childhood and education, I thought I was describing my struggle against and acquiescence to science and positivism. Now I look at it again and it speaks to me of my history, nurtured in my family and the social and institutional context that was my 1960's Britain. If I came to admire knowledge, the business of having an opinion and the notion of success and control it was neither a mistake nor an achievement, it was what happened. These admirations emerged as presuppositions that were brought to my attention as possibly at variance with those of others when I was faced with the provocation of the famine in Sudan. The experience brought into question the foundation of 'knowing' and 'world-control' on which my judgments had been standing. Gadamer says, '*understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated*' (TM 290).

I have tried here to account for the things that were influencing my approach to understanding. I gave credence to the naturalness of authority, elegance, formality and impenetrability of my family and my English class as it came up against the worlds of other people like Mrs Lane. I took in the dogmatism and imperialism of my education, admiring its successes. It did not appear dogmatic, it appeared to be true. I came to believe in the power of the human intellect to achieve anything it put its mind and science to. I noticed the way social schisms seemed to function, and while wishing to fight them and evade their grip, I accepted their existence. I did not accept the gulfs of incomprehension that divided us.

Gadamer remarks that opinion resists admission of ignorance and suppresses questions. '*Opinion has a curious tendency to propagate itself. It would always like to be*

*the general opinion, just as the word that the Greeks have for opinion, doxa, also means the decision made by the majority in the council assembly. How then can ignorance be admitted and questions arise?*' (TM 366). In our education we were rewarded for opinions, and most particularly received opinions. Gadamer, however, makes a distinction between authority and opinion. Authority, he suggests, includes that which is handed to us by tradition and is accepted by us as right and true within that tradition, not because it is powerful or unquestioned, but because it is questioned and found fitting.

I had learned from a positivist tradition that to be right meant to have power over the world. Authority had the dual meaning of superiority in knowledge and in status. While the original meaning of authority related to having created comprehensive and acceptable understanding about a subject, to have authority also came to mean to have power. Social position and military-political success gave us the power to know better than those weaker than ourselves. Men did this to women, white people to black, elites to the poor, educated to illiterate. The growing use of the word authority as a bureaucratic office added to its dominion (Foucault 1995). Even as I wished that the non-elites had rights to knowledge and for their wisdom to be heard, I built up a conception of understanding that was elitist, divisive, dominating and simultaneously romantic in its acceptance of the differences—and weaknesses—of the other. Carrying with me the habits of status, I was a knowing emissary of my culture. My interest was to spread my knowledge, ill-formed as it was, as a means of confirming my own existence, meaning and community. My questions were aimed at confirming what I thought I knew.

A clear theme that arises from my education in western culture is a conception that understanding is found through invasion. Our scientific tradition involves peeling away layers, digging down, controlling for variation, collecting information and bearing it away for analysis, subjecting it to procedures. It means taking things from their context and applying theories, manipulating and refashioning. This invasive mode of seeking to understand I took with me to Africa, together with the elitism of education and technology, the missionary notion of pity and the positivism of universal truth. In 2002, I read Foucault's

description of the prison psychologist extracting data from the hapless prisoner, pinning the prisoner to a categorical specimen board like a dead moth. It was then that I came to appreciate my own way of coming to understanding about alien people's ways and behaviours. The invasive, extractive technique of knowing was producing its own understanding. It suggested the other's unfair inscrutability or low intelligence. It seemed to cause the ghastly misunderstanding of the colonial administrator in Chinua Achebe's *'Things Fall Apart'* (Achebe 2005) or the confused isolation of the colonial governor in Okri's *'Infinite Riches'* (Okri 1999). When I read of the encounter of the European and the Nigerian in Chinua Achebe, I was given a perspective I had not yet seen: *'The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart'* (2005:125). Each reading expanded the inner substance of my horizon, taking my understanding of understanding from an idea of invasive extraction to one of cooperative fusion.

### **Common sense and tradition**

Becoming conscious of the beliefs that have been handed down to me by tradition does not mean that I am emancipated from them; it makes them available. I can question them or reinforce them. I was aware of the authority and the questionability of being elite from a long way back, and I was able to criticize it, justify it and keep the concept, all in the language of my own logic and tradition. As Gadamer puts it, *'tradition is not the vindication of what has come down from the past but the further creation of moral and social life; it depends on being made conscious and freely carried on'* (TM 571).

