

Decolonizing Cambridge University

A Participant Observer's View

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Abstract

I dwell here on my own experience of working at Cambridge University for methodological reasons. Anthropologists could make more of the humanities tradition of going deeply into particular personalities, places, events and relations in search of wider truths. Ethnography exemplifies this, but the discipline's assimilation into the social sciences and academic bureaucracy counteract this impulse. I draw selectively on my anthropological education and academic work to interrogate the political relationship between western societies and their former colonies. Cambridge University is reactionary for sure, but its decentralized organization makes room for a minority sometimes to change the world. The historical example of the abolition movement illustrates this. Anthropology ought to be a way of rethinking the world, and I conclude with how and why I introduced students to the anti-colonial intellectuals who did just that when they led the liberation (not 'decolonization') movements that overthrew European empires.

Keywords: Africa, anthropology, bureaucracy, Cambridge University, education, humanities, networks, revolution

When I read about the petition to 'decolonize' Cambridge University's English literature syllabus, my first question was, 'Why are they using the term for independence from empire preferred by the departing colonial powers?' Then, 'Why is a post-colonial perspective needed now, seventy years after India's independence and sixty years after Ghana's?' Perhaps policing the 'canon' is a collective and coercive process in the English department, but setting texts for social anthropology courses was hardly supervised at all in my time. This institutional variation goes missing when outsiders talk of my alma mater as 'that colonial place', as they sometimes do now. Cambridge is (or was) the most decentralized and plural, the least bureaucratic university that I have come across. The spirit of the Raj undoubtedly persists there, but organizationally it is not the Raj. I have not come across another one like it in all my travels.



I will take the unusual step here of providing a personal memoir in the style of the traditional humanities. Social science mirrors the bureaucratic revolution that spawned its rise over a century ago and I have become increasingly sceptical of academic anthropology's reliance on its assumptions and methods. We used to produce books thick with ethnographic description and the professional market was so narrow that authors, at least in part, had to reach general audiences. But the expansion of university enrolments has meant that the bureaucratic treadmill and limited funding squeeze extended fieldwork trips and we now write journal articles, book chapters and conference papers exclusively for other anthropologists and their students. As a result, social anthropology has become a species of bureaucratic writing full of sound bites referencing 'the literature'.

My choice to write here about my own experience as a student and teacher at Cambridge is methodological. This journal grew out of a student initiative and has recently joined mainstream academic publishing. This is not the place to dwell on the scandal of a publishing cartel that is squeezing the life out of academic labour for the sake of its own commercial logic. But the corporatization of the universities promotes forms of expression that mask personal agency in abstract generalizations.

Cambridge University is held by some to be a reactionary tool of colonial empire, in dire need of curriculum reform. So it is – in part. But there are other stories to be told about the place. I will not claim general significance for mine, but rather hope to challenge some prevailing narratives with anecdotes that point to other realities. In doing so, I make a claim for anthropology as part of the humanities – the attempt to generate truth of some generality by digging deeply into particular personalities, places, events and relations. Their leading disciplines are literature, history, ethnography, dialogical philosophy and case law. No-one knows at the time that a particular judgement will stand as law for a hundred years, nor are the benefits of a humanist education predictable. Occasionally I get email messages from former students thanking me for my lectures; before the internet, I wouldn't have had even that. Living with the unknowable consequences of personal intellectual exchange does not fit well with the ethos of university management today. Much of my argument below concerns the peculiar social character of Cambridge University, its institutional history and internal divisions which do, I think, affect how this movement to decolonize the academy might be addressed, but without its presumptive clarity.

An anthropological education

I direct research at the University of Pretoria. South Africa's *#feesmustfall* student movement, successor to the 'Rhodes must fall' campaign in Cape Town, for a while promised to become the most serious insurgency there since the release of Nelson Mandela, and some of its leaders explicitly claimed to renew the independence struggle that had been betrayed by the African National Congress government after 1994. When violent confrontation died down, the issue was transformed into the

‘decolonization’ of university curricula. Academic bureaucracy then took over from private security squads in the management of the process.

