

Has Gramsci Left the Building?

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In 1993, English political philosopher John Gray wrote a book titled *Post-Liberalism*. In November 2016, he revisited some of the issues raised in that earlier book in a *New Statesman* piece that sought to understand the politics of his own country in the wake of Brexit and what might be happening elsewhere in Europe, as well as the events in the USA (prior to a Trump win). He starts by invoking a phrase that will resonate with sociologists: “All that seemed solid in liberalism is melting into air” (Gray, 2016:25). Not all that he argues is convincing – at least to me – but he returns to his earlier theme that we are now entering a post-liberal era where anti-liberal forces have emerged to displace the values of freedom and tolerance. But while his assertions about this value shift are interesting, it is the way in which we – and here I am assuming a degree of community and influence from sociologists and others – have (mis)understood what has been happening around us.

He is particularly critical of the Corbynites in the UK who he argues offer “no analysis of changing class structures or any systematic critique of the present condition of capitalism” (Gray, 2016:27). He continues:

As for the concerns about job security and immigration that produced large majorities in favour of Brexit in what used to be safe Labour areas, the Corbynite view seems to be that these are retrograde attitudes that only show how badly working people need to be re-educated (Gray, 2016: 27).

Moreover, there are concerning elements to some of these politics: a re-emergence of left-wing anti-Semitism (see Luce, 2016), a tendency to blame the “folly” of the crowd and to rely on a relatively small echo chamber comprised of a concerned and/or alienated middle class. There is a touch of the Corbynites in New Zealand (listen to the Kathryn Ryan interview in late 2016 with Andrew Little about the need to appeal to the political middle ground or Labour’s

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misguided attempt to argue that those with Chinese surnames were influential in terms of housing issues in Auckland). Gray goes on to note that simply replacing Corbyn (or Little?) is unlikely to revive the party's electorate appeal unless there is a more convincing analysis of the nature of contemporary economic change, how this has impacted on communities and changed political dynamics.

My concern is that sociology, including sociology in New Zealand, has more than a touch of the Corbys. And I thought the LSE's Michael McQuarrie captured it rather nicely in the following:

Sociology has a Trump problem. And a Brexit problem. And a Populism problem. And a white people problem, and a class problem, and a man problem (McQuarrie, 2016).

Contemporary sociology, or at least large parts of it, is such that many sociologists have neither anticipated the significant shifts which have occurred in recent decades nor has the discipline provided the tools to understand the politics of alienation and anxiety. This is unfair. There are obvious exemptions to this sweeping generalisation but McQuarrie has a point. As he notes:

While we [sociologists] are attentive to globalization, global cities, new elites and the politics of the young, those suffering from economic decline and marginalization, the elderly, and Old Economy geographies tend to only receive attention from demographers and scholars of public health (McQuarrie, 2016).

Moreover, he goes on to note that rather than being observers, sociologists have become "political adversaries to many of the people we might want to study" (McQuarrie, 2016). He invites us to revisit the emphasis on *verstehen* advocated by Max Weber or the need to "win" our social facts advocated by Pierre Bourdieu.

This is my concern about the (ir)relevance of sociology in Aotearoa. How well do we understand what is happening in countries like our own and empathise with those impacted? How well do we "win" our analysis – and how well do we provide a compelling narrative of rustbelt politics (or whatever we might want to call it) and the anxieties arising from the decline of paid, satisfying and secure work? And what do we understand and say about "politics in the age of vitriol" (to borrow the title from a recent *Financial Times* publication), especially when new technologies open up a range of destructive possibilities in a post-truth age? And where are the New Zealand equivalents to books like Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crises* or Hochschild's *Strangers in*

Their Own Land. Anger and Mourning on the American Right? The first is a book on the sociology of a steel town in Ohio and it provides an interesting story of the white underclass and their growing rebellion at political and economic elites. But Arlie Russell Hochschild's book is the one that I would strongly recommend. It explores, with a lot of empathy, the triple marginalisation (the strangers referred to in the title) of those who have been most affected by stagnant wages and rapid demographic change and who have been mocked for their patriotism and faith by liberal culture and the media.

When I was at the University of California Berkeley on a Fulbright in 2010, I decided to take an interest in the Tea Party. I attended some Tea Party events and talked with some of those involved, and I went along to a number of seminars at Berkeley. Later in the year, there was a conference on the significance of the Tea Party for American politics. Many of the presenters were dismissive and patronising (the Corbynite belief that re-education was required) but Hochschild was not like that at all. She argued that there was a fundamental shift occurring in political values of which the Tea Party was one example, and that social scientists should take these concerns seriously and seek to understand rather than to dismiss. I was impressed and the book (a finalist for nonfiction in the National Book Awards in the USA) is an outstanding example of a sociology which has anticipated a significant shift in political values, the arrival of a post-liberal age. While these might not be our values, and the anxieties are not ones that we necessarily share, surely our task is to provide a sociology which explains and provides new options, political or otherwise. Where are our Hochschilds or equivalents to *Strangers in Their Own Land* in New Zealand?

We have been saying farewell to Steve Maharey as he steps down from his position as Vice-Chancellor at Massey University. It gave me cause to think about my own sociological practice, created in the very turbulent decade that was the 1980s. Steve and I (and others) sought to provide a sociology which was grounded in a New Zealand which was experiencing significant change. We wanted it to speak to a range of New Zealand audiences, we sought to establish alliances with particular communities (sometimes very unsuccessfully I might add) and we wanted to place sociology at the centre of public debate. I was very sympathetic to the Maori and Pasifika communities and organisations that I worked with as they sought change, but completely unsympathetic to the white supremacist and anti-Semitic individuals and groups that I was also researching. I am not suggesting that this provides any sort of model but I am arguing that we are in the

midst of equally powerful changes – and it is important for the vitality and relevance of our discipline that we are able to explain such changes – and to be engaged.

My plea is for a public sociology in Aotearoa that has something substantive and interesting to say about the transformative changes being wrought by contemporary globalisation and technological disruption, and which understands (and empathises) with those impacted by these changes. (Bruce Springsteen offers a pretty impressive role model). And which says something about the options available, whether those are in terms of a politics which (re)asserts the values of tolerance and respect or which addresses the precarious nature of economic engagement or growing inequality (see Deaton, 2016). Gray suggests that governments “will succeed or fail by how well they can deliver prosperity while managing the social disruption that globalisation produces” (Gray, 2016:29). How might this happen in New Zealand? And shouldn't sociologists be at the very centre of that debate? Just a final thought. Gramsci might still have had something to say about such political engagement and mobilisation.

References

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