

Chapter 5 - Theory and Method

Working on the problem

In the last chapter we saw my understanding challenged by difference and failure and lulled by vagueness. I was dealing with understanding in its manifestation as a *problem*. It was something not working that demanded to be resolved. I saw my predicament as uncomfortable and confused and leading to unfortunate outcomes. Misunderstanding was, in my mind, a primary cause of the difficulties I was having with getting things agreed and done with others. Expectations did not agree with outcomes. Promises were not kept. My plans, it seemed, were not aligned with those of others with whom I was making them and our communication did not work well. I understood and proposed one thing, they understood and proposed other things, and we did not resolve the differences before acting. The emergent results of our combined activities were not as anyone had willed or desired. Some people did perhaps get closer to their plans and desires, and I imagined that these people were the ones with powers to force outcomes more or less towards their immediate interests while the rest of us milled about in obsequious confusion.

I was dealing with provocations and confusions that called to be untangled, that is, I was dealing with prejudices and questions, and approaching them as problems. Theory and improved method offered ways of resolving the problems. As I conceived it, the problem was lack of effort to understand, exacerbated by imposition of one-sided meaning by those who could exert power using the structural constraints of modern systems of rationalisation. I also saw the problem of misunderstanding as fed by the confusion that inevitably arose from linguistic and cultural differences which needed to be bridged.

By and large, especially when it came to working out the collectively defined arrangements of society, justice and progress on which I was supposedly

working, my stated ideals were not realised and many of my professional relationships were uncomfortable. I noted the effects of the unpredictable environment and saw it as another cause of the unsatisfactory outcomes of our plans; but I saw it as a factor whose effects could be tempered by understanding. I believed that it would be possible to work within a variable and difficult environment if people who were collaborating together, or indeed in conflict with one another, came to deeper, more comprehensive and more realistic understandings about one another, the environment and their approaches. Understanding, for all these reasons, was a problem that could be solved with method. This chapter looks at my next move, towards development theory and theorised intervention.

Development theories

Theorising about development, about how to understand it and what should be done with it, is strongly influential within the development business. For the most part, its objective viewpoint gives it a distance from what is happening, in order that it may contribute a repackaging of what we understand. The question then arises as to how its insights can be reabsorbed into the lifeworld.

In 1996, I left Manderla and in 1997 returned to England. I joined the Institute of Development Studies and tried to build a new optimism around teaching, facilitating and researching development. It was here that I added active theorising to my attempts to discover solutions. I had been adopting new theories as I went along, development as agricultural intensification, development as economic growth, development as public sector rationalisation, development as rights, justice and security. Development agencies and their staff, bilateral, multilateral and non-governmental alike, took up theory in its more accessible forms and applied it to their plans. Whereas much of the early development theory of the 1950s and '60s was based on Western experiences of industrialisation and growth, later schools took account of post-colonial critiques as well as digging deeper into western norms to produce ideal models of governance, administration and welfare.

While theoretical ideas were central to the orientation of the work of aid agencies, I did not find that they were much discussed by the Sudanese, Kenyans and Somalis with whom I sat and talked in little tea houses and under shade trees, in shabby offices and in the grim hotel meeting rooms where we were tortured with unremitting 'workshops' on development

practice. In villages I would be invited to hear about land, animals, crops, customs, beliefs and ways of doing things. With colleagues in the aid world I would talk in jargon about ideals of ‘community’ and ‘partnership,’ problems of ‘marginalisation’ and ‘poverty’ and the business of ‘project implementation’ and ‘monitoring and evaluation’. This jargon was the detritus of theory; we used it to proclaim our belonging to the industry, supposedly a shorthand for complex notions, but in effect a lack of precision. Seldom did we talk theory in the way it is constructed in western culture – as a body of rigorous thought. Real theorising went on in particular places, in books and occasional seminars and at the universities. Trying to understand what was wrong with understanding in the development industry, I was following a thread, the thread of theory, towards its origin. Where does theory come from and why does it not it penetrate?

The Institute of Development Studies specialises in development economics, political science, sociology and other human sciences. The scholars categorised, organised and presented the evidence that they collected in the field or synthesised from others and spent less time on the development’s epistemological or ontological constructions. Cohen and Shenton describe the notion of development that was in general use in the mid 1990s as ‘*an intent to develop*’. The phrase embraces both the idea that things and people develop, and that we can *make* them do so (Cohen and Shenton 1996). These two aspects were how I saw the focus of the Institute’s efforts.

I found a pool of theories about the way the people in the world are and should be, and its proponents dealing with it in a plethora of sectors and fields. They were historical products, affected by the past of the disciplines themselves as much as by the languages of the times and the places where they were generated. The fellows and researchers were on an interface between the academy and the aid business. The aid donors (mostly western governments) paid for and had a level of influence on the direction of their research. Writings, observations and recommendations were in some vaguely enunciated way *for* the people who were the subjects of development as well as being *about* them, but likewise the products were for the agencies that paid for the work and the intermediaries who worked *on* development. The thinking projected outwards into the world, making assertions for the most part. Within the academy I think that the scholars understood themselves to be scientific and rigorous, aloof and critical in order to better observe and analyse the world. At the same time the donors needed to be pleased, so they would keep on funding the research. Their interests were often shorter term than those of the researchers. The theorizing that was done at the Institute was practically-oriented, often brilliant and influential in terms of government policies and international aid projects. I admired it. The research offered new frames for the understanding the world along with insights into realities for poor and marginal people in the world. It was rigorously developed and forcefully presented. Nyla Kabeer revealed the lives of woman textile workers in

Bangladesh. Andrea Cornwall opened up the world of sex workers, while Anne Marie Goetz showed us social and political movements in India. Robert Chambers shone a quizzical light on hierarchies of knowledge and John Gaventa on the workings of power. Melissa Leach shattered myths of desertification in Africa. Ian Scoones explained elite control of policy and Mick Moore explained the effects of taxation. Mark Robinson unpacked public sector reform and Stephen Devereux explained famine.

