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Of Academic Embeddedness: Communities of Choice and How to Make Sense of Activism and Research Abroad

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The Promises and Pitfalls of Collaborative Research

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Das Äußerste liegt der Leidenschaft zu allernächst

—Goethe, *Wahlverwandtschaften*

Postmodernism has caught up with all of us in one way or another. We are all decentered to some degree. Advances in education and increased exposure to a globalized media have corroded traditions everywhere and challenged monistic worldviews and belief systems in the remotest corners of the globe. While we are becoming more and more aware of Others everywhere, we can rely less and less on those traditional values and guiding systems passed on to us from the past. The postmodern condition, as Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) has argued, is one of uncertainty and of disconnection, as traditional bonds, both vertical and horizontal, are losing their strength. The physical, or bodily, component of this loss of traditional value systems and ways to make sense of the world is one of increased mobility. Some of us can now be everywhere, but when doing so risk being nowhere at all. Others remain stuck in their localities while being increasingly aware of their being stuck—not at least due to the international visitors they now receive. Zygmunt Bauman has described this phenomenon better than I could. He writes: "Some can now move out of the locality—any locality—at will. Others watch helplessly the sole locality they inhabit moving away from under their feet" (Bauman 1998, 15). Bauman further explains that "Being local in a globalized world is a sign of social deprivation and degradation. The discomforts of localized existence are compounded by the fact that with public spaces removed beyond the reaches of localized life, localities are losing their meaning-generating and meaning-negotiating capacity and are increasingly dependent on sense-giving and interpreting actions which they do not control—so much for the communitarianist dreams/consolations of the globalized intellectuals" (3).

The postmodern, globalized world is a polarized world, with elites routinely jetting through the skies as preferred gold and platinum clients of major airlines, while the majority of the population witnesses helplessly the erosion of the systems that give meaning to life. The driving force, according

to Bauman and others, is the ability to communicate instantaneously across great distance, thus erasing the differences between inner-community and inter-community communication. We can all talk to everybody, no matter how far away they are. As a result, physical proximity has lost its value. Or, in Bauman's words: "The present-day fragility and short life-span of communities appears primarily to be the result of that gap shrinking or altogether disappearing: inner-community communication has no advantage over inter-communal exchange, if both are instantaneous" (Bauman 1998, 15).

This ability to communicate instantly with everyone is met by the increased ability of some to leave. Some of us are now in a position to simply up and go, leaving behind oppressive families, controlling small towns, restrictive economic situations, and any other unpleasantness and restrictions imposed on us, thus giving some of us unprecedented opportunities to "fulfill ourselves" and satisfy our egotistic dreams, while leaving others, who are less able to move, behind. Of course, as with anything else in market systems, the amount of assets an individual or firm is holding determines the ability to take advantage of these opportunities, leading to the widely recognized polarization of the world where the rich get richer and the poor get not just poorer, but more exposed, helpless, and frustrated, as now they have much better tools to understand how screwed they really are and who screws them on a daily basis.

This essay is a very personal reflection about my own trajectory as a former social-justice activist and social worker turned scholar and researcher. Maybe more than most of my colleagues I have been thrown into the quick waters of the academic market, which has taken me to new places several times and eroded my connection to the places I have left behind. With every change of place I made—from Germany to Colombia, to Brazil, to New York, to Lisbon, Portugal, to Tampa, Florida, to France, Spain, and back to Germany—my ability to make sense out of my academic work seemed more threatened, as my attempts to connect it to local communities seemed to grow more and more tenuous. Having moved through such a great number of "new homes" probably makes my case an extreme one—but I hope to be able to offer, by way of introspection, at least some insight that also applies to others. My case might not be so extreme, after all.

Framed more generally, this essay proposes to analyze some of the consequences of the mutually reinforcing powers of postmodernism and globalization on academics and their connection to local communities. I will show that the postmodern, globalized condition we face has eroded the embeddedness of scholars in their lifeworlds and exposed them to look for new, artificial communities that allow for some sort of second-degree sense-making out of academic activity. Most scholars leave "their" communities and connect to new communities of choice at least once during their careers—particularly if their careers are taking off. Doing so, however, is problematic on three levels—namely, for the scholar herself, as the bonds to these communities of choice tend to remain tenuous and require active investment for their maintenance; for the communities left behind, because while people, or firms, leave, the problems they created tend to stay; and third, for the receiving communities of choice, who are increasingly exposed to agents of a kind of change that is not gradual, but born thousands of miles away. I will go through the three levels one by one.