This links us to the mode of 'common sense,' which draws its sustenance from changing traditions of what is good. Common sense offers what is sensible and proper. In Roman antiquity it was thought of as 'love of community,' yet its meaning developed in Europe over the centuries to become variously a question of tact, taste, rational morality and folk practicality in turn (TM 19-28). In European antiquity it seems to have been a kind of understanding that embraced

all other kinds, but now in much of European thought it is only a residual appendix to rationality.

The story of my upbringing suggests that tradition as it is manifest in the present comprises more than just the negativity of opinion and the positivity of authority but also includes common sense. Mrs Lane and my mother taking tea was, I thought, common sense. It was right, but it was in some ways unimportant. We could have been out in the world making money, or conquering ignorance rather than chatting. But common sense turns out to be very important. It is something that I think few of us would be willing to drop in favour of pure rationality. In my view, it is analogous with what the philosophers Goodman and Elgin call 'rightness.' Rightness is a matter of 'fitting and working' (Goodman and Elgin 1988:158). Ideas we have about what is true and suitable are arrived at because they fit with the tradition as well as with the demands, discourse and language of the present.

I came to Sudan thinking that I could find out what to do using intellect, technology, resources and power. There was an authority and tradition of which I felt a part, albeit a rather hesitant part, that gave me a sense of sureness and capability. I came from a place where it was possible and desirable to get hold of and apply resources: theory, science, technology, ethics, finance and organisation were all available. I brought with me the tradition of having cups of tea with people and found its equivalent everywhere I went. The rightness and usefulness of my understanding was self-evident to me, coming as it did from countless sources that seemed to make up the whole of life and truth. The explanations that I was using seemed based on a proper foundation of thousands of years of civilisation and thought.

Neither provocative shock nor logic shifted these explanations and there was no epiphany – why? My ideas are born of my tradition with its long heavy train. They are resilient, supported in language and largely immune from deliberate reconfiguration. To explore further the foundations of this resilience, I return twice more to the years before I reached Sudan to look again, and again, at the sedimentation of my prejudice.



## ***The bus to Tooting***

I am now interested in the resilience of a given prejudice or set of prejudices, their persistent unwillingness to develop very far despite the world's energetic efforts to remind them to move on. What happens when prejudice is consolidated? The following story perhaps gives some clues.

I was eight years old; I had long red socks on, a grey skirt, a blue cape and a red bobble hat. I felt like a pixie. I was sure that I knew the bus my older sister and I needed to get on. I remember that our hats and socks matched the colour of the bus. We got on and scrambled up the stairs. It headed south across London, in what seemed a familiar direction. I watched people get on and off. I saw young women get on at the Kings Road wearing mini skirts and white patent leather boots, I saw women in tweed skirts and jackets who got off at Chelsea, I saw opaque men with grey hair stretched across their bald heads, I saw fat black women with string shopping bags and floppy felt hats. I saw streets of terraced houses, corner shops, bus stations, department stores, parks, railway arches, junkyards and zebra crossings. I began to realize that I wasn't recognizing the landmarks anymore. A group of loud tattooed building workers in paint- and dust-streaked overalls, a man with a cigarette and donkey jacket and two old women with hairnets joined us on the bus. The further we went, the poorer the people got and the more difficult it seemed to me to have to admit to them that we were lost. I saw the familiar symbol of an underground station, it was called Tooting Bec, a place I had never heard of, deep in the wildest lands of south London. My sister and I looked at each other. Clutching the rail, we scrambled down the stairs, swaying with the movement of the jerking bus, and gazed up at the conductor. I noticed his metal ticket machine, his dark suit, stubbly face and uninterested eyes. He hustled us off and pointed across the road. Hand in hand, we advanced into the jaws of the underground station. We went up to a uniformed black man and asked him how we could get home. He surprised us. He smiled. He put us, ticketless, on the right train and we got to Clapham Common, home territory, no trouble.

I wanted to be like my parents and older sister, clever and organized. I wanted to be respected and admirable. For a long time I felt bad that I had been so foolish as to get on the wrong bus. I also felt a secret thrill. It is like standing in an art gallery in front of a work which is neither obvious nor incomprehensible, and finding it inexplicably attractive. Despite my decision to avoid getting lost, I never lost the joy of getting lost, nor the joy of travelling on top of a bus.