I have worked in and on Africa for half a century and have seen how divisions of history into periods defined by western colonial rule have moved over time. I entered the anthropology of African urbanization and migration through research in West Africa (Hart 1973) when the dominant paradigm came out of the Manchester School’s work in Southern and Central Africa (Evens and Handelman 2006). Colonial rule was shorter and less coercive in the West – there were few settlers and mines. The coastal cities were largely built and provisioned by Africans lightly supervised by a small administrative class. In much of the region colonial empire lasted only for sixty years. I concluded that the cities were an extension of indigenous rural civilizations, unlike the confrontational white enclaves of Southern Africa (Hart 1982). It doesn’t make sense to think of Nigerian history (where one in six Africans currently live) as pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial, when relations with the Islamic world have lasted for much longer than European rule.

In contrast, having spent two decades living part time in South Africa, I never cease to be struck by the grip that the colonial past has on political imagination there – and for the good reason that white settler capital has not been displaced from its dominant position in the political economy (Hart and Padayachee 2013). When Kwame Nkrumah led Ghana to independence, he urged his countrymen to ‘seek ye first the political kingdom’. For two decades it did make a big difference. Investment in social infrastructure, in education, health and transport, vastly exceeded the efforts of colonial rulers. But the neoliberal counter-revolution of 1979/80 stopped all that and most African countries ended the century worse off than before independence. The notion that independence was a sham was soon expressed by the term ‘neo-colonialism’. Post-colonial failure – a process involving foreign interests and dependent national governments – required a rethink of periodization and the idea of a genuine rebirth with independence was replaced with one of persisting colonial domination, this time from afar. Latin American history and political theory, where colonial rule was officially abolished much earlier, supported this ideological move. In the first decade of this century, seven of the ten fastest growing economies in the world were African and for a time this supported a new story (‘Africa rising’). Comparative history adds another dimension to how I approach the question of decolonization and post-colonial studies.

I was a Cambridge student for eight years in the 1960s and lectured there for fourteen years in the 1980s and 1990s. As an undergraduate I switched from classics to social anthropology. I found the classics syllabus and especially the scope for research much too narrow. Anthropologists, it seemed, could study anything in the world and call it social anthropology. It was sociology with travel thrown in. The downside was that anthropologists had no intellectual standards beyond ‘I’ve been there and you haven’t’. It felt like being a football player transferred from AC Milan to Stockport County.

This was the sixties and my generation lacked respect for our parents and teachers. This was a big mistake, as we learned later. So I attended few lectures

and departed for Africa without any pre-fieldwork training. Things were a lot looser then. I met a Stanford anthropology professor in Ghana and, after a while, he exclaimed, 'You really don't know anything, do you?' That sums up my anthropological education to date. I spent over two years there and became for the only time in my life a serious ethnographer. But I soon reverted to my classical training and an MO of reading old books and writing about them. At least I could avoid the capricious requirements of funding agencies.

I have since worked in many universities on four continents and Cambridge is the only one that lacks a dominant central bureaucracy. By this I mean an administrative hierarchy that can override any of its component parts. The flower of the university is its research students and junior fellows from all over the world. I spent much of my time trying to explain and assuage their alienation from the place. They expected a social structure and felt excluded from it, but the university is a decentralized agglomeration of semi-independent clusters navigable only if you are your own network entrepreneur. For many inmates the weight of the university is as monumental as the buildings, but there is scope for movement too.

African Studies at Cambridge

As Director of the Cambridge African Studies Centre in the 1990s, my mission was to shift its focus away from Africa as a land mass to the common history of Atlantic societies formed by the slave trade, colonial empire and unequal development.

Soon after starting, an offer came from Nigeria's head of state, a former general called Ibrahim ('IBB') Babangida, to fund a £1.5 million research fellowship on African women through the Centre. The fellowship would be named after Babangida's wife, Maryam. IBB came to power in a bloodless coup. He organized presidential elections only to have them annulled. He resigned and was succeeded by another general, Sani Abacha, who was a monster. Babangida had been rich before entering politics, allegedly through smuggling drugs. Others claimed that he just stole from the Nigerian people in the usual way. It seemed obvious to me that the fellowship offer was tainted and could embarrass the university for several reasons: crimes against humanity, fraud and embezzlement, unconstitutional behaviour, the drugs trade etc.