The Globalized Scholar: At Home Everywhere and Nowhere

Many contemporary scholars face a double dilemma: on one hand, scholars employed in some Northern and Western universities enjoy some of the advantages of the economic elites Bauman has in mind, namely, access to information and global mobility. In terms of their access to information (I am reluctant to say "knowledge"), they are elites. On the other hand, their work and status have been severely devalued and exposed to the narrow utilitarian framework of the economic market, which does not ask, "Who are you?"—but "How much are you worth?" Particularly for social scientists and humanists, the answer is more often than not: "not much." Most academics are thus tenuous elites, characterized more by their gatekeeping and performance anxiety–driven behavior than by their relaxed elite habitus. In academia, vanity and egotism tend to be displayed in a crazed game of exalted egos trading in "who knows best" (Latour & Woolgar 1986).

This, it seems, is caused by the fact that most academics are not truly "elites," while at the same time they enjoy some of the elite-only advantages of global mobility. Like artists, they have to believe that they are important so they can muster the drive to sit down and write to the world—while at the same time fearing that "the world" is not listening and the only ones reading their work might be their own students, who have no choice in the matter. Academic books rarely sell over one thousand copies, and the readership of most academic journals is even smaller—and reduced to those who are obliged to read them: graduate students and a handful of colleagues.

Pierre Bourdieu has thus called academics "dominated dominants, that is, the dominated among the dominant" (1991, 655). As dominated dominants, professional scholars, while enjoying some relative privileges vis-à-vis the other dominated, are nevertheless exposed to the dynamics of globalized academic markets, which most of them face without much financial or symbolic capital and with very limited agency. The average recent PhD has little choice and almost no power of agency when facing an extremely competitive market for jobs, grants, postdocs, and fellowships.

To many scholars, being a professor thus means having left one's traditional community behind after having exposed oneself to the global maelstrom of PhD admissions and job searches. My own trajectory might serve to illustrate this point: While growing up in Germany and living in Colombia and Brazil, I went to graduate school in New York, did a postdoc in Portugal, and finally found a tenure-track position in Tampa, Florida—a place I had never even heard of before. Since then, I have also spent several months living and working on time-limited research projects in France, Spain, Colombia, and Germany.

The academic market dominates and dictates most of the choices academics like myself make, and it exposes us to high levels of nonvoluntary mobility and undesired flexibility. On today's academic postdoc and job market, finding a job where one lives is almost impossible. For married academic couples, finding tenure-track positions at the same universities is almost a miracle. The last job search my own department conducted produced some two hundred viable candidates—none of whom already lived in Tampa.

My own case, then, seems less extreme and more typical: Every time I leave, I remove myself more and more from those communities to which I had a genuine connection and a bond. Every time I arrive, I am forced to find ways to insert myself into the already existing local communities

I encounter. The older I grow in this process, the less "natural" or "organic" these relations tend to be—so that the postmodern condition becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and I can no longer differentiate between traditional and modern, original and simulacrum. You can only call so many places your "home." Any reference to a rhyzomatic network of horizontally dispersed relationships seems but a cheap language trick and a bitter euphemism unable to compensate for the sense of loss arising from being disconnected.

The ability to forge meaning out of chaos (or sense out of complexity) relies on having strong and meaningful connections. It is a relational effort and as such requires having robust relations to begin with. When living in a world where one cannot distinguish between original and simulacrum lifeworlds, we run the risk of moving entirely into a simulacrum world without even recognizing the difference—*a plastic world*, in the words of Ruben Blades.[1] After over twenty years away from "home," my hometown feels probably the most foreign of them all—and the one that makes me the most aware of the price I have to pay for my high level of mobility.

As scholars, why do we need communities, someone might ask? Why not embrace the fate of the solitary thinker? The problem, however—particularly for social scientists—is: in the absence of community embeddedness, where to get inspiration from? What questions to ask? What to write about and for whom? After having lived and worked in Brazil for some seven or eight years, trying to add my work and voice to those seeking to improve the lives of the excluded and marginalized—I moved to New York. For the first few years I still had plenty of empirical material to reflect upon. But how long can one maintain a meaningful connection to a community left behind? How long can one legitimately speak about, let alone for, this community? At what point is it more truthful and honest to say: "Better ask a Brazilian, or at least someone who still lives there"?