I met Robert Chambers in 1997 and joined the Participation Group at the Institute. I started off running a little library, sending out free copies of material on participation to people all over the world. Before long I began facilitating and researching people's participation in development. I became a facilitator of dialogues aimed at liberating people from being silenced, mostly by researching with and training intermediaries in development agencies. I picked up techniques that allowed the unsaid to be said using diagrams and group discussions. I could distil a fragmentary conversation to a pithy summary or an artful question. I could draw a roomful of people into a new way of considering things with a gesture. I enjoyed facilitating meetings. I liked the feeling of holding a dialogue in my hands and offering people a new way of thinking and taking part. I was suspicious, though, of the feeling of power and exhilaration it gave me; it seemed contradictory to the ethics of humility we espoused. And the results were evanescent, flashes of understanding followed by a return to jargon and enthusiasm for the latest theory.

I found it easy to rest on the laurels of our global efforts in the self-congratulatory world of participatory development. It was easy to see our espoused love of people and planet and our endless debates and participatory inquiries as evidence of rightness and even progress. I blamed the aid agencies, the politicians and the governments for their mistreatment of the poor. I went along with the participation crowd when I said things like, 'communities should be consulted', and 'we must work in partnership' and 'the people have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives'. It meant almost nothing in real life.

My colleagues and I aimed to create understanding and help liberate people from oppression. Sometimes extraordinary people did us the honour of coming to the Institute to take part in our inquiries and events, bringing with them the fervour of their passionate lives in the favelas of Sao Paulo or the slums of Johannesburg and Delhi. I admired Paolo Freire, Augusto Boal, Robert Chambers, John Gaventa, Andrea Cornwall and Orlando Fals Borda; scholars who took action on their theories in inventive and egalitarian ways. Chambers was, is, a riveting speaker and a humble man. He pointed at us and told us that our realities are '*universalist, reductionist, standardised and stable*', while the realities of poor people are '*local, complex, diverse and dynamic*' and '*you do not understand each other!*' (Chambers 1995). Robert was closest of all of us to considering the philosophical matters that underlay our situation, but even he was diverted by the urgency of putting things to rights. He had a notion that if we, like

him, saw what should be done in order to be good, then we would do it. But few people ever really did, they only pretended. They took his ideas of coming truly close to people in a real and phenomenological way and made self-serving versions of it. The villager was placed in a high chair and the visitor from overseas sat in the dust at his feet and asked him annoying questions, and came back and wrote books about it. Robert focused on development hypocrisy with disarming humour, but I think he assumed that once we had 'seen' the error of our ways, we would all change. What we got instead was a preening jargon around participation.

The participation arguments were not working for me, because I could see they were not working in the places I cared about. The understandings we achieved with local people, NGO representatives and bilateral donor officials in a hundred different countries were always ephemeral. The farmers and textile workers, administrators and bureaucrats performed the participatory exercises we set for them and we found ourselves in possession of diagrams of their institutions and maps of their land, or their farms, their offices or their gender problems or whatever the subject was. They were explaining things to us, and I suspected that they told us what they thought we wanted to hear. I shook with frustration. I noticed that I said less and less as I lost hope that anyone would ever be able to dislodge the ossified structures of what appeared to me to be exploitative and denigrating power relations. What I did say made no sense to me. In seminars and university events I did not speak much. I could not formulate any point that seemed worth making.

I embarked on a detailed inquiry into where my own understandings came from and what they were: my culture, history, point of view and assumptions. What things mean to me, which are then the starting point for my questions and conversations, are rooted in who I am -- in my '*identity, origin and locality*' (Chabal 2009). They are developed through my interpretation of, among other things the morality, rationality and institutional logic of my own society and experience. I concentrated on the dialogue that I conducted without cease with my own culture. I wrote down the stories of my life, my absorption of the acceptable and ideal as I grew up, my encounters with perplexing difference and horror, with famine and war. I spent some time examining the institutions which framed my rights, obligations and values, and compared with others that belonged to other peoples. I read and wrote about being an English twenty-first century woman.

Gradually I came to see the theories of the West were just that, not the reality of the whole world. I saw at last that the understanding that I had about the world, ontology, epistemology, economy and a hundred other 'ologies were of their time and place. They were not of all horizons. These new understandings were mine, a contextualised adaptation of a local norm, rather than being universal. I began to notice that my own horizon differed from and entwined itself with other horizons, other parts of the world horizon. In all this, the gentle, detailed and convivial voice of Gadamer accompanied me.