At the beginning of the bus trip, standing on the pavement looking up at the number of the looming bus, I was excited, sure, unsure at once. I got on the bus and was reassured. I settled into the pleasure of its red and blue seats, its big windows and views. As the journey went on the threat grew

and grew until it became a massive repudiation – I should not have got on this bus... In the end I felt that the dangers of the experience outweighed the joy of it, so I made a concrete decision. I would avoid getting lost again.

I have tried to strip the story of excessive interpretation, to leave only a thin interpretive layer over the basic colours, textures, movements, sounds, thoughts and other stimulations of the event. I am looking for the prejudices about knowing and control that were later challenged in Sudan. My understanding of life bifurcated and expanded. As a result of my decision I was going to be missing interesting, unexpected things (a 'free' kind of knowing in encounter in the world), but it was going to be worth it to avoid the anxiety of error, failure and danger (a controlled and controlling kind of knowing, or knowingness). I note an apparent turn towards knowingness and my sense of loss of the wild and unexpected. I also note the splendid complexity of the decision, its attempt to reject prejudices of sensuous engagement and vagueness, its embracing of the prejudice of knowingness authorised by my tradition. At times of shock and failure it seems that epiphany is the last thing to expect. I turned to the safety of my tradition.

Attempted rejection of the free kind of knowing did not mean its disappearance, however. Both freedom and carefulness, remained available for continued provocation and development, but a division had been made between them and each had acquired a different value. I regenerated the threads of my tradition, its philosophy, language and spirit. My family and society valued, above all, success. Here in this encounter was an intertwining of a happening, tradition and me. I brought prior beliefs about what was fun and what was dangerous and they were fleshed out in experience. I decided that it would be good to protect myself from and be forearmed against the unknown and unexpected. What now appeared to be a battle between freedom and carefulness itself became the ground of subsequent experience, a standpoint for recognition of and dealing with the world.

## Horizons

Both Heidegger and Gadamer clarify that prejudices are not separable from one's being and being-in-the-world and they do not offer themselves up to management. How then do they change? It seems that in this case my prejudice expanded. Here we need to bring in the idea of 'horizon.' Originating in Husserl's thinking, and extended by Gadamer, the notion of a 'horizon' is both limiting and expansive. Gadamer notes that any situation brings forward our horizon, because it '*represents a standpoint that limits the possibilities of vision*' (TM 302). He then goes on to say:

*'Since Nietzsche and Husserl, the word has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one's range of vision is gradually expanded. ... A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small'* (TM 302).

I can see in the story of the bus journey a horizon of understanding that comprised who I was up to that point (my history, language, beliefs, ideas and so on), what was happening at that moment, and all the possibilities for the future that were available to me at the time. I did not, could not, throw away old prejudices and replace them with new ones. I merely extended my horizon. The delight of untrammelled observation on the top of a bus and the terror of being about to be kidnapped in an unfriendly underground station crystallized and gave substance to what had previously been a vague generalization about some good and bad things in the world. I now had these new, more textured arguments available to be put at risk by the next encounter that might bring them to the forefront of my mind. Changing prejudice is expanding it, absorbing it into a broader vision. Mistakes are embarrassing and embarrassment gives the resulting decisions persistence. Mistakes also give us ground for making distinctions; they give texture and direction to life.

## ***Gypsies, black men and merchants***

Few encounters generate reversals of prejudice. Most of them leave me with the same prejudice as before, expanded and given texture. In this last section of the chapter I look again at how prejudice is consolidated, this time in encounter with fear and difference.

At first I could not understand race or class except from a kind of puzzled defensive position. 'I'm not racist!' I claimed. But I noticed that I was intensely aware of race and class and deeply self-protective. My family was part of the British establishment, with its history of white economic and social supremacy. I could feel the fear of losing what we had to interlopers. The British aristocracy have all sorts of exclusionary habits that they use to keep out the riff raff; ways of behaviour, terms of phrase and formulas for marriage being just a few. I could see that to be unacceptable to my own family might be worse than being unacceptable to another. I disliked the divisiveness of the system. I thought I could overcome it, but I found that it was too strong for me.