The academic market, like all capitalist markets, relies on branding, which demands: once a Brazilianist—always a Brazilianist. Removed from the communities they once lived in and studied, many Northern and Western scholars are driven into a niche of specialization that is less and less grounded in genuine participation and local knowledge. As a result, the work of many scholars has long been a reflection of their condition: they write only for themselves and their academic community—a group of experts without any connection to other experts, let alone lay people and the local communities that they have studied.

To make matters worse, forced to "publish or perish" by the logic of a narrowly defined academic system, most of us write only to advance our own interests—that is, to get tenure, promotion, and more money. Tenure review boards simply do not care about how many of the research subjects involved in a study were actually able to benefit from their participation—be it only through a sharing of findings in local outlets, published in the local language. What matters to most tenure review boards instead are impact factors, where "impact" ironically excludes those local communities that might benefit from the produced research. This, again, might be an extreme case of highly unreflexive political-science departments, and I know that some other departments do a better job—but the logic of how to define, let alone assess, academic impact and success among social scientists in general certainly deserves some critical review. The criteria for assessing the merits of "tenure" seem to work, to the best of my knowledge, directly against any attempt to share one's findings with local nonspecialists. As a result, on top of being anxious quasi-elites, some of us risk becoming hysterical egomaniacs without any consequence.

Worse, and any metaphors of "rhizomatics" notwithstanding, the disconnected individualism that springs from uprootedness makes it increasingly impossible for many of us to even grasp the problems that plague local communities—let alone do anything to help local activists to make a difference. This uprootedness condemns us to become "global citizens" and pushes us into the trap of commitment-free scholarship about "global forces." However, there is no such thing as "global thinking," and in most cases, global activism is but a cheap excuse for not being willing to commit to the causes of local people and groups (Esteva & Prakash 1998). While "the strength of weak ties" (Granovetter 1973) lies in being able to take personal advantage of loose connections to many people and communities, understanding, commitment, responsibility, solidarity, and reciprocity all demand strong ties.

As Gustavo Esteva and Madhy Suri Prakash (1998) so convincingly argue, "global thinking" is mostly a meaningless stand-in, born out of the necessity to offer a positive framework for thinking without consequence and commitment. In their view, as well as in my own, only multiple local efforts and collaborations between them have the power to change the world—a view also shared by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985). Committed academics can assist these efforts by adding their work and voice to those of local people, communities, and activists. "Global scholars" who engage in "global thinking" and deal in "global problems" at best can give advice to those few hyper-elites that actually have the power to influence global politics. But how many of us can really become advisors to the U.S. Department of State, Tony Blair, Kofi Annan, or even lower-level foreign policymakers? The great majority of "global thinkers" run the risk of undermining the limited local actions of local activists by belittling their efforts and importance. Most "global thinkers" do not even seem to care about social and political change to begin with, so that their choice of a research domain is a truthful reflection of their snobbish elitism. They want to be global brokers, diplomats, and players in a game of no other consequence but the effect such engagement has on their own careers. True and lasting change, on the other hand, must come from below, i.e., from local communities. In the words of Esteva and Prakash, "Since none of us can ever really know more than a miniscule part of the earth, 'global thinking' is at best an illusion, and at its worst the grounds for the kinds of destructive and dangerous actions perpetuated by global 'think tanks' like the World Bank, or their more benign counterparts—the watchdogs in the global environmental and human rights movements" (Esteva & Prakash 1998, 22). Even from a narrower, scientific viewpoint, objective knowledge cannot be universal. Only partial and situated knowledge promises to advance our collective effort to better understand our different worlds. If "changing it for the better" is our objective, universalist platitudes draped in "global thinking" certainly represent the least promising strategies (Harding 1991; Haraway 1988).