I was alone in taking this view. The Centre's management committee felt that the offer was too good to turn down. Feminists told me that I would be a marked man if I refused a unique initiative in African women's studies. A women's college was keen to host the fellowship. Nigerian students accused me of double standards: 'The whole of Cambridge was built on dirty money,' they said. 'What's wrong with Black people's dirty money?' I began seriously to doubt my own judgement. But I was rescued by a visiting Yoruba professor who told me, 'Ask him why this award is coming to Cambridge,' he said; 'an equal grant to a Nigerian university should be a condition for accepting the offer.' I wrote along these lines and never heard any more on the subject.

The African Studies Centre was and is a small cog in the Cambridge University machine. My judgement was political – based on the responsibilities of my office – not moral or ethical. It seems that most academics when faced with a free lump sum will grab it. I found Nigerian military rule and the ill-gotten gains of dictators personally offensive, but the threat to my institution's good name was decisive.

Elihu Yale bought his university with the loot he gained as ~~governor~~ of Madras. The college was pleased to change its name to his at the time. If 'primitive accumulation' of this sort was acceptable then, it ought not to be now. Yet evidence of the universities' continuing reliance on tainted money suggests that the practice is still commonplace. There is something absolute about the prestige enjoyed by Cambridge or Yale – which is why so much dirty money flows into their coffers. But this prestige may be used for good or ill and is not immune to revelations of malpractice, as the London School of Economics discovered when its director had to resign over a scandal involving Libya's Gaddafi family.

I launched some public initiatives that went to the heart of Africa's contradictions. The most dramatic came after an Italian associate came into my office one day and said, 'They are killing my friends in Angola. What are you going to do about it?' Usually the most I did for visitors was to sign a form for a library card. The thirty years war, which had cost a million lives there, was reopened when Unita, led by Jonas Savimbi, attacked a hospital where Italian doctors who supported the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) government worked. I wrote a letter, signed by over a hundred British academics and published in *The Independent*, in which Unita was described as a 'genocidal organization'. Later, the Angolan government suggested that we hold a conference on Angola in Cambridge. I persuaded Unita's foreign affairs spokesman that their side should come too. It was the first time that the opponents had appeared together in public for several years.

The conference, 'Why Angola Matters' (Hart and Lewis 1995), brought together the deputy foreign minister and other government representatives, Brigadier Samakuva of Unita, the British ambassador to Angola, a wide range of academics and students, extremely vocal Angolan refugees, anti-land mine activists, journalists, diplomats and businessmen; discussion was lively. Conferences like this often have unexpected outcomes and I happen to know one. I hung a poster of the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) on my office wall: it showed the Earth encircled by barbed wire with a warning triangle in front and gruesome pictures around the edges of land mine victims with their limbs blown off. An undergraduate student, Richard Moyes, was fascinated by this poster, especially since MAG's base was his home town in Cumberland. After graduation he ended up in Cambodia trying to save children who thought that land mines were toys. He returned home and formed an NGO, 'Article 36', to promote action against weapons that were or ought to be illegal. In 2010 he drew up a sketch to get nuclear weapons banned by the United Nations working around the nuclear powers, not with them. The movement crystallized as the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear weapons (ICAN). In 2017, 122 out of 193 member states accepted in principle a Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. ICAN received the Nobel Peace Prize later that year.

In 1995 the Nigerian writer, TV producer and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa was tried and hanged by Abacha's military. He belonged to the Ogoni people of the Niger Delta, which has long seen oil production (mainly by Shell), local resistance and military repression. I organized a conference bringing together government spokesmen, Shell executives, Ogoni activists and other interested parties. One session was chaired by Jack Gowon, a former Nigerian president. A senior Shell official made an unconvincing defence of the company's policy in the Delta. The mid 1990s were also the time of the Rwandan genocide and of South Africa's first election for an African majority government. We always enrolled a wide range of professionals, activists, scholars and students in discussing these events. When trying to attract participants, I found that Cambridge University had enormous pulling power.