I was about seven years old and on my bike in Kent, at my grandmother's house. It was a summer's day and the hedgerows were thick with wild cowparsley and red campions. I turned off a lane onto a track and bumped along through a coppiced chestnut plantation. I knew who lived down this way and I wanted to meet them – gypsies. I didn't get within 50 yards. A bunch of children came out from among the caravans, shouting. They stooped and picked up stones and started to hurl them at me. I jerked the handlebars round and skidded on the stones. I pedalled away down the stony track, tears stinging my eyes.

I used to walk down different streets in Brixton when I lived there in the seventies, just for interest. One time, one of many, I was walking along and I could see up ahead some black guys sitting on the front steps of one of the peeling old houses. They saw me coming and growled blackly. I felt my face freeze, fake nonchalance struggling with open fear, steps quickening, eyes shifting from them to the pavement, to the sky, the busy high street up ahead, their whistles, comments and laughter hurting, even as I burst out onto the big street and fled for my front door. I wanted to be accepted by these exotic beings, and to make up for the pain they had suffered from my hostile and arrogant nation. I decided that each race and class played their part as victim or lord in a great dance between the peoples of the world. People seemed to use their powers, whatever they had, to make good.

In the autumn of 1979, I was just starting my undergraduate degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. I saw an announcement on the notice board of the local health food co-op in Brixton inviting people to take part in an Oxfam event in Archway. I went along to a cavernous hall; a schoolroom or a meeting house. We were handed bits of paper each

with a name of a resident of an imaginary Indian village. I remember I was a local merchant. And then we played out the relations between our various characters in the village. I was mean and grasping, indignant and proud. We made a compelling scene of exploitation, despair and resignation. That we made the whole thing up from our assumptions did not enter my head. I thought of it as a window into another world. I felt full of pity for those poor farmers, dislike for the merchants and full of zeal for putting their problems to rights. I understood that I could understand them by putting myself in their shoes. All my assumptions became theirs, their addresses to me were in fact my own.

### **Fusion of horizons**

The expanding horizon that I am focusing on here is the changing but nonetheless singular way I interpreted my experience and encounters. My horizon of understanding expanded in encounter with others and their ideas. It expanded from within itself, differentiating as I added new details. The gypsy children were communicating and insisting on hostility and difference. The experience became part of my horizon and it came forward in subsequent encounters. When I was being the merchant in the imaginary Indian village I brought the angry black men and hostile children with me as characters in my play. Gadamer describes the expanding of horizons of understanding as a 'fusion.' *'In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other'* (TM 306). When I am considering something that is speaking to me from a distance of any sort – in time, space or culture – there is always a fusion of horizons as I assimilate what the person is talking about or doing, and its effect, in a unity of meaning (TM 576). This does not mean a tyranny of a single meaning; there are always discontinuities and disagreements that are part of this unity (Weinsheimer 2004).

A given prejudice proves to be persistent when it is confirmed by repeated encounters. Stereotypes act and are acted upon as stereotypes. In the case of the gypsies I allowed them to be right about our mutual hostility. By the time I met the black people in Brixton, I had already established the expected mode of the encounter, and so had my interlocutors. Neither of our prejudices was challenged as we had co-created a world together in mutual reinforcement. The process of identity formation encourages each of us to be as we have always been and as we

are expected to be by others. Difference and challenge do not necessarily bring prejudice and presupposition into question. Rather, prejudice can persist and reinforce itself as it is confirmed by experience and become a disposition.

### ***The history of effect and the effect of history***

In this chapter, I have dealt with the theme of historicity: my being grounded in a tradition arising from history and its manifestation as prejudice and horizon. Gadamer's clarification of the part played by history in understanding underlines its depth of effect and breadth of potential. Even in this thesis, history is active. Each time I turn to look at history, I add a new perspective to it as it does to me. *'Modern historical research itself is not only research, but the handing down of tradition. We do not see it only in terms of progress and verified results; in it we have, as it were, a new experience of history whenever the past resounds in a new voice'* (TM 284).