The almost unavoidable outcome of "global thinking" more often than not is a sort of irrelevant arrogance. It is the kind of arrogance that claims to have solutions for others without ever bothering to know those others, let alone provide them with a voice. This arrogance is also the one that asks, *what ideas can I offer to others or the world?*—as if the problems of the world were caused by a lack of smart people and ideas. To think so is not only arrogant, but naive (Easterly 2007). Thinking that one knows better what is good for others is also the kind of attitude that more and more local activists, influenced—and sometimes led—by native or first people, struggle against (Escobar, this volume). Grassroots activists are not the only ones, however, rendering such scholarship irrelevant.

With but a few exceptions, the productions of most global thinkers go unheard. Who really reads the books and articles of even the most prominent academic global thinkers, most of whom work for international-relations departments and publish in highly specialized academic journals? The "big debates" routinely waged in this field among "realists," "liberals," and "constructivists" have not had any reception, to the best of my knowledge, outside of the circle of the same specialists that have formulated them in the first place. The work of such prominent global scholars as Robert Keohane, the 2012 recipient of the Harvard Centennial Medal and the main proponent of "neoliberal institutionalism," must necessarily be a reflection of their own positionality and situatedness. What else but "high politics" could elite scholars such as Keohane write about? It seems hardly coincidental that international relations is an American discipline. After all, U.S. hegemony *is* the standpoint of most authors writing in this field—even if most of them might not realize it (Tickner 2013).

Instead of offering ill-received prescriptions to those waging global power over "the world," I contend that the important question to ask instead is *With whom do I want to stand?* and *For whom do I want to work; that is, to whom do I make my work accessible and for what purpose?* In my own experience, the answer to these questions will necessarily influence not only what one writes about and where it is published and distributed, but also what kind of language code one uses. While such global scholars as Jürgen Habermas, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Jean Francois Lyotard, Michael Hart, and Antonio Negri might have valuable insights to offer to those suffering from poverty, exclusion, and discrimination, they have certainly made sure, by choosing cryptic and convoluted language codes, that most of the affected groups will never be able to read, let alone use, their books and articles.

To sum up: One cannot stand with anybody if one is constantly on the move. Against the fashionable trope of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari 1987), standpoint theory demands that one has a point on which to stand to begin with. I am not sure how many different viewpoints a scholar can adopt, but it seems that our range is limited, if not by time and resources, then by our own positionality, which enables some views but forecloses others (Haraway 1988).

The Ones Left Behind: Communities Thinner than Air

In the agglomerate, if more and more people constantly and frequently move, local community bonds become thinner and thinner, and eventually local communities become mere agglomerations of self-interested individuals who enter new communities with strategic interests in mind, making them instrumental and a tool for profit-seeking of some sort. When this happens—and it has of course happened for a long time, particularly in the communities of the advanced capitalist world—leaving becomes easier and easier, as local communities offer less and less genuine embeddedness and less and less guidance for action and thought. They impose restrictions and exercise control without offering comfort and meaning.

Those who leave—once they have been duly treated by the different disciplining machines that transform them into utterly disconnected and self-interested strategic actors—tend to spread meaninglessness by introducing it like a virus into those communities that they find so attractive: communities that still offer meaning and guidance to their members. Those communities are typically found in those regions of the world yet not thoroughly structured by instrumental rationality, and not

yet inhabited by the rational, profit-maximizing zombies unleashed from those communities already further into the maelstrom of globalizing capitalism (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999).

Hence the moral dilemma of any astute and self-aware researcher or transnational scholar: we know that we make our career by exploring the lifeworlds of those stuck in their locality, and in doing so we risk becoming active agents in the very destruction of the locality we seek to defend, and whose destruction by the unbound forces of globalized capitalism we so eloquently deplore. Worse: we also know that nobody really cares about the loathing of academics so that our radical critique goes mostly unheard, our messages not impacting the world. We are unable to remedy the structures we criticize, while our transnational actions and our mere presence in local communities never fails to introduce globalization into the lifeworlds of the people stuck there—making those even more aware of how stuck they actually are.

