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FORUM COMMENT

The Virtues of Theory: How Some Academics Succeeded -- Big Time -- in Reaching Non-Academic Audiences

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Abstract: This is a short essay stimulated by *Why Anthropologists Don't Reach the Public: A Ruminantion on Books of Thomas Hylland Eriksen*, by Gordon Mathews (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2018.1502074>)

I take this opportunity to go travelling around the academy to learn what high-profile scholars have in common. I am specifically referring to those scholars who became both paradigmatic in the academy and inspirational to diverse audiences beyond it, as opposed to those who are media savvy and quick with the pen. Strikingly, a quick survey of such academics, from the natural and social sciences, suggests that to obtain their iconic status, they each needed to be one hell of a good theorist.

With natural science, I emphasize those scholars whose efforts to better understand the natural world have helped to generate new outlooks in the political world, over those scholars who deploy their education and moral capital to effect political change. The late Stephen Hawking was as cutting-edge of a theorist as you can get in physics, occupying the same chair as Isaac Newton and regarded as the heir to Albert Einstein. Yet, he could write successfully for a popular audience, notably his *Brief History of Time*, which suggests to readers a radically different cut on the experience of temporal life. With that cut comes new ways to think ethically. The late Stephen Jay Gould wrote some 300 essays in his column “This View of Life” in the popular periodical *Natural History*, many of which were reprinted as best-selling books. He examined issues from the pseudo-scientific basis of racial prejudice to the marvelous adaptations of animals to peculiar environmental circumstances. These essays appeal because they leave the reader with a clear-headed view of how science is actually done and with a wonder about nature’s infinite variety. The result is a new sense of possibility for the reader about how to live in the world. However, Gould, like Hawking, was not primarily a populariser of science. He was a leading theorist of geology and evolutionary biology. He re-set the paradigm of evolutionary theory from Darwinian gradualism, which saw speciation occurring in slow, steadier lengths of time, to what he and Niles Eldridge called “punctuated equilibrium,” where it occurs in short bursts followed by periods of stabilisation. (This interpretation of the fossil record reflected his left-wing views that revolutions happen in an instant rather than through gradual accumulations of reforms.)

Switching to the social sciences, the geographer David Harvey twice re-set paradigms of thought in his discipline and beyond, once in the 1960s with *Explanation in Geography*, a ground-breaking book in quantitative, positivist geography, and again, in 1989 with *The Condition of Postmodernity*, a masterful quantitative and qualitative analysis of the material basis of the postmodern experience. Economist Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the 21st Century*, a book almost as thick in pagination as Marx’s *Capital*, registered so deeply with the general public that Amazon struggled to keep supply in line with demand. We should similarly note that Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*, first published in 1951, sold out on Amazon on January 29th, 2017...shortly after the inauguration of a certain US president. To boot, no one ever accused Arendt of writing short, digestible sentences and her intricate study of modern European history includes lengthy analyses of the likes of Proust and Hobbes. Arendt always asked her readers to raise their game, but she always made the effort well worth their time. Slavoj Žižek continues to inspire radicals and progressives the world over. It would be unfair – and more than a little condescending – to attribute his success to his “rock star” status generated through his charismatic performances. Rather, he became a rock star because his hard intellectual work, developed through his Hegelian-Lacanian approach, has allowed him to provide an accessible and provocative angle to crack open the global liberal consensus. People can make use of it. Though abstractly reasoned, Žižek’s message is anything but abstract: it’s about how we viscerally exist in the world today. And let us not leave out difficult theoretical writers – like Judith Butler, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri – who nevertheless inspire non-academic readers to political action. We may not agree with these above characters, but we should admire how their comprehensive programs of thought push peoples’ thinking in both the academy and the world of action.

Their examples toss aside the tired conviction that theorists can't speak to laypeople, or that laypeople are uninterested in theory. I would wager that a layperson's interest in theory (like many an academic as well) corresponds to the personal and professional investment they have in the status quo: if they are attached to it, then they are more likely to decry the alleged uselessness of theory; if they are dissatisfied with it, then critical theory appeals precisely because of the new perspectives it offers.

