

12. Political theory and activist strategy¹

We are not the first generation of political activists. Our history has been created through the struggles of thousands of generations of activists. It makes sense to try to learn from their experience.

One approach to synthesising some of the lessons of this experience is to review the political theories which have informed or arisen out of these generations of struggle. Reflecting on the theories which have emerged from previous activist engagements invites us to be more reflexive about the theories which inform our own practice. Political theory gives us a language for talking about the strategies of activist engagement and the contexts within which such activism takes place.

In this chapter we will review (all too briefly) a number of prominent theories of political engagement

- from the divine right of kings to human rights and self-determination,
- economic liberalism and the struggle against feudalism,
- the Enlightenment, progress and representative democracy,
- the communist tradition,
- colonialism and national liberation,
- social movement theory,
- neoliberalism, the dangers of government, the beneficent albeit invisible hand of the market and the very intentional hand of the TNCs and their think tanks,
- governance theory,
- complexity theory, and
- relativism (and realism).

From the divine right of kings to human rights and self-determination

Social decision making and implementation are mediated through a combination of consensus and leadership, solidarity and power. In small mobile societies these principles would be expressed through personal relationships.

As political systems came to encompass larger populations, these principles became more institutionalised, in terms of the relations between rulers and ruled, and relations among the ruled. The principles of consensus and solidarity would be expressed in some level of listening and trust; the expression of power through force or arms, repression and ideology. The divine right of kings and of papal infallibility reflect the role of ideology in mediating power and bolstering legitimacy.

The limits to oppression are found in refusal and resistance, depending on who is resisting and the solidarity of such resistance.

In Western tradition the French revolution marks the rise of human rights and collective self-determination as necessary conditions for political legitimacy. These principles have not

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eliminated force, money and ideology but they do impose constraints on the use of these modalities of power.

Liberalism and the struggle against absolute power (and royal monopolies)

In the Western tradition the philosophy of economic liberalism, which arose in the context of early capitalism, signifies an important restriction on the absolute power of the feudal king, emperor or pope.

Liberalism was necessary to break feudal monopolies and allow the free play of market forces to operate in terms of allocating capital and buying and selling. Under the feudal system royal monopolies were an important source of royal revenue.

In various accounts of this period the rise of Protestantism and the bourgeois revolutions (in particular the French and American Revolutions) were necessary events in achieving this transformation.

While the principal driver of liberalism was commercial it clearly extended in various ways to political freedom including freedom of the press, freedom of speech and freedom of association. However, it did not include a universal franchise nor did it apply to women, slaves or the people of the colonies.

More recently the term 'neoliberalism' has been used to describe a new movement to restrict the role of government and to limit the regulation of commerce and finance. This is a direct reference to the earlier movement of economic liberalism.

The Enlightenment and the promise of progress

In the Western tradition the French Revolution was driven in part by the need of the emerging bourgeoisie for commercial freedom but also was inspired by the promise of progress and the power of rational choice and good faith dialogue associated with the European Enlightenment.

With the flourishing of science came a new perspective on the history of the earth, the evolution of living forms and the mechanisms underlying physiology, movement, gas and light. With these manifestations of progress and understandable dynamics came a new perspective in political science: the possibility of social progress, rationally planned and consensually implemented.

Commercial freedom was gradually subsumed within a wider philosophy of human rights and democracy and including an appreciation of dialogue, respect, compromise, leadership and accountability. Government under early liberalism was a constraint on market freedoms and to be kept at bay. However, with the vision of rationally planned social progress came a perception of government as a leadership institution in relation to such progress. However a leadership role for government would be contingent on its perceived legitimacy which in turn would depend on the rule of law, the accountability of rulers to the ruled, the sanctions of democratic process, including elections, and the freedoms needed to contribute meaningfully to policy debate.

The collapse of modernity

The vision of rationally planned and consensually implemented progress became progressively more blurred in the last decades of the 20th century. The horrors of war cast doubt on the inevitability of social progress and the beneficence of science and the flaws and failures of governance institutions cast doubt on the government as the leading vehicle for such progress.

The collapse of the modernist promise was reflected in a return to religion, including a range of religious fundamentalisms and the ascendancy of the new liberalism promoting the beneficence of the invisible hand and the importance of containing government interference in the market place.