Given local scarcity of academic jobs and the global opportunities advertised in such outlets as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, where academic job offerings from Turkey, China, Singapore, etc., are routinely advertised, those seeking academic careers have no other choice but to apply worldwide for training opportunities, fellowships, postdocs, and tenure-track positions. Not every local community, after all, has its own university offering graduate training. As only a few recent PhDs get a well-paid, tenure-earning job immediately after completing their degree, chances are that they will spend some time "community hopping" before they finally land a good, permanent job. They are, however, not the only ones engaged in this sort of community destabilization. They are merely the vanguard. Particularly in the United States, where market forces are the most unbridled, personal lives have long adapted to the forces of impersonal markets. On average, Americans move some twelve times during their lives; they have children once they have enough income, and they try out different life partners according to more or less standardized tests that take into consideration such criteria as income, health, housing situation, etc. (called "dating"). When they can, when they must, or when better opportunities await elsewhere, those endowed with enough assets move, following the same rational logic as firms. Their lifeworlds have been thoroughly colonized by the logic of capitalist markets (Habermas 1985). According to Bauman, "The company is free to move; but the consequences of the move are bound to stay. Whoever is free to run away from the locality, is free to run away from the consequences. These are the most important spoils of victorious space war" (Bauman 1998, 8f).

In the case of humans, Albert Hirschmann's (1970) assessment is probably still the most telling: the easier it is for someone to just move, the lower are the incentives to actively engage with local problems. Under conditions of increased mobility, exit trumps voice and loyalty. While companies move and leave problems behind, people move and leave problems unresolved, or for others to solve. Furthermore, if many people move, as is the case in the United States, the bonds that hold communities together get thinner and thinner, to the point where local communities become mere residual places of people unable to move away. In Germany, where I grew up, this phenomenon has led to entire villages emptied of young and active people, but also to an exodus of local shops catering to them. A few years back, the last bakery of my home village closed, and the majority of elderly people living there are now stuck and unable to get to the supermarket in the next urban center. What once was a vibrant local village community has become the residence of those unable to move. For them, there are no small shops, no deliveries, no spontaneous gatherings in front of

houses and alleys. The benches in front of the old houses, once built so that the older generation could sit down in the evening and watch the younger generation promenade, now go unused. Nor could they be used, as all one can see pass by today are cars. The milkman does not come anymore, nor does—this is Germany—the beer truck. Almost all of my former high school classmates have left. Some have moved to bigger cities, and some, like myself, to foreign countries. The only difference from the social poverty of suburban America is that the buildings and the urban structure remind everybody how much social life these streets must have hosted only a few decades back. The stone benches stand as silent totems, like gravestones to a community life that has vanished and died. Very much like the average American suburbanites and the village dwellers in those other parts of the world that have undergone economic development, those that were unable to leave are stuck. More often than not, they are also lonely. This loneliness seems only in part explained by a physical lack of company; it rather seems to reflect a weakness of community bonds—even if others are present, and sometimes precisely because they are.

Some of the new communities I joined along the way did not feel like communities at all, but rather like a bunch of people thrown together against their own will and sharing nothing but a common wish to take advantage of each other. Most prevalent in those was not a sense of community, but an angst that one might get taken advantage of by another member, acting quicker than oneself.

Communities of Choice: Where to Dump Next?

The solution to this devastating emptiness of anemic communities for many scholars lies in actively engaging in other communities—communities of choice. If my own community feels empty and thin, then why not spend more time in Guatemala, Brazil, India, or elsewhere, where communities are still genuine, people are welcoming and hospitable and do not calculate every move for the sake of personal gain. To many social scientists, spending time away and partaking in genuine community life abroad is the first time they ever experience what community can mean, or how important culture can be to sustain community life. Engaging in the community life of others, particularly if those others are poor, excluded, mistreated, and in general on the defensive, allows for the achievement of several goals at once: Most poor and exploited people, because they are at the nadir of power, make for easy research subjects. They appear willing and open, even when they are not. They tend to be welcoming to the foreigner and outsider. They often cooperate willingly, without raising uncomfortable questions about intellectual ownership and rights. They pose no risk of pursuing the researcher if anything goes wrong, as their access to legal systems is precarious at best. On top of that, they allow the researcher to engage in work that appears meaningful to him or her. After all, his or her work helps the wretched of the earth and allows one to feel cozy and warm in the middle of so much sense and meaning. These are, of course, only the spoils of successful academic work, if successful it is. The core benefit for the researcher abroad is that a whole career can be constructed upon such work. Books, articles, and conference papers are the most immediate outcomes of research, abroad or not—and these products can carry tremendous symbolic value and lead to other jobs, promotions, and repeated research grants. They represent a major investment in the credibility currency in which scholars trade (Latour & Woolgar 1986).