I was surrounded by excellent thinkers and new theories expanded and added texture to my theoretical horizons. I was compelled, for example, by a version of dependency/post-colonial theory in a paper by Mark Duffield: *'A small part of the world's population consumes and lives beyond its means within the fragile equilibrium of mass society while the larger part is allowed to die chasing the mirage of self-reliance. Rather than addressing these divergent life-chances, the securitization of development is further entrenching them'* (Duffield 2005: 141-142).

I also read the political economy work of Jean-Francois Bayart and it seemed to parallel what I was encountering in my own travels. I appreciated his appreciation of the sheer Africanness of Africa and how its varied peoples made sense to themselves and could therefore make sense to us, if we let them. I loved his zest and humour, even-handedness and admirable way of description:

'Inasmuch as it is a plural space of interaction and enunciation, the state [in Africa] does not exist beyond the uses made of it by all social groups, including the most subordinate. The state buzzes with their constant murmur: the murmur of social practices which tirelessly fashion, deform and undermine the institutions and ideologies created by the highest of the high; the murmur, above all of Radio Trottoir (pavement radio) or its white collar counterpart, Radio Couloir (corridor radio) which insolently ignore the embargoes of the censors and obstruct the totalitarian designs of government and its 'legitimate problematic' with their black humour' (Bayart 1993:252).

When I heard these ideas I merged them into my own thought. Poor people and refugees in Africa were engaging with hegemonic forces and they were dipping and diving with the systems of patronage and opportunity as impressively as anyone could be expected to. I came to new admirations and intimations of possibility. The new theories, analyses and framings made articulate what I had seen. They were empirical, plausible and cogently argued. But I was, in effect, continuing my old approach of finding out, knowing, boxing in and hoping to control and change the unruly and morally-insulting world of the poor. This objectifying stance did not quite fit with the experiences of twenty years of fusion of life horizons that I had been living in East Africa.

I could not find evidence that the scholars' insights and the new formulations were in dialogue with the understandings of poor and rural people I met in East Africa. Research seminars, publications and websites were stimulating conversations that got nowhere near the places where the poor themselves were. For every theoretical framework to categorise reality there was elite self-interest to distort and ossify it; for every new analytical formulation there was an institution to apply it out of context; and for every critical insight there was a gulf that was not crossed to a dialogue that it should have stimulated.

Critical distance

Heidegger divided the world of which we are conscious into three categories, '*conscious beings*', the '*ready-to-hand*', and the '*present-at-hand*'. Entities that are *ready-to-hand*, he said, are understood in the engagement we have with them, their usefulness and possibility. Entities that are *present-at-hand* are abstracted; they are what we see when we objectify. They are unreachable, but they could be categorised and measured. Consistent and clear categorisation attuned to the needs of the present and future is useful to many people, for example those who make policies, organise bureaucracies or develop, manufacture and market products. I read from Heidegger, however, that to be useful science needs to be clear about its limits and manipulation of abstractions. He says, '*by looking at the world theoretically, we have already dimmed it down to the uniformity of what is purely present-at-hand, though admittedly this uniformity comprises a new abundance of things which can be discovered by simply characterizing them* (BT 177).

Social science mostly does not find ways to clarify to the layperson the epistemology on the basis of which it considers the things that it considers, and the layperson has for the most part an attenuated version of the original. Neither has much of social science usually made clear to its non-academic readership the researcher's own historically-effected consciousness in the formulation of the research, despite the central role of the researcher and her or his tradition in the understandings that are developed. The people who are researched, at least the ones I have met in East Africa, tend to be forgotten as beings with meanings and consciousnesses of their own, and interest in what researchers are saying about them (Chabal and Daloz 2006:4). Much of what is called participatory research involves getting people involved a little more than had been the norm before, but the frame of thought is still dominated by the concepts of the researcher. In other cases participatory research suffers from a lowest common denominator effect as concepts of hermeneutic rigour are not agreed. There are, of course, all sorts of innovative approaches to research that attempt to remedy these shortcomings, action research being just one of them (Reason and Bradbury 2001a). But this is not so much a point of method, but a point of hermeneutics. Any form of research and theory can bring resonant insight when it works within and makes clear its

own grounds, clarifies its limits and engages in the equivalent of a conversation with its readers and users.

Much of the scholarly work that I have read on development attempts to be as plain and practical a representation of what is 'out there' as can be expressed intelligibly within an acknowledged conceptual frame. The flaw that I am concerned with is in its communication and discussion. A conceptual frame may be made with a view to subsequent refutation and reformulation and its role may be to contain a contextualised description and argument, but people that I have met in government offices and aid agencies usually only pick up the frame itself, and any sound bites that the studies offer. These frames have influenced entire decades of development practice. Take, for example, the public financial prescription of 'structural adjustment' or the current notion of 'social protection'. They universalise what is in reality specific to each context. Research users often ignore the rich context expressed in the original work. The frames, in my experience, have the effect of pre-packaging reality into shapes convenient to the 'policy-maker'. It is as if natural laws are being found and packaged for these thirsty types. Gadamer said that a scientist who has discovered a law of nature has it in his power (TM 450). Here it seems that the power to define natural law in social sectors is handed to the policy-maker and pundit, a direction that does not recognise the fundamental role of agreement of multiple people in coming to understandings about social affairs.