The Marxist tradition

Marx was a creature of the Enlightenment. Just as Newton had discovered the laws of motion, Le Clerc highlighted the cooling of rocks and Darwin discovered the dynamics of evolution so Marx discovered the iron laws of social development.

Marx brought together the economics and politics of capitalism: the role of workers and capitalists in the production process and the role of class antagonism in politics. He argued for the working class as the leading edge of social change (because they have nothing to lose but their chains) and regarded revolution as an inevitable part of the change process. Mao Zedong argued instead for the revolutionary potential of the small farmers and was in this degree vindicated by the success of the Chinese revolution.

The scientific prescription of revolution as a strategy of social change gave birth to Leninism as a form of political organising with concepts and practices such as democratic centralism, vanguardism and entrism. Democratic centralism was an Orwellian convolution which basically meant that party members did as they were told. Vanguardism refers to the self-appointed role of the communist party as the vanguard of the working class. Entrism refers to the practice of party members joining and taking control of unions and other more or less open organisations. The relative success of social democrat parties and the eclipse of communist parties (in the rich world) casts some doubt on whether the claim to be the vanguard was fully appreciated by the masses.

There was a clear contradiction between the universalism of democratic theorists – everybody is equal and each person has one vote – and the strategising of the revolutionary socialists. However, the discounting of democratic values is not restricted to revolutionary socialists; the rise and rise of money politics, with well funded ‘think tanks’, in contemporary ‘democracy’ runs parallel in many respects to the strategising of the vanguardist party.

Class

The introduction of ‘class’, defined in relation to the means of production, was an important addition to the analytic resources of political science. In Marx’s hands it provided a key insight into the dynamics of history as well as informing the politics of working class struggle. The Marxist concept of ‘class’ involved a number of mutually reinforcing dimensions: power, institutions, culture, and identity.

Power. The capitalist class has access to important levers of power that the working class does not have, money, control of employment, control of the press, control of the state. The only power the working class has is to withdraw labour or take to the streets.

Institutions. The institutions of society (education, church, judiciary, parliament, press, academia, etc) are not neutral with respect to class. Rather they are controlled by and express the interests of the capitalist class.

Culture. The prevailing assumptions about how the world works naturalises the capitalist dispensation and positions the claims of working class advocates as surprising and problematic. The language which we use, for example, in talking about the economy, naturalises the interests of the capitalist class and renders invisible those of the working class.

Identity. The term identity has two different but related uses: objective and subjective. On the one hand it suggests an objective and verifiable descriptor (you do or do not belong to the working class) but on the other hand it also refers to how we see ourselves (I am middle class). Marx's colleague, Engels, used the term 'false consciousness' to refer to people whose sense of themselves does not correspond to their true status in class society.

Utopian theories can be very inspiring and in the early years of the 20th century millions of people were inspired by the promise of socialism and the power of communist political strategy. Unfortunately with inspiration comes the risk of dogmatism and ideological blindness.

Feminism

In the 1960s class, as the principal axis of social analysis and political strategy, was confronted with gender as an alternative axis by 'second wave feminism'.

Second wave feminism argued that the social disadvantages faced by women were related to power, institutions and culture. Men as a group had more access to the levers of power than women, ranging from physical power to the control of the institutions of the state. The institutions of society (education, the church, government, academia, business) were structured in such a way as to express and reproduce the power of men. Finally, in terms of culture, the norms, values and language in which culture is carried all served to naturalise the dominance of men. Further, these three dimensions of patriarchy were all mutually reinforcing.

Feminism eschewed revolution but achieved (unfinished) revolutionary changes through institutional incrementalism, cultural reform and a mass based social movement.

Feminism complicated the picture by establishing the plurality of identity. People can be women and working class. The forces of oppression can be both capitalism and patriarchy. This insight immediately pointed towards other axes of social analysis and the 'identities' they defined, notably race, ethnicity, caste, sexual orientation and ability.