This might sound hyperbolic, but my own experience, again, might provide an example—whether

extreme or typical is up for grabs. Conducting research on school reform in Bahia, Brazil, I encountered local community schools where the local activists told me that they "had enough of white, middle-class researchers coming to their school, taking their time, but never bothering to come back and share any of their findings" (Reiter 2009).

The problem is, again in the words of Zygmunt Bauman:

> If the new exterritoriality of the elite feels like intoxicating freedom, the territoriality of the rest feels less like home ground, and ever more like prison—all the more humiliating for the obtrusive sight of others' freedom to move. It is not just that the condition of "staying put," being unable to move at one's heart's desire and being barred access to greener pastures, exudes the acrid odor of defeat, signals incomplete humanity and implies being cheated in the division of splendors life has to offer. Deprivation reaches deeper. The "locality" in the new world of high speed is not what the locality used to be at a time when information moved only together with the bodies of its carriers; neither the locality, nor the localized population has much in common with the "local community" . . . Far from being hotbeds of communities, local populations are more like loose bunches of untied ends." (Bauman 1998, 23f)

As visiting researchers inevitably leave local communities after their research is concluded, locals stay behind, hoping that some of their time and effort spent assisting the researcher somehow returns to benefit them, even if only in the form of learning what all their work and effort led to, "over there." However, most researchers do not return and locals never learn what became of their contributions and efforts. While an academic might make a career out of the work done in a locality, that same locality might never learn about it. Having participated and supported foreign researchers thus puts local participants into the position of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, or the Brazilian villagers who participated in Orson Welles's unfinished documentary *It's All True*—still hoping decades later that they would hear from Mr. Welles and maybe become famous. Most researchers I have encountered, however—particularly those not spending much time in a locality—do not even leave copies of the photos they take of locals, and very few actually go back after their work is completed to share the results and findings of their research with their research subjects. Many simply take—and very few give back. A local Casa da Mina priestess in the city of São Luis told me once that the famous researcher and specialist of Afro-Brazilian religion, the Frenchman Pierre Verger, had taken an old photo that showed some of the now diseased dignitaries of this cult and had never bothered to give it back. The priestess, similar to the local school activists in Salvador, had developed a deep distrust of white, foreign researchers—and rightly so.

Of course, while being "soiled" by a previous researcher and rendered uncooperative for future researchers, such communities might use the experience of academic exploitation as the beginning of their own empowerment, conquering agency and making deliberate decisions about whom they want to collaborate with and under what conditions. The traveling scholar will most likely meet such attitudes and regulations with discontent, as they question the privileged positionality of Northern researchers and their right to impose an unconstrained gaze upon those they want to examine. However, taking active control, by local communities, of the conditions and terms of researching them can help them to secure much-needed knowledge, avoid abuse where Human Subjects Approvals fail to grip, and it can lead to more respectful and mutually beneficial relationships among visiting

researchers and local communities. Such steps are thus potentially important and necessary to take, particularly in such "hip" communities as, for example, the Mexican Zapatistas, who have become every Latin Americanist graduate student's research nirvana.

What Is to Be Done?

The picture painted so far is of course overly gloomy. I painted it that way to provoke some hard thinking and hopefully some action among those who often unwillingly become agents of destruction, or at least agents contributing to the eroding of local sense-making efforts—namely, professional scholars. The risks I have depicted are all pitfalls I have encountered myself, as a white, European-descendant male conducting research among mostly poor black communities in Latin America, Africa, and in Europe. Instead of accusing, I hope to have shared some of my own worries and fears, as some of the problems described above are difficult to avoid. A "going back" and sharing is not always financially feasible once a research project is concluded. Tenure pressure is an imposing reality and its dictates are difficult to ignore. The constant search for jobs and academic opportunities that triggers the kind of "community hopping" deplored here has structural components that are difficult, maybe impossible, to avoid.