A network approach to Cambridge University

In my North American perambulations, I held a weekly *soirée* at home and the international interest provoked by these African Studies events encouraged me to hold one at home in Cambridge on Thursday evenings. They were more difficult to manage than in Montreal. The English students sat drinking quietly in twos and threes, whereas the Africans felt uneasy if I didn't make a formal speech. Every week I met disillusioned graduate students – Indians, Africans, Southern Europeans – often natural scientists, serious people who wanted to change the world in a material sense. They felt they had a duty to overcome the world's inequalities, and they were often depressed. 'Isn't Cambridge awful?' they would complain. 'It is so conservative, so heavy in its traditions, so establishment-oriented. Everything moves so slowly; everyone lives in the past; they don't want to touch anything that is relevant in this world. They break us up socially and farm us out to highly specialized disciplines. Physicists in one research group can't talk to the others. They split us up into colleges, stick us with public schoolboys who just drink beer; and we end up feeling lonely, depressed and isolated. We are not getting what we want.'

I would say, 'This place is full of people like you – progressive and engaged people with extraordinary backgrounds who come from all over the world, especially the graduate students and junior research fellows. If you are not looking for them and don't know how to find them, or if you keep to your preconceived model of how to build a social world, you will spend your time here seeing nothing outside your own blinkers. When I was a student, I thought that Cambridge was just Conservative party politicians at the Union and rugby types who made noise in the streets. I didn't know that Crick and Watson had discovered DNA not long before or that Cambridge was changing the world in many ways.'

'Cambridge is very decentralized. The departments, colleges and institutes are semi-autonomous. If you find one oppressive, you can move to another. You must make your own social world and many people have no idea how to do that. There is no social structure to adapt to here. You are a scientist. How did Cambridge come

to be a famous science university? The Natural Sciences Tripos was invented in the 1860s by a couple of Northerners, William Whewell and Adam Sedgwick. Then James Clerk Maxwell launched the Cavendish Laboratory and changed what the world thought science was. Charles Darwin's son Horace set up his instruments factory and supplied the equipment. By 1900 Cambridge University was remaking modern physics. Meanwhile male students were ripping up Newnham College's gates to protest allowing women any academic rights. The Senate House debated for decades whether dons must have a religious affiliation. A casual visitor would see only this reactionary stuff and miss what the scientists were up to.'

A fair proportion of the world's leading scientists were at Cambridge: Newton, Darwin, Babbage, Maxwell, Marshall, Rutherford, Keynes, Crick/Watson. Cambridgeshire is the heart of Britain's latest industrial revolution, thanks to college-sponsored science parks and village start-ups in their hundreds. Cambridge University encourages innovation by leaving small self-organized networks to do something new. It helps that it is a medieval institution without a strong bureaucracy.

The monks who split from Oxford and then formed the first college, Peterhouse, broke with the official church and set up their own place because they rejected an orthodoxy that was narrow and backward-looking. They sought universality, a wider sense of relevance and connection with the world. The provincial notables linked to Henry VII's mother who founded St. John's College wanted to open up educational opportunities to lower-class provincials like me. The puritan divines who founded Emmanuel College thought that their peers had abandoned their original goals, so they confronted society in their own way. Each new college made a difference and later fell back into protecting the status quo. They broke with the establishment and opened up to the world. This dialectic is still intrinsic to the development of Cambridge University, although it does wax and wane over time.

Cambridge between Africa and the world

I wanted to show that Black students have a long history at Cambridge University. The pioneers included George Bridgetower, Beethoven's violinist. He was thrown out for playing African drums in the market square on a Sunday and later became director of George IV's orchestra. Alexander Crummel was an American Baptist minister sponsored by Cambridge abolitionists, who coined the term 'Pan-African' and launched settlements in Liberia. Then, with my collaborators (especially Salah Bander), I found a whole social movement based in Cambridge.