This pluralism of identity undercut the concept of false consciousness and the assumption that, if only people could be disabused on the falsehood of their sense of themselves then they would join the revolution and all would be well. It started to seem that the revolutionary would need to deal with people on their own terms; to respect the choices that people make, even if those choices seem to run counter to their own interests. Instead of

telling people that their sense of themselves is wrong we may need to engage in a more respectful dialogue around the structures which shape our lives and which shape how we think. Respect would require that we are open to the possibility that our own assumptions are false.

Social democracy

For 100 years social democrat politics ran side by side with communist politics; sometimes cooperating; mainly in conflict. With the progressive collapse of communism from the 1950s and the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s the social democrat parties inherited the constituencies that had previously supported the communist parties.

However, the allegiance of the 'working class' to the communist and social democrat parties was weakening.

However, limitations of representative electoral politics have been only too clear and in many countries people's confidence in the promise of modernity was further weakened by the corruption, cynicism and careerism and the insistent pressures of media corporations and money politics.

Colonialism and national liberation

Colonialism was an important factor in the ascendancy of capitalism and in the struggle against colonialism new insights into political analysis and strategy emerged.

Perhaps most important was the recognition of racism including the power relations across the axis of race; the institutional forms through which those power relations were expressed and reproduced and the cultural norms through which they were normalised. Racism was named in the context of a range of different struggles separated in time and space: the anti-colonial struggle, the struggle for freedom of the Afro-descended people of the Americas; the struggles for self-determination of the Indigenous peoples of the white settler colonies; and the struggles for equality of immigrant peoples of colour in the cities of the North.

With the anti-colonial struggle came a renewed recognition of the limitations of the promises of democracy and human rights and the need for revolutionary change including through violent as well as non-violent means. It would be important not to forget the brutality of the colonial state in reflecting on the violence of anti-colonial struggles. However, it is clear that revolutionary violence carries significant costs and risks including the damage to civil dialogue (from the normalisation of violence) and the risk of dictatorship (linked to the normalisation of violence as a pathway to power).

A significant factor in post World War II decolonisation was the opposition of the US to the old colonial regimes of the European powers. By the 1950s the US had developed the practices of neo-colonialism (exercising colonial suzerainty through formally independent governments) to a high level in Central and South America and the Caribbean. US access to the markets and resources of countries under colonisation was significantly facilitated by decolonisation. The refusal of Eisenhower to support the Anglo French Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956 was a dramatic reflection of this position.

Neo-colonisation did not go unchallenged and from Latin America from the 1940s came a new theoretical movement (around 'dependency theory') regarding the dynamics and strategies for economic development. Dependency theory argued that economic integration between an advanced capitalist economy and a developing economy throws up barriers to development (for the less developed economy) and impels a 'division of labour' between the two economies which amounts in essence to the development of dependency.

Out of this analysis dependency theory argued for tariff protection of domestic industry (to protect against import competition from more efficient production of higher quality products) and for a greater degree of economic self-sufficiency, to provide a protected market for domestic producers. The risks of this model are related to the different levels of efficiency, price and quality of the products from the more and less advanced economies and access to investment. When the price and quality gaps are high there may be a rising protest from the domestic constituency, particularly from the urban middle class. If protectionist policies discourage foreign investment then economic development will depend on domestic capital accumulation. If the domestic capitalists choose not to invest in more efficient production and higher quality products (and perhaps transfer their wealth to tax havens) the country may become locked into under development.

This policy model was strongly criticised from economists and business leaders from the USA for whom this policy model would have meant exclusion from the Latin American market. The threat was taken seriously by the US government also and as a consequence interfered directly and violently in the domestic politics of a number of Central American and South American countries (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile etc). However the model was also seriously weakened by the debt crisis of the 1980s. In circumstances of low domestic investment when the international banks were offering very cheap loans local politicians and businesses borrowed incautiously and were left very exposed when interest rates rose in the early 1980s. Under the pressure of the IMF and through the installation of more pliant governments the influence of the dependency theorists waned from the 1980s.

However, the debt crisis was not the death of protectionist policies in Latin America but it became evident that a regional approach to development could, through increasing scale, secure the benefits of regional protection while reducing the downside risks. Hence the development of Mercosur and Unasur.

Social movement theory

With the collapse of communist politics, the tarnishing of social democrat politics, and the successes of the women's movement and the environment movement in the late 20th century the hopes of many civil society activists turned to social movement theory.