I have outlined just some of the combinations of tradition and encounter that formed the origins and presuppositions of my question about understanding and which subsequently propelled the research. I am at pains to distinguish the psychological concept of 'conditioning', from the philosophical concept of 'historicity' to which I have been paying attention here. Gadamer suggests to me that we are not conditioned by history as if we separate from it; rather we simply *are* our history (Linge 1977: xiv) (TM 262). Historicity is not a state of mind, neither is it an accident that happens to us from which we may escape, but an ontological state, a condition of our existence. It was Martin Heidegger who demonstrated this and its corollary that our own sense of being and understanding always seems self-evident to us (BT 42). It sometimes seems hopeless to try to interrogate it. When we are born into a particular time, we learn the habits of its language and culture and it becomes invisible to us, because it is in this language and culture that we think. Every word that I use is a product of my history, even the 'ands' and 'buts'.

That we then become interested in history and attempt to learn it and interpret it makes no dent on the size of the effect of history on us. History is vast. Even my own history, which is smaller than all history, has an infinite quality, as it

stretches back into time and across geography. It is always much bigger than our historical researches will allow and it retreats from our inquiries into the distance. What I am now is a unity of all that history has made of me and an expression of rebellion against it and towards something new. But just because it is not possible to know it all, does not mean that it is not useful to explore. As an encounter with a person or a text is a potential source of provocation and clarification, so is an encounter with our past.

As part of my more recent studies, I read texts that illuminated the history of western culture. I began to develop a picture of the deep historical roots of the language that I spoke and the mode of thinking that had up to that point seemed to me to be natural and universal. I began, for example, to look closely at the formation of my own culture at its grand turning point in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Enlightenment, and its unfurling across the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe. Gadamer refers to the Enlightenment as a way of thought involving perfection of knowledge and an idea that prejudice gets in the way of seeing what is real (TM 201, 205, 270). The pragmatist Richard Rorty suggests that the Enlightenment fulfilled our need to have the human project underwritten by a nonhuman authority. The Enlightenment, he says, *‘wove much of its political rhetoric around a picture of the scientist as a sort of priest, someone who achieved contact with nonhuman truth by being “logical”, “methodical”, and “objective”’* (Rorty 1989:52).

Toulmin helped me to untangle the skeins of the Enlightenment tradition. It was never a single block of ideas, nor an orderly progression, but a refashioning by each society. He unravels the variations of Enlightenment perspectives on truth and streams of influence from different spheres, describing their patterns and textures in different European nations over several centuries and in response to different religious, social and political forces (Toulmin 1990). In these contests I came to see some of a more differentiated substrate to the arguments of my 21<sup>st</sup> century culture.

I read Weber and Habermas and I began to see more clearly just how cultural and historically conditioned was my understanding of the world. Of Protestant stock myself, I was struck by Weber’s work on the rise of capitalism and its connection

with Protestantism: protestant ethics of labour and investment that made it right and Godly to work, make things, make money and invest that money to make more things and more money (Weber 1985). Weber's description chimed with my own attitude to money, an attitude that I had up till then taken for granted as the only possible attitude to it. Habermas, for his part, speaks to me of disenchantment, differentiation and the parting company of systems and lifeworld, the overtaking of Western society by its own creations of rational administration and economic growth (Habermas 1984a). I was surprised when I realised just how deeply we Westerners believe in the self-evident superiority of administration and money, not only their utility, but their obvious 'rightness.'

I saw that Westerners see things, speak of things and deal with things in a very particular way, born of our history, and that people of one English 'class' or tradition see and speak of essential things differently than those of another. All this culture is embedded in my own language in a way that is particularly mine. That any of the compelling western arguments as to the way the world works and what humans are came to seem to me to be only a brilliant description of the west, but not a universal truth for understanding the whole world and all the people in it, came about because I lived for a long time in another place where people thought quite differently, had quite different stories and resisted coming to agreements with me on what I thought was self-evident. I will turn to this contest of viewpoint in the next chapter.

I have begun with a specific exploration into the historicity that is always at work in understanding and the history that has been forming the changing contours of my inquiry. I have noted the ways in which my horizon expanded through fusion, differentiation and texturing as the people and things that I encountered addressed and provoked it. I have remarked on the consolidation and persistence of prejudice as it sinks into the horizon of the self-evident. I have looked at how my historically effected conceptions framed the question of understanding between people and cultures to which this thesis is addressed. In the next chapter, I go on to discuss how my subsequent experiences, as a development worker in East Africa, brought forward contradiction and question. I work with Gadamer's



version of the hermeneutic circle to explore how and in what way I strove to resolve contradiction between what I expected and what I found.

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