Theoretical thinking has produced a wide array of different descriptions of the way the world is, and in its turn, but in rather less detail, these descriptions have affected the worldviews of leaders and bureaucrats and the rules and modes of institutions. These articulations, distinctions, disruptions and discontinuities can become fashionable modes of consciousness. The flow of new understanding is interrupted when an abstract consciousness becomes all that anyone needs, being considered the right way to divide up life, and being true for everyone, always. The users of academic products in the development sector are less concerned with concrete objects of policy, business, industry or society, than with coalitions around one framework or another.

For many development theorists critical distance is an essential part of their method and epistemology and the question follows as to how academic thinking is being reabsorbed into non-academic life. People in the development sector who use social science to think and decide on courses of action and ways of perceiving the other seldom see its full context. Development theories about people in East Africa are not reaching many of the people I met there, except as the jargon and tropes they pick up from development agents. The kind of science that tends to be adopted by the development industry, considers 'ordinary' people as having neither the capacity, nor the interest, nor the need to debate and have meanings. As such it contributes directly to my concern about lack of respect and its consequences.

Lifeworld

Much social science has a tendency to 'float' detached from the realities it reports on. It establishes and maintains a distance between the things and people under investigation and the consciousnesses that apprehend them (BT 50, §7). In so doing, suggests Gadamer, theory is complicit with a *'fatal immunization against experience – for example, against that of common sense and the experience one gains in living'* (TM 555). In my own quest to understand how understanding happens, I came to agree that there was plenty of understanding before and beyond theoretical and scientific knowledge. If I concentrated only on the reality shown to me by the social sciences I would grasp the explanations, but I would miss the possibilities of being and the actualities of lived worlds, which are fundamental to coming to understandings with others, even in theoretical and scientific realms.

Gadamer questions whether methodological alienation is really possible (Linge 1977). Researchers are not actually detached from the subject matter. On the contrary, they are deeply involved. If some are imagining themselves to be outside, maintaining objective distance, they are then failing to recognise and account for the context of their work. They miss an opportunity to discuss what they are 'finding' with the people they are investigating and thereby perhaps agreeing something new about the lifeworld they are a part of. They would be immunizing themselves against life.

The lifeworld is a term coined by Husserl to convey the ‘world of lived experience’ (Husserl 1970; Moran 2000:181). It is everyday lived consciousness and its practice. Heidegger’s version of the lifeworld is a world that is available – it is practical, embracing and we belong to it. According to Husserl, science and theory arise from the lifeworld; they do not stand truly apart from it. While Husserl proposes that science is a stance motivated by ‘intellectual curiosity’ and playfulness, Heidegger suggests that science’s way of being objective is a ‘deficient’ mode of ‘being’. Science is not separate from or superior to the lifeworld, but emerges from it. It is framed and explored in it, and it is plunged straight back into the lifeworld as soon as its theories are expressed. As Rorty puts it, *‘there is no deep split between theory and practice, because on a pragmatist view all so-called ‘theory’ which is not wordplay is always already practice’* (Rorty 1999: xxiv).

I have also found that social science is constantly admonished by real life. The people that I meet in Africa who are the subjects of theory have always moved ahead of and beyond the reach of theory. They behave differently than expected, because, like the rest of us they live in the lifeworld. When complicated meanings are reduced to multi-part diagrams backed by universalising statements and when the rich texture and variation of living is forgotten, I feel justified in my suspicion of theory. And to me, it is feckless for theory not to be taken back into a conversation with those about whom it is theorising, instead projecting itself into arcane debates between interesting, but nonetheless thinly concerned people. My discomfort with the business of theorising is not when it plays with the possibilities of life, but when it stands aloof for too long. If the reason for aloofness is rigour, rather than epistemology, then I can argue that it is possible to be playful and rigorous at once, as has been shown by numerous different people over the ages, in science, literature, sport, art and many other walks of life.

The life of theory

In circumstances where people come together across gulfs of cultural difference and incomprehension, where the question of what is right is in dispute and new ideas are being contested, what most of us want is a kind of best-possible agreement. From a pragmatist perspective, the sciences have a problem of

universalising. Richard Rorty argues that what we are actually doing when we say things are true is saying that the distinctions we are making are good and workable for now; they are based on our experience, but they are not universal for all time and all people (Rorty 1999: xxvi). A working agreement makes it possible for us to agree, if we are not so dogmatic as to think we have finished our task. Local meanings are not less, but more true than universal meanings. Debates around universals need constant nourishment from the ground (Judith Butler cited in Marshall 2004:133). In the same way practical meanings nourish abstract ones (Eikeland 2001).

Without going any further into an old controversy about reality and theory, I will close this section by returning to the progress of my own understanding. What theory gave me for my purposes was insight into my own tradition and fore-conceptions. It was and remains a deeply interesting exploration, even though I found much of it debating only with itself and I wanted to find a way by which it would debate beyond itself, back with the people living in the lifeworld again. Such a notion is tricky when the self-understanding of social science is such that it will only accept as true that which follows its own rules – a tendency common to all kinds of consciousness. Orienting theoretical research in ways that encourages traditions to speak to each other in inventive conversations is not the way of most theorists nor their financiers. Nonetheless, theory is another kind of prejudice, and has its same potential.

One area of theory that I have already touched on is the area of participatory idealism. In the next section I turn from development theory in general to the particular realm of theories of emancipatory participation and their practical application in the art of facilitated dialogues.