While political power is wielded by governments and money power is wielded by corporations, both governments and corporations are also sensitive to social movements, particularly when they threaten their legitimacy.

A social movement is characterised by a loose organisational structure with many autonomous organisations, networks and individuals; a shared analysis, sense of direction and broad strategy; a shared consciousness or sense of identity (being part of the movement) and a shared repertoire of action.

The levers of social movements, the sources of their power include inspiration (projecting a vision; things could be different); delegitimation (of the prevailing authorities); and mass refusal or ‘practising differently’.

Delegitimation is a challenge to ideological control. A major purpose of the ideological work of any political regime is to affirm the legitimacy of that regime, whether it has divine legitimacy or legitimacy through electoral endorsement or through charismatic leadership. While most political regimes are also able to draw upon state force to maintain control, they also depend on an appearance of legitimacy. The loss of legitimacy and the need to deploy state force may lead to a further loss of legitimacy until state force is not sufficient to maintain the regime.

Delegitimation is not a definitive strategy of social change. Delegitimation can be followed by re-legitimation; investment in new ideological initiatives or policy feints which serve to restore the perceived legitimacy of the regime of control. This is the dance of legitimation.

During the late 1980s the brutality of the IMF’s structural adjustment policies was becoming more widely known and there was a rising tide of criticism, epitomised by the UNICEF publication, ‘Adjustment with a human face’. Accordingly the World Bank stepped up its investment in health policy and in 1993 produced ‘Investing in health’, a very polished, beautifully presented, apparently well argued health policy report. The underpinning message of Investing in Health was that health improvement could be achieved at low cost and that better population health contributed to productivity and economic growth. Accordingly, since structural adjustment was necessary for economic growth a relatively small investment in health at low cost would contribute to further economic growth and in due course yield the wealth needed for greater allocations to health care. It was presented as a virtuous circle: health contributes to growth contributes to health (elsewhere in this book we have criticised the assumptions and policies of this report). This episode illustrates the dance of legitimation; delegitimation through ‘Adjustment with a human face’; re-legitimation through ‘Investing in Health’.

A further example, from the late 1990s starts with the South African Treatment Action Campaign success in confronting the international pharmaceutical industry and delegitimizing the use of the TRIPS Agreement to maintain pharmaceutical prices. The standing of big pharma was further weakened in December 2001 with the Doha Statement on Public Health in which trade ministers affirmed the principle that trade agreements should not damage public health. Re-legitimation followed with a massive investment of philanthropic and government monies in the Global Fund against AIDS, TB and Malaria and other global public private vertical funding initiatives.

Ten years later the growing criticisms of the fragmenting effects of the World Bank’s stratified health care policies and the vertical silos of the GPPPs threatened to destabilise the ODA for Health establishment. Steps towards re-legitimation have included the ‘International Health Partnership’ and the campaign for ‘universal health coverage’.

The critical insights which underpin the social movement are captured by two slogans: from feminism: ‘the personal is political’ and from the environmentalists: ‘think globally; act locally’. ‘The personal is political’ affirms that the choices of the individual (the collective

choices of groups of individuals) constitute and reflect the social dynamics which can also be described, at the macro level, in terms of institutional and cultural changes. The slogan implicitly challenges the assumption that individual choices are shaped by 'larger forces'. The environmental slogan, 'think globally; act locally', affirms that global trends reflect local choices and that, if enough people choose to practise differently at the local level, the global trends can be reversed.

In the context of the struggle for health the environmental slogan might need to be reworked somewhat to make the point that action is needed at the global level as well as at the local level. And of course thinking globally should not be taken as meaning that local contingencies can be ignored.

Both slogans highlight the power of 'mass refusal' and 'practising differently', partly because at sufficient scale they constitute social change but also because they articulate the challenge to the legitimacy of the prevailing regime.

Social movements emerge spontaneously and in this degree cannot be said to have a definite analysis or strategy. However, there are always individuals, organisations and networks within social movements which provide various forms of leadership including inspiration, analysis, strategy and movement building. The open character of the social movement means that the influence of such leaderships depends on their being recognised across the autonomous networks which constitute the movement.