Thomas Clarkson of St. John's College developed many of the methods of single issue politics that we are familiar with today. He led the abolitionist network that flourished in Cambridge around 1800, crossing divisions between academic life, the town people and national politics. The anti-slavery movement is the matrix from which the international movement for human rights grew. Our nearest equivalents now are the movements for Black emancipation in the United States and South Africa.

Peter Peckard, Master of Magdalene College, was seventy when he became Vice Chancellor. He advocated religious freedom and human rights for Jews, Gypsies and Methodists. In 1784 he gave a sermon against slavery, 'Am I not a man and a brother?', the greatest preached in Cambridge since the Reformation. It galvanized everyone. Peckard led a team of subscribers that published the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo freed slave (Equiano [1789] 2015). The book went into eight editions and sold thousands. Peckard, an academic churchman apparently in his dotage, organized and financed the leading Black activist literature of a revolutionary era.

The movement to end slavery united people of disparate religious and political views, ranging from high Tory churchmen to non-conformist dissenters and evangelicals. George Tomline was Master of Pembroke, William Pitt the Younger's college, and later became a bishop with Pitt's help. He was Pitt's chief of staff throughout his political career. Pitt and William Wilberforce went up to Cambridge together when Peckard gave his famous sermon. Clarkson drew Wilberforce into the abolition movement and Pitt became Cambridge University's MP and prime minister at twenty-four. He encouraged Wilberforce to become the parliamentary leader of the movement. Benjamin Flower owned and was chief writer of a radical magazine, *The Cambridge Intelligencer*. He advocated slave emancipation by revolution, a brave stance in the Napoleonic wars.

Thomas Clarkson (Brogan [2004] 2011) won an essay competition on slavery and decided to devote his life to its abolition. He went on a series of fact-finding and publicity trips on horseback, a total of thirty-five thousand miles over seven years. He was beaten up and thrown in the sea in Bristol and Liverpool, but was met by a large enthusiastic crowd in Manchester and left with ten thousand signatures to an anti-slavery petition. What was his method of campaigning? First, these were fieldwork trips; he insisted on going to see for himself. Second, he wanted evidence, but he also wanted to show it to people, so he bought bits and pieces – thumbscrews and whips – and built up a portable museum that he hoped would shock his audiences, a chest containing symbols of the slave trade's evils and the benefits of legitimate trade with Africa (export crops). Clarkson pioneered the single-issue politics that we know so well. He understood too that someone needed to personify the movement.

These remarkable people reveal that Cambridge was not an isolated fenland town, detached from the world and national politics, divided by an irreducible gap between town and gown. Cambridge University was a lynchpin of the British Empire in the nineteenth century, but as a centre for training evangelical missionaries (as well as natural scientists) it was also a crucible for a revolutionary ideology and movement combining anti-slavery, free trade, economic individualism and evangelical Christianity, explored comprehensively by Boyd Hilton (1991).

The relevance of this history of activism for us

World society is being formed in our times. Now is when the world became unified for good or ill. We are all connected through a single network for exchanging goods, services and information. Our generation has discovered universal connection and movement. We just need to find the forms of association that can put them to good use. Imagine what Clarkson would do with the internet and cell phones! The poor man had to go charging around the countryside on a horse over bad roads; he was beaten up; he had to print and distribute books and pamphlets by hand.

What do we do with our means of communication? We write trivia to mailing lists, tick likes on Facebook, put selfies on Instagram. Of course, a few use the internet to mobilize networks, pass on important information and transform the nature of knowledge. Ours is a new stage of human society. Maybe we can't see it, but what is going on is not obscure. The 1990s, launched by the end of the Cold War, the rise of China and India and the internet going public, were as pregnant with possibility as the 1790s, if not more so.