A struggle with facilitating participation

Facilitation has theoretical underpinnings in notions of participation and inclusion and their potential for helping to create stable and happy societies. A staple of public sector attempts to get closer to clients and a branch of research aiming at democratising and increasing the scope of knowledge, facilitation has

been surprisingly unsuccessful, I think, in helping people in development to reach meaningful understandings with one another. In this section I look at my repeated attempts to make it work and ask why I was dissatisfied with the results.

When, in 2002, I started to study for my doctorate, the question that concerned me was how facilitated dialogue might make a helpful contribution to understandings across cultures. The art of facilitation, as I understood it, supposed that inserting a new, fair, mediating power into dialogue between people who were different would help overcome obstructions to agreement and innovation created by social divisions. Facilitation could, I thought, help untangle communication between people who had different ways of expressing themselves, divergent foundational beliefs and kaleidoscopic understandings of how the world worked. I knew that behind this lay the question of whether or not facilitation, even at its most skilful, did these things. So I asked the question ‘what is skilled facilitation?’ To test the hypothesis of utility, I would first need to achieve a level of skilled facilitation that when applied to the world, would achieve results for respect, innovation and co-operation. I needed to believe in the effectiveness of good facilitation. I had to try repeatedly to improve it and make it work and continue to hold it up as a marker of my identity and pride.

For several years I had been facilitating meetings whose objectives had been to improve co-operation between the people who worked for the organizations that drafted policies, made laws, laid on education and health services and spoke on behalf of poor people, and poor people themselves. Facilitation meant planning and guiding public discussions. It involved, in my case, meetings of anything from 10 – 100 people, often a mix of citizens and officials, professionals, politicians, producers, traders, students, aid workers or researchers. I would chair the meeting, make introductions, pose questions, draw out opinions, bring ideas together into frameworks, organize analysis in small groups and encourage people to come to conclusions. These meetings were parts of communication projects, efforts to bring the voices of poor people in to policy debates, efforts to change the way NGOs engaged with those they raised money for, or the way donors understood their responsibilities. The projects entailed trying to explain the context of people’s participation in policy, public decisions and public organisations.

I saw that facilitation could stimulate intense conversations and glimpses of new insight, but as the people left the meeting, they let go of these fugitive insights and returned to where they had left off. Despite bright inspirational moments, new ideas and understandings between different types of people evaporated quickly, leaving little trace. A discussion about the deficiencies of aid and the possibilities of doing things differently would rouse ideas of listening to poor people in new ways, changing our official approaches and personal attitudes and yet my colleagues and I would return to our offices and our engagements with poor people and most of us wouldn’t make a single substantial change to our ways of working. Our offices demanded plans and expenditures, so we made plans and expenditures. There was little

opportunity and not enough understanding to act differently than we had done before.

However much I tried to adapt my ways of speaking and acting, arriving in village or slum and introducing myself with due respect, arriving in a ministers office with due coolness, making suggestions for fair co-operation with poor people, spending money in harmless ways, I felt that I was kidding myself. I blamed our failures on power, money, history, and culture. I did also, secretly, blame the poor, blighted others for being hopeless. For those of us working in or on Africa, whose statistics indicated inexorable poverty, corruption and illness, there was a seductive argument that Africa was, as Chabal puts it, *'fated never to manage to resolve its problems.'* I had already caught myself and others contending that its problems were inevitable and intractable, Africans were *'cursed by their own traditions'* (Chabal 2009:15).

I thought that perhaps the new ideas and concepts proposed by participation theorists needed to be iterated again and again until they became understandable. But it was my experience that repetition of a word like participation led to a dimming of the reality of what was talked about, until it became a meaningless cliché rather than a possibility of something concrete. At first I had at least a passionate ideal, concrete if impractical, later all that was left was a cloud of fuzzy thinking. The disrespect that I saw in the world continued unabated.

I led workshops for development workers in which we reviewed the shortcomings of our approaches. We absorbed Chambers' insights on the behaviour of 'uppers' and 'lowers' (our places in hierarchies) and of the educated (our blinkered intellectual framing of the world) (Chambers 1997). I attempted to use the participatory tools he had taught us. I made diagrams of livelihoods and dreams with mothers in Kibwezi, development workers in London, pastoralists in Wajir, slum dwellers in Lusaka, people on welfare in Hull and Bristol, in the sand, on the pavement or the carpet with sticks, beans, string and marker pens, and despite creating sometimes quite beautiful and multi-dimensional diagrams, I did not feel we were coming to real agreements. I felt that my facilitation techniques were lacking the requisite art that would draw out and sustain our capabilities to know, act and be together differently.

I was asking how I might facilitate better. I was in search of method. I analysed the minutiae of our conversations and workshops and looked at the dynamics of who spoke and how. I sought to level the playing field in the debates that I facilitated, to allow even the quietest and the most oppressed person to speak and be heard. I tried every kind of trick to liberate collaboration and inspiration – small groups, buzz groups, theatre scenes, open spaces, matrices, timelines, diagrams and maps. I would ask people to write their ideas on little bits of paper and stick these on larger bits of paper, then rearrange them into categories and review them. I did it in Brighton and Bangladesh and in Brazil. Chalk and cheese written on pastel coloured squares, these scraps of paper were disparate collections of foreshortened notions, decoupled from their origins and meanings, forced together and turned into a list of five bullet points.

