

Gavin Williams

REFLECTIONS

My family always encouraged my interest in ideas, in learning about the social world, and in the appreciation of theatre, dance, and art. I grew up in the compromised everyday world of white South Africans. My parents taught me to be tolerant of and respect people whatever their ethnic and racial identities and their religious beliefs and gave me the security of an atheist upbringing. These values brought me and my brothers, Brian and Roy, into conflict with the social order of apartheid and at times with its agents. My wife Gill, our daughter Rosa, and our son Keir share a commitment to social justice, intellectual inquiries and artistic practices.

I studied at the height of 'Calvinist-Nationalist' (apartheid) ideology at the Afrikaans-medium University of Stellenbosch. There I chaired a small branch of the anti-apartheid National Union of South African Students. I was also a founder of SAAK, a student current affairs association, designed to provide an much-needed open forum for ideas at the University. At the conclusion of an address by Dr H F Verwoerd to a public meeting of the National Party in Stellenbosch, the Chair said that if there was anybody who did not agree with 'our leader', they should stand up. So I did.

As a student, I was fortunate to learn from remarkable teachers and scholars. They all combined their erudition with their capacity to take their students and their ideas critically and seriously. Johan Degenaar at the University of Stellenbosch deployed his Socratic method to set ideas as problems persistently and thereby bring into question any hegemonic ideology. At Oxford, I was supervised by Philip Williams and Thomas Hodgkin. From my first week in Oxford and throughout my career, David Goldey has always been a mentor as a teacher, friend, and colleague.

The Department of Sociology at Durham was intellectually exciting in the two periods during which I taught there. In the late sixties, we were united by in our rejection of 'positivist' methodologies, whatever they were. In 1973, I founded at Durham a Political Economy Group that created a context of historical study with social theory.

I was fortunate, in more than one sense, to be appointed to a position at St Peter's College and the University of Oxford. The virtue of Oxford's tutorial system is that undergraduates do the work before their tutors discuss it. At Oxford, I could combine my interests in the empirical study of politics and societies with political and social theories, and was able to teach students within and across disciplinary boundaries.

Research in the social sciences is rarely an individual enterprise. This has for me been most important in Nigeria, my first research venue. My research in Nigeria began with a study of the common people of Ibadan. It was a formative period in my academic life. It required me not only to interview people (and administer a useless survey) and with Gill to read newspapers but to become familiar with and appreciate Ibadan and its people. Like most researchers, I varied between thinking that I had identified major truths with a sense that nothing I had to say was new, when it was not just banal. That unstable balance may be an aid rather than a hindrance to scholarship.

Research in and on Nigeria, then and subsequently, brought me in touch with wide, unstructured networks of scholars, many of whom combined a concern with Marxist questions with disagreement about their answers. All of our agendas were at variance with the subsequent hegemonic claims of the abstracted analysis of rational action or the quantification of the unaccountable.

Editing books and journals is time consuming. It also requires collaborating with others, which can be the foundation of critical thinking and new ideas. I did so editing books on sociology and development, and on rural development, and as an editor of the Review of African Political Economy from the outset and of the Journal of Historical Sociology. At St Peter's, I took part in the annual workshops on 'the English state', over the last millennium. They were examples of how to enable discussions by limiting them to no more people than can fit around tables in one room.

In the 1980s, I tried to make sense of the World Bank and the origins and implications of its policies of rural development, and after that to bring into question nationalist critiques of structural adjustment policies. When I returned to South Africa, my friends pushed me to write about the World Bank's ideas on land reform, which took me on to agricultural policies. My own priority was rather to find an empirical project - what could be better than the history of the Cape wine industry?

A consistent theme throughout my writing has been to question the ideas and practices of 'development'; the ideas 'with which people think' and their commonly disastrous consequences. Policy studies typically address the questions set by policy makers, who are disinclined to listen to the 'wrong' answers, and do not wish to be told that they are asking the wrong questions.

It has become more and more important to defend the space that Universities allow for independent and creative thinking. In 1985, members of the University Congregation decided by a resounding majority not to accept Council's proposal that an honorary degree be conferred on Margaret Thatcher. In 2004, I initiated the rejection of a 'mandatory' system of performance review. Congregation followed this up by rejecting proposals to reorganise the University along the corporate lines favoured by bankers and maintained Oxford's distinctive form of academic democracy.

My understanding of the historical and social sciences owes much to teaching and supervising undergraduate and graduate students, and examining doctoral thesis. Many of my best ideas have come from trying to answer the questions from students and from their research. I have taken ideas over from my students as well as friends and colleagues, with due acknowledgement. My contribution has often been to show that many things are not always as straightforward as they sometimes seem to be.

To turn Marx's '11th Thesis on Feuerbach' the right way up, 'the point is to understand the world'.

Max Weber set out the vocation of science in his lecture in 1919:

... First, of course, science contributes to the technology of controlling life by calculating external objects as well as man's activities. ... Second, science can contribute ... the tools and training for thought. Fortunately, ... the contribution of science does not reach its limit with this. We are in a position to help you to a third objective: to gain clarity. ['Science as a Vocation']

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