The other main feature of our world is inequality amplified by machines. Indifference to it is made possible by separating ourselves from others, through the international controls that keep poor people out, while we demonize those who slip through (Sharp et al. 2014). We know that we can't keep them out. Yet we support territorial states run by politicians who appeal to racism and promise to ban the world's poor, while preserving the illusory homogeneity of decadent national societies. We are all implicated in this. It was once fashionable in British universities to advocate disinvestment in apartheid South Africa or to boycott grapes from Pinochet's Chile. Inequality is especially intolerable when it can be located elsewhere than at home. By all means decolonize the curriculum as part of an assault on the unequal British education system.

So there is a role for engaged intellectuals today. First, we must acquire a better grasp of what is going on in the world. The universities are poorly placed to do that. How disciplines are organized, the curricula and courses, makes it impossible for them to address this question. But Cambridge University still has small networks in its institutional cracks, people who are not defined by the official syllabus, who are driven to seek a new and expanded universality, who know that normal academic life is dying. Cambridge pioneered modern physics and molecular biology, but they won't help us to understand the twenty-first-century world. Social movements could once be personified as Clarkson did his. For us, however, individual personality will matter less than before. If we would compare that period with our own, we need new forms of association as frameworks for intellectual life (Barone and Hart 2015).

Rethinking the world

What does it take to rethink the world? And to whom should we look as antecedents? The circuit of money today is global and in effect lawless, while politics are mainly

national, without offering much purchase on that more inclusive economy. Not long ago there were several models of humanity and society in circulation, but now there is only one. That is why we need to refresh our thinking about the world.

Nineteenth-century world society was conceived of as an evolutionary racial hierarchy imposed on others by 'white' conquerors. By 1900 the Europeans controlled 80% of the world's land surface, but a sequence of world wars and economic depression undermined their monopoly. The main event of the twentieth century was the anti-colonial revolution, a process whereby peoples originally coerced into joining European empires sought their own independent relationship to world society. This was important, not just for dismantling empire but for generating a number of thinkers who could imagine a new kind of world and persuaded the masses to fight for it.

The Pan-African movement was the largest and most inclusive organization for change in the first half of the twentieth century, with Black intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James and Frantz Fanon offering a vision of the world that negated racial empire. M. K. Gandhi developed the most original global vision for the anti-colonial movement. If we wish to rethink our place in world society, he has the most to offer. He was the first truly global thinker since Immanuel Kant.

I came to the anti-colonial intellectuals late. They were absent from my education and played almost no role in my early academic career. Social anthropology was transformed (but only temporarily) by the collapse of European empires, mainly because the world was changing in radical ways, opening us up to history and critique. Even an academic careerist like me believed that western societies were decadent and might be made receptive to political lessons from the newly independent countries. And of course the Vietnam War felt like the end of imperialism too. But the social anthropology syllabus at Cambridge was still imbued with the spirit of Radcliffe-Brown. My favourite books (always the classicist) were S. F. Nadel's *A Black Byzantium* (Nadel 1942), a marvellously full account of the political economy of a Nigerian kingdom, and Raymond Firth's monograph on Tikopia economy (Firth [1939] 2004).

Jack Goody was moving towards comparative history and linking up with sociology and politics. Edmund Leach gave theory lectures based on *Rethinking Anthropology* (1961), but one day he came to the lecture room brandishing Lévi-Strauss's *Le cru et le cuit* and told us that our discipline would never be the same again. His BBC lectures, *A Runaway World?* (Leach 1968), were as thrillingly iconoclastic then as they are now. I became a specialist on Ghana, but I only found out in the late 1980s that President Kwame Nkrumah was a protégé of the London-based Trinidadian Marxists, George Padmore and C. L. R. James, and that James wrote a devastating critique of his protégé's post-colonial politics (James 1978). But then I would not blame the Cambridge system for an ignorance of the world fostered by a decade of specialization in ancient languages.

In 1986, I was invited to visit the University of Cape Town in South Africa. My Ghanaian friend, a senior official at the Commonwealth Secretariat, was sure that the embargo of the apartheid regime wasn't meant to keep people like me away.