Perhaps I thought that someone was talking too much, and drowning out the opinions of others. I dug into psychological realms. I assumed that the person perhaps did not realize her mistake – she felt she had something important to say. Or she was unable to control herself: she said, ‘I talk too much,’ and then carried on talking. She is not being listened to elsewhere, or she is in the habit of being the boss, or she wishes to fill in awkward silences. Techniques presented themselves to rebalance the conversation, perhaps a listening exercise or a role reversal exercise. I gave each person a turn, or I would suggest drawing, theatre, or other tricks. And so it went on.

I began to wonder if the problems were not trust and meaning, which were not going to be overcome by tricks. The before and after of any conversation and the invisible influences everyone brought with them and were striving towards demanded not merely facilitation but something much more fundamental. Still I continued to look for a method. My sense of identity and contribution depended on finding one. By now, my critique of the methods we employed had become quite fierce. Not only was the context not given its due, the before, after and around, but neither were the cadences of people’s thought and conversation respected, despite our claims. As Abram said of literate and oral cultures coming together,

‘We must strive to free ourselves from our habitual impulse to visualize any language as a static structure that could be diagrammed, or a set of rules that could be ordered and listed. Without a formal writing system, the language of an oral culture cannot be objectified as a separable entity by those who speak it, and this lack of objectification influences not only the way in which oral cultures experience the field of discursive meanings, but also the very character and structure of that field’ (Abram 1996:139).

In 2004 I began to read about different epistemologies in an effort to understand what was happening when I was facilitating. Drawing from the work of Guba and Lincoln, I asked whether I was trying to uncover universal truths with people, or taking part in constructing temporary realities out of multiple perspectives (Guba and Lincoln 1994:105; 2000). Nietzsche howled at me with savage freedom and poetry. He sang of bravery and honesty (Nietzsche 2003). Selfish, generative, cruel and brilliant, like Whitman and America, he screamed at me for being distanced, bureaucratic and deceptive. He pilloried my way of pitying the poor. ‘Enjoy yourself and don’t lie!’ he threw out as he danced off into oblivion. Still obsessed with method, I asked myself if I could make my facilitation braver, more poetic, more diverse and more effective. Would it help the people I encountered come to understandings with me?

I read Rorty and tried to incorporate his insights into the events I facilitated. The world is out there, he said, but our understanding of it is always historically contingent and we face an infinity of interpretation at once limited by our historical situation (Rorty 1979; 1999). Our agreements should be for the best for now, not universal. I would encourage recognition and validation of a variety of truths from different cultures and histories. But at the end of the event, feeling pressure from outside to conform to norms of achievement and

value for money, we pushed variety aside and summarised the many into the one. We came up with a concluding statement that forced together twenty truths into bland lists, or we did not, leaving with only confusion to take back to our bosses.

Rorty also suggested to me that progress with human happiness came about through imagination and new descriptions of things: '*a talent for speaking differently rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change*' he said, and '*to change how we talk is to change what, for our own purposes, we are*' (Rorty 1989:7). To have new vocabularies we would need to take risks, be poetic and shift our attention from epistemology to politics, because '*political freedom has changed our sense of what human inquiry is good for.*'

Could facilitation and a focus on political engagement encourage re-description and make a new contribution? I thought it could because I understood that within political freedoms lay the ability to speak and be heard, but I didn't know how, and I continued in my search for a method. I was inspired by Amartya Sen writing on development as freedom (Sen 1999). My work in East Africa became more political, I had a sense that the conversations that I facilitated there were about building political strength with those who had none of it, and breaking down political barriers to negotiation.

At length, when even after all this I found myself still in the same place with regard to finding brilliant ways of promote change across the divides between different cultures, poor, rich, male, female, European, American, African, I turned again to the question of whether my facilitation work was having *any* lasting effect on reducing the gulf between us at all. I considered the possibility that most aid and development workers did not want to change the normality of their lives. It seemed that they and I were inextricably embedded in our labyrinthine industry, fixed in the orbits of my social and geopolitical positions and pinioned by the expectations of a dominant Western culture.

In 2005 I examined the situation where I was working in Ethiopia in terms of political economy, in a bid to understand why facilitation was having little useful effect, as far as I could see. I looked at the competing and colluding interests of national elites and international players, the reverberations of a colonial past in present behaviours, and the systems and structures of patronage and patrimonialism at work in even the smallest village (Hagmann 2005). I spent several months interviewing people in different parts of Ethiopia, pastoralists and shopkeepers, manufacturers and politicians, aid workers and officials hoping to find ways of reframing what I saw as a worrying situation of political violence. What I found was an economy and vocabulary of fear (Scott-Villiers 2005). I found that everywhere people yielded to power and took part in perpetuating Foucaultian discourses that led them into restricting their own capabilities by accepting institutions that imprisoned them (Foucault 1995).

Considering Duffield on the biopower of the rich nations over the poor, Bayart on the rhizomatous patronage networks of Africa, Foucault on the inextricable

mazes of European normative administration, Habermas on the decoupled steering systems of bureaucracy and economy, and Fanon and the Black Atlantic writers on the excruciating pain of colonial repression, I concluded, that with all this power and history, facilitation of idealistic dialogues was worse than useless (Habermas 1984a; Fanon 1986; Foucault 1995; Jain and Singh 2000; Duffield 2005; Baucom 2006). I and the people who took part in the events I led were not likely to take the huge risks needed to deal with the problems we are talking about. The participatory idea that everyone could contribute in a small way, thus making it less risky for the bravest ones, did not play out in reality.