However, some of the same literature that points out all of the pitfalls and dangers of globalization and postmodernism also offers some guidance on how to navigate the slippery domain of academic work under globalizing and postmodern conditions. The decentering of the individual and the loss of hegemonic scripts that guide our morals pose problems, but they also provide opportunities. As the "good old days" are fading, more of us are becoming aware that the good old days were not that good after all. Analytical frameworks more aware of the gendered and racialized dimensions of exclusion and privilege are slowly conquering more space and starting to command more visibility and authority. Decoloniality frameworks of reading and understanding the world have gained more prominence even among the academic mainstream—at least in some disciplines. These new frameworks offer new ways to make sense of the world without relying on the old dogmas of hegemonic white male dominance, dressed up as universalism. This king, at least, has been denuded quite a bit, and more and more people are able to see his nudity. Social scientists can and must play a central role in this process of destruction of the old and biased mantras that still provide the legitimation for exclusion, exploitation, and unjustified qua unexamined privilege. A decentering of individuals has invited Others in, not only into individual consciousnesses, but also into dominant discourses of knowledge production and distribution. The role of critical social scientists and humanists in this process has certainly been significant—even if much more needs to be done. Pierre Bourdieu has highlighted this role by stressing the importance of critical reflexivity. To him, "Critical reflexivity, in other words, is the absolute prerequisite of any political action by intellectuals. Intellectuals must engage in a permanent critique of all abuses of power or authority that are committed in the name of intellectual authority; or, if you prefer, they must submit themselves to the relentless critique of the use of intellectual authority as a political weapon within the intellectual field and elsewhere" (Bourdieu 2000, 41).

Some of us, particularly in such fields as international relations and economics, clearly need to be much more courageous when analyzing ourselves and the roles we play in the different games we engage in—academic as well as political, economic, and social.

Scholars who are actively engaged and involved in communities of choice abroad can, due to their practical experience, become true agents of change, not just in the communities they visit and work with, but also back "home," because their practical experience should allow them to better evaluate the priorities of academic life (e.g., how important is it really to publish in this or that "highly regarded" journal when the readership is miniscule). My own practical experience with courageous activism in the face of poverty, exclusion, and precariousness abroad has certainly put some of the academic activities deemed important back home in perspective. Witnessing courageous local activism has also allowed me to detect and recognize the very prevalent "paper revolutionism" and "campus radicalism" (Bourdieu 2000, 41) of so many Northern scholars who often denigrate the concrete but small victories local activists tend to achieve. It is easy to be radical when one is a tenured professor with a cozy office, a guaranteed job, and a retirement plan, and it is cheap to seek academic recognition by offering the most radical assessments while not risking anything—least of all to put one's words into practice.

I have also learned that the disconnected professors tend to be the ones who complain the most about their own "precarious" situations while not even considering the situations of some of the staff who support their daily activities—some of whom receive indecent wages, without access to pension, health, and social security provisions (I work in Florida, mind you). Hence, having lived and worked under truly precarious conditions in the global South puts perspective onto the "plights" of Northern academics and allows for a reassessment of one's role and position in producing social change. It helps avoid "mistak[ing] verbal sparring at academic conferences for interventions in the affairs of a city" (Bourdieu 2000, 41). Paper radicalism is, I suspect, one of the results of community disembeddedness that can be remedied by a genuine involvement with local communities and their struggles.

Communities of choice can become "genuine" (for lack of a better word) communities to the visiting researcher, as researchers can truly embrace the lifeworlds and problems of the local communities they study and become active supporters of local efforts towards change and improvement. Visiting scholars are of course not bound to unwillingly introduce the virus of a corrosive capitalist mentality into these communities, because any human interaction is at least in part willful and offers choice. By becoming "outside members," researchers can and have helped local communities in their struggles, giving them visibility and legitimacy through the research they conduct there. Research, instead of objectifying subjects, can also empower them—if done in knowledge-respecting, and knowledge-sharing way. The burden to make sense of one's uprooted life lies, after all, not with the local community, but with the visiting researcher.

Knowledge shared with the local communities makes all the difference. So does sharing in general—be it a sharing of food, books, or photos. Once a researcher comes back and shares, she also puts an end to the vicious cycle of leaving waste behind while making a career and money out of whatever was extracted locally. If you dump your baggage somewhere else, then at least go back and help clean it up. And when you do that, share your research findings, leave some books behind, share your photos. Don't steal from or lie to locals—be it only information you steal and lies you tell about your own life, pretending to be equal. Care. I have learned that if you do, a community of choice can also become a true community, even if you stay away for long periods of time.

NOTES

1. From the Salsa song "Plástico," by Ruben Blades.

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