Later that year, when I arrived in Kingston, Jamaica for a two-year secondment at the university and mentioned that I might be going to South Africa, they looked at me aghast. Jamaicans were then sitting on the edge of their seats while white cops shot Black youths in Soweto on the nightly news. They saw the struggle in South Africa with Pan-African eyes. If the apartheid regime was defeated, it would be a victory for Africans throughout the Atlantic world and could bring their own freedom nearer. They made it very clear to me that I should not come back if I went to South Africa. So I stayed.

I did not yet have a narrative that made sense of my voyages through the North Atlantic world – between Britain, West Africa, North America and now the Caribbean – perhaps because I saw each leg of my journey separately. West Africa seemed familiar: it was an old society, like Britain, where people knew who they were. The United States was new alright, but I still had not digested its significance. The Caribbean was all of the other three combined. Like the United States, it had been created from scratch by adventurers, the aboriginal population destroyed. But Africa and Europe remained a conservative force in the Caribbean which the Americans had broken with decisively. Sometimes I had the impression that Jamaica was frozen in the eighteenth century. I had come there as the last leg of that unholy quadrilateral made by the slave trade and what I learned helped me to integrate experiences that had been disparate until then.

The key to my self-reinvention in mid-life was an intense working relationship with C. L. R. James and Anna Grimshaw, which culminated in the publication of his *American Civilization* (James 1993). In shadowing the African diaspora, I had absorbed their perspective on history as dispersion and movement. I came to think of this vision as ‘cubist’ (Berger 1993), following the Paris avant-garde who, at a time of unparalleled movement of people around the globe, abandoned perspective from a single point of view. They placed the viewer inside the picture at different points. Whereas agrarian civilization taught people to see the world as if they were rooted to one spot, the Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade spawned the first truly modern people, as James insisted, a people formed by dislocation and dreams of emancipation who could hold in their heads perspectives from several places at once. I learned to place myself imaginatively in the places I had been and, sure enough, the world changed as I did so. Being forced to juxtapose Cape Town with Cambridge and then Kingston was the catalyst for this revelation.

When I returned to teach in Cambridge, I asked myself how I might give my students access to the other side in the war against colonial empire. The intellectuals I had in mind were only rarely anthropologists themselves – they wrote novels, poetry, history and political tracts, while films were an important source. So for several years I put on a course called ‘Voices from the Third World’ which always began with a TV documentary featuring Edward Said, ‘The Idea of Empire’. A Palestinian of high family brought up in Egypt, Said was both a socially hybrid figure and the leading critic of ‘Orientalism’, a distorted western perspective on the East (Said 1978). The film included some shocking footage of forced labour in the colonies (with musical backing by Elgar’s ‘Enigma Variations’!). I chose three

novels, one each from Africa, Latin America and Asia – Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981); clips from Richard Attenborough's movie, *Gandhi* and Jean Rouch's *Les maîtres fous*; Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1963] 2004) and James' *History of Negro Revolt* ([1938] 2012).

I soon ran into a road block. The students had been trained to write essays based on ethnographies whose truth was vouched for. They didn't know how to read novels critically or for that matter biased political works that they considered to have been 'made up'. They wanted to know the relationship between these fictions and what really happened in history, whereas I was interested in the global vision animating their art. The students found it unproblematic to read Edward Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* (1940) as God's truth, even though I told them that the Nuer forced him to pitch his tent outside their villages, since they were being bombed by the British at the time. *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) was all the rage at the time, but that revolution had not yet penetrated to the level of college supervisions.

I made some modifications the following year. First, we would discuss only how these works were made. What 'world' did each author create and how? What was the narrative voice; the organization of tense; the treatment of race, class, gender and generation; how was political authority portrayed; what is magical realism? Second, we would include a couple of ethnographies for comparison: one by Evans-Pritchard along with Clifford Geertz's commentary in *The Anthropologist as Author* (Geertz 1988); and Marjorie Shostak's (1981) biography of Nisa, a !Kung woman. We would apply the same method to analysing the worlds they made. And exploring combinations of magical and realist thinking in novels and ethnographies provided endless fun. The course eventually settled down into something enjoyable and instructive. It was put on in the Department of Social Anthropology, but attracted a crowd of mixed discipline and region, as is usual in Cambridge.