In the summer of 2006, I helped facilitate a big gathering of pastoralists from across Africa, held at a tented camp that we had built in southern Ethiopia at a place called Qarsa Dambi. The chair of the meeting was a pastoralist leader called Nura Dida. He led the sessions when all 300 of the delegates came together under the central tree, and I was tasked with running the group sessions on substantive issues. In my sessions different constellations of pastoralists, government and NGO agents argued about drought and animal breeds, trade and community organization. I found the discussions interesting but inconclusive. I was only vaguely aware that the part of the meeting that was to have any lasting effect was actually taking place around the back of the tents, a vigorous series of small engagements that were proposing agreements between different pastoralist groups for keeping peace and dealing with political stresses. When I did understand it, after the event, I appreciated my diversionary role.

Nonetheless, I decided that I could quite safely stop imagining facilitation by foreigners to be at the centre of processes of social renewal. I understood that people would find generative causes and understandings when they rooted them in their own histories and projective directions. They would not find them when they were proposed by technicians and theorists. No false equality, fleeting goodwill or deracinated concepts would help them. My question found its focus. I no longer needed or wanted to know how to do facilitation better. I no longer wanted to know what facilitation did or didn't do. Rather, I wanted to know how people came to understanding, where it came from and what effect it had.

False, slanted and true questions

When a prejudice comes into the open, Gadamer remarks, its validity is suspended and its previous state of self-evidence and naturalness evaporates. It becomes just a provisional judgment. It takes on '*the logical structure of a question*' (TM 299). In the stories of my struggles with facilitating discussions and meetings I was repeatedly provoked by my failure to live up to a promise of producing agreement and understanding. I had a prejudice that skilful and methodical facilitation would be effective in promoting agreement, and I looked for better

approaches. Only after some time and under sustained provocation from Gadamer and the world did the possibility arise that my focus on method was missing the true question that the situation was asking of me.

Questions, Gadamer notes, *'open up possibilities and keep them open'* (TM 299). He suggests that a question is 'slanted' if it does not foreground its pre-supposition and intend the real issue that has prompted it. It has the spirit of a true question, because there is a question behind it and openness is intended, but since the presuppositions are not opened to refutation, nothing can be decided from it (TM 364). A false question is a closed question, one to which I already know the answer. There is no strengthening the argument of the other, no possibility of ignorance from the questioner and no possibility of truth from where the reply is to come from. A true question is the opposite, it is open to the potential truth of the answer, to the alterity of the answer and to its coherence with the whole of which it is a part (Warnke 2003:111). The slanted question lies between these two – it is a question that lacks skill rather than one that is opinionated. It is muddled (TM 362-369).

My question about a good method was a slanted one. I was being provoked by misunderstanding, disagreement, disrespect and distance. But I did not ask what they were and what they were not, when they happened and when they did not. Until I identified the true question no answer could be given and no decision could be made (TM 364).

Questions have sense, which means a 'sense of direction' (TM 362). The question comes from somewhere and everything about it – its subject matter, language, time and place – orients it in a direction from which its answer must come. Question and answer are bound together – the history and reality of what the question is about defines the direction from which the answer must come and the potential of the answer defines the question that fits it.

My question about good facilitation originated from concerns with being effective according to the norms of my world. These norms oriented the question towards answers about technique. I derive the notion of technique from my education in cause and effect and my admiration for science. I phrased a question about

technique that was embroidered with the terminology of psychological and political science that explained why people do or do not speak, and why they do or do not generate conversations that give them new understandings. The answer to the question of technique came from the direction towards which it was pointed, from social theory, psychology and method. Try this, try that, said my colleagues. It is caused by this, it is caused by that, they asserted. Trying to discover the reasons why skilled facilitation was not working to create dynamic understanding, I expanded the scope of my inquiries beyond matters of psychological technique to include a broader landscape.

The limits of methods of understanding

The primacy of method is a hallmark of Western tradition. Meanwhile Gadamer was worrying me. I was perplexed each time he suggested that hermeneutics is not a method but a field of philosophical insight. If aid did not have much time for politics it had absolutely no time for philosophy. Surely hermeneutics is an art? Surely it is something that I can learn, something that can be done better or worse? Gadamer raised the possibility that there might be something beyond method in the realm of coming to understandings. He was making a cogent argument for a contrary view to my own. He spoke from somewhere close to my own tradition. He gave me an opportunity to make a distinction between the utility of method for science and its inadequacy for the life of human understanding.

In development agency discussions, officials, volunteers and aid recipients pretend to ignore politics, even while members of the academy attempt to draw their attention to it. I have met many people directly involved in disbursing the millions donated in aid who want to distance themselves from the accusation that we work in a political industry involving gross manipulations of power, resources and institutions. I, like them, saw myself as a pragmatist allied to the social sciences and bureaucratic neutrality. I tried to approach my work scientifically, putting emphasis on method and technique. I wanted to find a dialogical way out of political-economic problems, creating conditions for the blossoming of real and effective institutions that could constrain the worst effects of politics.