The progressive growth of a social movement can be described in terms of

- richer communication structures,
- clearer divisions of labour,
- richer understandings, wider repertoire of strategies,
- stronger self-consciousness,
- cultural and institutional development,
- inspiration, and
- retention and recruitment.

These are continuing challenges for those who would 'grow the movement'.

PHC as a theory of social change

The primary health care model elaborated in the Alma-Ata Declaration can be seen in several different ways. At one level it argues for priority to be directed to primary health care as a sector of service delivery (first contact, continuing, comprehensive, multi-disciplinary). More broadly it offers a policy model of relevance to the whole health system: providing sick care and preventive services; addressing individual and social determinants; supporting community involvement (accountability, planning, prevention); building mutually supportive referral systems; developing a multi-disciplinary workforce with appropriately trained practitioners working as a team; appropriate technologies; and intersectoral collaboration (in particular, to address the social and environmental determinants).

However the PHC strategy is more than a model for health system development; it is also a strategy of social change. PHC practitioners and agencies work with their communities to identify and address the barriers to Health for All. Through community

mobilisation and intersectoral collaboration the civil society constituency for action on the social determinants of health is strengthened. The reference to the need for a New International Economic Order demonstrates that the vision is not restricted to local issues and local advocacy. It also points towards a more active civil society exacting stronger accountability from service providers, officials and politicians. It points towards political sovereignty and self-directed economic development.

Neoliberalism, the dangers of government, the beneficent albeit invisible hand of the market and the very intentional hand of the TNCs and their think tanks

As noted above neoliberalism is a direct reference to the economic liberalism of the 1800s firstly challenging the royal monopolies and subsequently (in England) challenging protectionism. As the most powerful manufacturing and trading nation at this time free trade was entirely in British interests.

Like the earlier version, neoliberalism carries a deep scepticism about the role of government. It argues for small government with low tax and minimal regulation. It argues that bureaucrats and politicians have too much discretion to look after their own interests to the detriment of the public good. It argues that policies for social development are just as likely to have adverse unintended consequences as to achieve their rhetorical objectives. Neoliberalism suggests that we place our faith in the beneficence of the ‘invisible hand’ of the market place; that public choice exercised through the market is more likely to produce public good than policy deliberation and implementation.

While specific instances and episodes can be cited to support all of these claims the package as a whole is quite implausible, particularly in view of the investment of big business in market friendly think tanks which do nothing but deliberate on policy and its implementation.

The neoliberal proposition is a warning to strengthen the accountability of politicians and bureaucrats and to work towards stronger policy and implementation capacity including through mechanisms of public accountability. However, in the larger picture, neoliberalism is an ideological smokescreen designed to provide cover for quite cynical manoeuvring for economic advantage for transnational private enterprise.

Governance theory

Governance used to mean ‘what governments do’ but increasingly is being used more broadly than government to encompass the other powerful stakeholders, networks and forces who also influence ‘what governments do’.

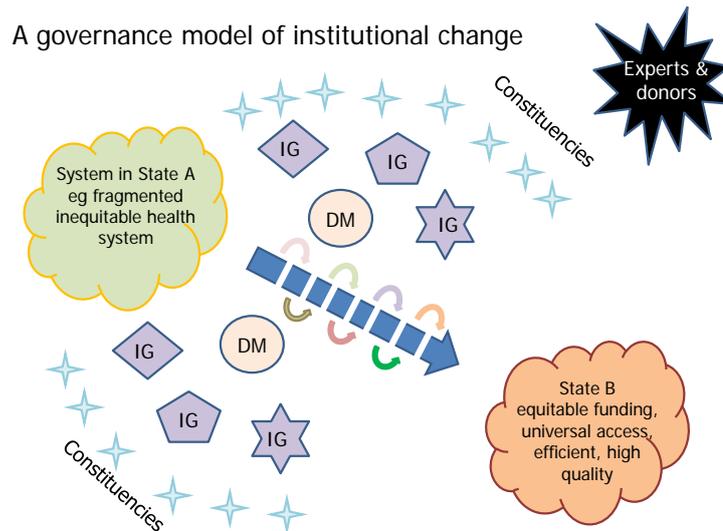


Figure 1. A governance model of social change

In Figure 1, above, the governance of health system development is depicted. Decision makers (DM, presumably government) initiate incremental reforms which in aggregate transform the health system. However the DMs do not act in isolation; rather they operate in an environment of interest groups (IGs, organising, advocating, lobbying), who have more diffused less deliberate constituencies standing behind them. These interest groups and constituencies will operate as alliances and blocs from time to time depending on the issues.