What about anthropologists writing for non-academic audiences? Enter David Graeber. His wide appeal stands in contrast to pretty much any other anthropologist over the last several decades. Moreover, it differs in character from earlier anthropologists with high public profiles such as Margaret Mead or Marvin Harris. These anthropologists wrote to the post-war middle-class of white America. They poked it gently in the ribs lest it assume that rest of the world cherished its bourgeois life. They wanted their readers to know that the world was bigger than them. In contrast, Graeber writes to the precarious anywhere in this neoliberal, postcolonial world to convey the significance both of their struggles for justice and of the actual modes in which they perform participatory democracy. The latter should be lessons to all of us. Graeber's fluid writing makes it look easy to do what he does as a scholar and scholar-activist. Counterintuitively, though, a scholar's depth of theoretical command enables them to capture with easy prose the heart of the matter or the definitive issues of the times. Saying it plainly is evidence that one truly commands theory. If one writes theory in difficult, obtuse prose, then perhaps the writer doesn't understand it all that well. Graeber is well versed in Marxism, neo-Marxism, and anarchism. This depth of knowledge allows him to use theory like an artisan, as opposed to theory controlling him like an acolyte.

Crucially, Graeber's audience(s) are not asking for accessible lectures in anthropology, which does not mean that anthropological perspectives are not helpful to them. I suspect that his audiences – like many non-academic audiences across the political spectrum – are not particularly enamoured with the academy. Those audiences want an understanding of how their lives became so precarious, so that they can forge courses of action to change them. Graeber does not spend much time flashing his disciplinary credentials, but nor does he deny them. Perhaps, to be widely read as an anthropologist, one need not insist on the discipline's relevance. In fact, the very insistence makes anthropology appear weak as when President Bill Clinton weakly declared that the “president is still relevant” after Newt Gingrich shut down his agenda as Speaker of the House. Better to write something brilliant that draws on one's discipline, then let the reader discover that one happens to be an anthropologist. The point is not limited to anthropology, however. It seems that most disciplines in the social sciences and humanities worry that the “real world” doesn't take them seriously.

To reach non-academic audiences -- big time -- especially if writing from a left of center standpoint, then the scholar needs an extraordinary amount of academic learning that dives into theory rather than cautiously poaches from it. That work gives them an awareness of what enables the historical moment, which is something more than simply knowing what is happening in the historical moment. But, that's not enough. These authors also have an earthy, gutsy commitment to saying what they think, and they don't worry if their disciplines approve of it or not. Their priority is on the relevance, the construction, and the power of the argument

itself. Their disciplines have educated them, but they have not “disciplined” them in the Foucauldian sense of the term.

Indeed, Arendt spent her career distinguishing her work from philosophy despite the fact that she was trained in it. Harvey, though trained as a geographer, has his professional home in the CUNY anthropology department. And then there is Žižek. Am I the only one to have wondered about Žižek’s career path? It doesn’t resemble that of the rest of the world’s work-a-day professors at underfunded, neoliberalised universities. (Sound the violins now.) However, I doubt that we would even know his name if had he tried to build a career through the standard disciplinary paths in Europe, North America, and Australia. That point critiques the standard not Žižek! One doesn’t acquire his depth and eclecticism by playing by the rules; the rules don’t allow it. Therefore, we should not envy him for the freedom he enjoys as a public intellectual, but rather ask how those rules limit the rest of us. Lastly, we may rightly insist that scholars such as these recognise that their privileged educational backgrounds readily open up venues for speech. (I suspect that they do.) Yet, privilege alone does not explain their profile and appeal. We cannot doubt the career risks that many of them took to develop their own lines of thought and to get their ideas out there. Put differently, they did not waste their privilege, which would be a greater sin than having it in the first place. They bravely put it to use in the struggle to make the world somewhat of a better place.