When I was facilitating discussions with people within my own profession, my colleagues in British government departments for instance, we flattened out our differences, assuming that we were all of one culture trying to understand a universal situation. We were not making distinctions between our variations of history and political positions. I closed down possibilities by assuming that a method of dissolving the power differences between us would lead us to universal meanings and clear agreements. I was attempting to bridge differences of meaning and philosophy with paper-thin assumptions of universal norms.

I used the methodical formats of the development bureaucracy and academic methodology to try to understand development. Sokolowski notes that *'this confidence in method ... lies behind the trust we have in large-scale research projects that promise to discover the truths we need to make life easier and better. The authority of the wise or intelligent person is replaced by the method-driven project sponsored by government, industry, or the academy'* (Sokolowski 2000:164). I did indeed understand something with my colleagues, but the results had a static quality. We took up positions. These positions brought me no nearer to the other people I wanted to understand *with*, those others who lived in the 'undeveloped' lifeworld, and who were so different from me. Neither did they bring me back into the world of marvellous and irritating contingency that I wanted to live in with grace and responsiveness.

Missing from the methodological approach was recognition of the 'belonging' of the question to somewhere and something. We had turned development and participation into problems; made them distant and static in our search for a method to solve them. Gadamer notes that *'the concept of the problem is clearly an abstraction, namely the detachment of the content of the question from the question that in fact first reveals it. It refers to the abstract schema to which real and really motivated questions can be reduced and under which they can be subsumed. Such a "problem" has fallen out of the motivated context of questioning, from which it receives the clarity of its sense'* (TM 376). In this way of thinking, problems are not things that we can study with the methods of the natural sciences like 'stars in the sky', but are questions and topics of speculation born of a context (TM 377).

Discipline and method certainly have a bearing on my success in the world, but I think that they arise *from* understanding rather than being conditions *for* understanding. They do not produce it, they reproduce it. Method is not achieved prior to understanding – where could it possibly come from? It does not deliver understanding, it is its result. It then provides '*the working out of possibilities projected in understanding*' (BT 188). I had put the cart before the horse. My culture glorified method as if it were superior to and prior to understanding and truth. Giving primacy to method in this way has serious limitations when it comes to human relations, political interaction, social understanding and being together with others. It reduces rather than enhances possibility when it attempts to put aside the prior conditions that bring it into existence (TM 490). As I see it now, the difference between truth and method is that truth presents itself by happening and method is a mode of presenting back to truth. When I encounter truth, I '*recognize what is, instead of starting from what ought to be or could be*' (TM 511).

Wisdom and freedom

As a methodological discipline, science places restrictions on its own freedom to manoeuvre in order to achieve its ends, and those ends, while powerful, are not the entirety of life. The notion that science encompasses all of reality has narrowed many people's concept of understanding to one of objective knowledge. Influential western concepts of technique and expertise have displaced our respect for wisdom and connectedness even though these qualities are still required for us to have technique and expertise. The scientific idea of accuracy is not the same as the rigour of seeing what is there in the way it is presenting itself, including foregrounding and working out prejudice (TM 449-453). Hermeneutics is a rigour of allowing insight.

Of course, method is not absent from interpretation and coming to understandings, mine is only a question of how its limits and potentials are recognised in any given arena. I 'work out' fore-meanings and fore-conceptions and it makes a difference to the ease by which they are fore-grounded as questionable. I read phenomenology and it becomes more and more the way I notice and speak the world. Gadamer says, '*methodologically conscious*

understanding will be concerned not merely to form anticipatory ideas, but to make them conscious, so as to check them and thus acquire right understanding from the things themselves' (TM 269). But the prejudices I find to work out are not all available to be picked up precisely when I want them. I do not see them until they arise. I can be methodical in examining tradition, and can develop experience of knowing that I do not know, but I cannot be entirely methodical with understanding. It is, as Gadamer says, an event (TM 309).

'What distinguishes the process of refining hermeneutic practice from acquiring a mere technique, whether called social technology or critical method, is that in hermeneutics history co-determines the consciousness of the person who understands. Therein lies an essential reversal: what is understood always develops a certain power of convincing that helps form new convictions. I do not at all deny that if one wants to understand, one must endeavour to distance oneself from one's opinions on the matter. Whoever wants to understand does not need to affirm what he understands. Still I think that hermeneutic experience teaches us that the effort to do so succeeds only to a limited extent. Rather, what one understands always speaks for itself as well. On this depends the whole richness of the hermeneutic universe, which includes everything intelligible. Since it brings this whole breadth into play, it forces the interpreter to play with his own prejudices at stake. These are the winnings of reflection that accrue from practice, and practice alone (TM 567).

With the idea of practice, which is a mix of method and non-method, I move in search of collaboration and dialogue. I abandon the search for control, influence or theoretical objectivity. I explore the achievement of understandings between people in a way that attempts to account for what happens. In situations where orthodoxy is limiting my understanding, I need innovation and creativity to free me of the blindfolds I have tied around myself. Influenced by the failure of my facilitation methods to live up to the promises I had made for them, the provocations of difference given to me by African ways of being, and the distinctive understandings I was offered by scholars of European culture and history, I abandoned a search for a method that would provide a standard way of

coming to understanding with others. I became interested in the contextual, the connective and the phenomenal.

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