At a global level we do not have ‘government’ as we know it at the national level; rather we have a series of intergovernmental organisations and agreements with varying mandates, authority and patterns of control. We also have large transnational corporations and industry peak bodies exercising massive influence over national governments and intergovernmental organisations. Civil society also operates in this environment, seeking to hold governments and transnationals to account for how they use their power. Too often civil society and even governments are left way behind by the strategising and manoeuvring of the business sector.

In global health policy two terms global health governance and global governance for health are commonly used, the first to mean the governance of identified health issues which are seen as lying within the domain of ‘health’ as an institutionally defined system; and second, the governance of the social conditions which shape health, including the economic and political institutions through which the social determinants of health are governed.

This is a distinction of limited usefulness because the economic and political forces and institutions which shape what can be done in health care are generally responding to the same global pressures as the institutions which shape food supply, employment and urbanisation.

- Formal regulatory structures: multilateral institutions and agreements (UN, WHO, IMF, WB, WTO, etc)
- Empires, big powers and nation-states
- Transnational corporations (and peak bodies)
- Disciplines of the market place
- Classes, constituencies and social movements
- Ideas, information, knowledges, ideologies and discourses

Box 1. A system view of global (health) governance: six key pillars

While the idea of network (or nodal) governance has been particularly useful in relation to global governance it also provides a useful framework for thinking about the power relations and power dynamics around decision making at the national level.

Complexity theory: complex adaptive systems

A complex adaptive system is made up of multiple autonomous agents, all ‘watching’ each other and responding according to their own rules. Such systems are fundamentally unpredictable (owing to limits of information, knowledge and computing power).

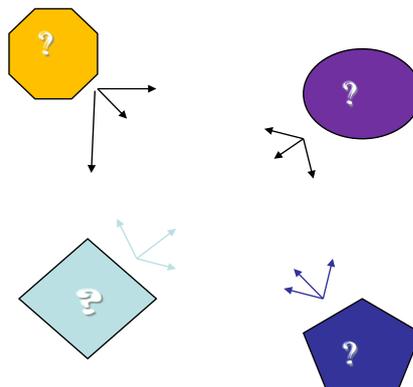


Figure 2. A complex adaptive system. The agents in the system are all monitoring the movements of the other agents and are adjusting their own movements according to their own rules. The trajectory of such systems can be impossible to predict beyond a short time horizon since the number of scenarios defined by the choices of the agents and random fluctuations in the system exceed all possible computing power.

Recognizing how the possible scenarios flowing from a single action can explode; how can we plan for particular outcomes? How can we plan for the contingencies which might cut across our paths? While some outcomes are more likely than others, at any distance outcomes are fundamentally unpredictable. From this we draw the importance of flexibility in strategy and capacity-building for better choices tomorrow.

The principle of partial stories

The foregoing sections provide a collection of partial stories regarding the structures, dynamics and evolution of health systems. This collection of partial stories is intended to provide activists and policy workers with resources for building much more specific accounts of the priority problems which they and their communities are facing; accounts which describe and explain those problems and scenarios of possible futures associated with

different strategies of engagement; accounts which are centred on the agency of the activist and the context and dynamics of local problems.