Although some department lecture courses at Cambridge are seminars with student presentations, discussion and assessment run by the course leader, most consist of fifty-minute orations by the lecturer with only limited scope for audience feedback. More intimate 'supervisions' are organized by the colleges separately. This course was organized as lectures, so that feedback was restricted. I sought to counteract this in three ways: I improvised my lectures so that there was some scope for energy exchange between performer and audience; I left more time for discussion than was usual; and I used multimedia sources in some of them. But teaching, like writing, is a lonely profession, and we rarely find out how effective we are. A Deputy Prime Minister once confessed that he was radicalized by my first-year lectures. His subsequent political career turned that compliment into a poisoned chalice.

Two decades later I put on a course of improvised lectures on 'Africa in World History' in South Africa's capital, Pretoria.¹ 'What does world history look like from an African perspective? These lectures are not a survey, but each will examine one or more outstanding books addressing various aspects of this topic, arranged in

historical sequence. Every one of these books, many of them written by Africans and members of the African diaspora, has inspired the lecturer. This is lecturing for belief, not lecturing for knowledge. The improvised lectures are intended as a guide to reading and stimulus to personal research.' The authors chosen were: Cheikh Anta Diop, Walter Rodney, Gordon Childe, Martin Bernal, C. L. R. James, W. E. B. Du Bois, W. Arthur Lewis, Frantz Fanon, Vishnu Padayachee, Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton, Moeletse Mbeki, Jean-François Bayart, Charles Feinstein and Keith Hart.

I have a second home in Durban, the largest Indian city outside India, and this led me into serious study of the life and work of Mohandas K. Gandhi. He has become, with Immanuel Kant, the main source of inspiration for my own attempt to reinvent anthropology (Hart 2010, 2015). He made generalizations about humanity as a whole and these were based on two universal postulates. According to him, every human being is a unique personality and as such participates with the rest of humanity in an encompassing whole. Between these extremes lie a great number of divisions and associations. Having absorbed much that the West had to offer, Gandhi settled on the village and therefore on agricultural society as the most appropriate vehicle for human development in the Indian case.

If the world of society and nature is devoid of meaning, being governed by remote impersonal forces known only to specially trained experts, that leaves each of us feeling small, isolated and vulnerable. Yet modern cultures tell us that we are personalities with significance. How do we bridge the gap? Gandhi devoted a large part of his philosophy to building up his own personal resources, but also to teaching the Indian masses to believe in their individual capacity to change the world.

In conclusion

The stories I have told here support a view of intellectual politics in a university that is radically decentred. Throughout its history, the vast bulk of Cambridge University's members, both faculty and students, have been ardent supporters of a rather insular version of the establishment. But its institutions are Janus-faced, if disproportionately so. Just as the majority adhere to the status quo, there is a permanent tendency for self-organized individuals and small groups to go in the opposite direction, to open up to the world and do something new that matters.

The guarantee of this dialectic is the university's organization into distinct spheres of influence which ensure that no adult must buckle under to a single central authority and students have much more room for independent manoeuvre than elsewhere. The internet has brought with it an enhanced appreciation of the potential of networked social relations as opposed to fixed structures. At Cambridge there is no reason to sit still and take it, unless you have already been programmed to do that. The local environment provides abundant possibilities for self-starting initiatives. There is no need to wait for a faculty board to change the examined

syllabus or to choose that route yourself as the path to meaningful change. Reading is not the only activity available in a science-based university.

I have lived through the anti-colonial revolution. Colonized peoples fought for their freedom, for independence, for the nation. I never saw a placard or banner with 'We Want Decolonization Now!!' The term expressed rather a feeble attempt for the departing powers to assert their own agency – 'You didn't win this, we gave it to you.' Reading about the struggle to expand the canon of English literature, I recall those soirées in Clare Street and how hard it was then to persuade frustrated foreign students that Cambridge University can sometimes be more mutable than they think.

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Note

1. The lectures can be heard as MP3s at SOAS Radio: <https://soundcloud.com/soasradio/sets/africa-in-world-history-lectures-by-keith-hart>.

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