The methodology which I am envisaging here goes something like this:

1. We start with our own distress or anger as members of community or the regrets and frustrations arising in our work as practitioners;
2. We explore different ways of describing and explaining the causes of our distress or frustrations. We look for local and immediate causes and for larger scale, longer term causes; hopefully we may be able to draw upon some of the partial stories presented in this book in building this narrative.
3. We explore different futures and reflect on what might be needed to get there. We explore different strategies and project the likely scenarios which might unfold if those strategies were deployed. We reflect on strategies which address local and immediate needs and those which address larger longer causes; we look for strategies which will impact at both levels. We explore scenarios of change in relation to the immediate context and circumstances; we also dream about the possible futures towards which our efforts are directed over the long term. Hopefully some of the partial stories presented in this book may be useful in exploring this range of possible futures.
4. We act in accordance with our preferred strategies. This may involve talking, communicating, singing, walking, sitting, standing; fundamentally it is about what we do with our bodies. We make choices about where we put our bodies.
5. We observe and reflect. We observe the impact of our actions on our original problems (the sources of our distress, anger or frustration); on the local context and causes and on the wider field; and on ourselves. We review our narratives of explanation and our scenarios of change. We review the partial stories which we have drawn upon in assembling those narratives.
6. And we start again.

This methodology applies to both political as well as technical analysis. The causes we focus on might be the vested interests of big pharma or the pressures of neoliberalism; or they might be weaknesses in the supply chain which lead to stock-outs in the clinics or pressures in the workplace which weaken the professional motivation of practitioners. The options and scenarios that we explore might also be mainly political or mainly technical but in most cases both analysis and strategy will include both political and technical considerations.

Realism and relativism

According to the realist perspective there is a singular reality out there in the objective world and through scientific method we can acquire a deeper and deeper knowledge of that reality. Realism seems intuitively obvious and is consistent with our experience of learning about the world.

The logical flaw undermining realism is recursion; the presence of the observer in the field of observation. To develop a singular coherent picture of the objective world in which we live will require that we include a picture of ourselves drawing the picture of the world – and of ourselves. Like the hall of mirrors the project of drawing a picture of ourselves

drawing a picture of ourselves drawing a picture of ourselves ... is not possible because we are in the field of observation.

Similar conclusions have been drawn by the linguist De Saussure who argues that the symbols we call words do not bear a 1:1 correspondence to reality; rather new words are coined to capture differences which newly come to matter for socially significant purposes. This casts some doubt on the idea that a narrative description of reality (in words) can be assumed to offer a 1:1 correspondence picture of reality. Quantum physics has come to similar conclusions from experiments which demonstrate the presence of the observer in the data.

Relativism warns us against singular privileged theories (of explanation and of strategy). Knowledge is made up of partial stories which we put together as coherent narratives in relation to the interpretations and choices we make in our practice. As Horkheimer said, truth inheres in a moment of correct practice. The truths that inform our practice are locally contingent shaped by context, subjectivity and purpose as well as by the partial stories we draw upon to depict the bigger picture.

For those who are intimidated by the complexity of the global economy and who 'leave it to the economists because they seem to know what they are talking about' this relativist understanding argues instead that the mainstream economists are working on a picture of 'the economy' which is constructed from a number of partial stories, put together around a particular subjectivity or world view and a particular set of purposes. From this insight we move to a new confidence in making sense of the global economy based on as many useful partial stories as we can mobilise and put together around a different subjectivity and a different set of purposes.

For many people the greatest threat from relativism is the decentering of the universal principles of ethical practice; the obligation to do good and not bad and the rules for determining what is good. Some presentations of the human rights suggest that they have this universalist character. The relativist argues that ethical norms are produced in human culture through human practice. They do not need to be positioned as somehow coming in from the outside; being handed down as tablets of stone. Just as the inherited norms are products of culture so the choices we make in daily practice are acts of will, personal will arising in social context. They do not have to be 'rationalised' in terms of universalist truths; rather we affirm them as an act of choice which reflects an aspiration to shape the person whom we are becoming. Why do I want to become this kind of person? Because this is who I am.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have explored a number of political and philosophical theories and frameworks which have informed or emerged out of various political traditions. Our treatment of these theories is very brief but hopefully sufficient to point the reader to sources where they may be developed in more detail. (Wikipedia is always a good place to start.)

Political theory gives us a language for talking about the strategies of activist engagement and the contexts within which such activism takes place. The theories which are most relevant to contemporary practice (in particular the social movement perspective) are all built upon political theorising which has gone before.

If we are to develop a more reflexive political practice, a more conscious approach to learning from experience about what works and how to do it better, then we need a language to discuss political strategy and the contexts of activism. Political theory provides such a language.