

GOOD RESEARCH AND ‘SELLING IT’ MATTERS

I believe that if you want to change your local situation take personal action, but if you want to change the world create ideas – and see others take the majority of the action. This notion that ideas and thus theory – not necessarily good theory – can have a profound impact can be seen in the work-life of most economists – and social scientists – who chose academia over activism. Academic theorising, we assure ourselves, matters as the direction of activism will inevitably be shaped by some theoretical notion (I include herein notions of morality). So is activism a waste of time for the ‘serious’ academic?

Recent events across the world indicate that this is not the case: From the financial bail-out packages and the successful U.S. Presidential campaign to this winter’s student occupation at the New School itself, activism matters. But in common for all these instances of activism there are two things I want to draw out.

First, there is an underlying idea which underpinned the actions. The financial bail-outs have been shaped by a mixture of belief in free market efficiency and the (rekindled) idea that government should have a hands-on fiscal approach to the market. The U.S. president elect had a campaign run on a notion of social justice through active government involvement, while the New School occupants believed that a university should be run for students and academics first and foremost.

Secondly, the action taken has been led by people who may not necessarily have invented the theory or idea in question, but those who have actively contributed to them in public and in academic life. The financial bail-out in the UK was shaped by a prime minister who had been Chancellor of the Exchequer for ten years and the U.S. package eventually fell to established academics and policy makers, after a brief half-life in congress as a seven page document. The U.S. president elect has been a constitutional lawyer and has run a campaign based on sharing his ideas and allowing independent campaigners open access to their election databases – probably a first in the U.S. The New Schoolers at the front of the protests were students who are active in student governance and in social rights movements.

The parallel of the ‘activist academic’ continues if we consider the influential economists of recent history. Two of those big names are John Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman. Keynes worked in the UK Treasury guiding war-time policy and published frequent articles in the popular press and his own academic journal. Friedman published books and produced TV programs and acted as economic advisor / mentor to a range of government heads (including Augustus Pinochet in Chile) so activism has a role to play, but one type of activism instigates local change, a different type can change the world.

Friedman was part of abolishing conscription in the US and Keynes affected UK policy directly, through their actions, but they changed the world by spreading their ideas far and wide. The lesson is you need outlets for your thoughts. This includes academic journals, but if we are trying to create knowledge and affect change, we need to share our ideas with as wide an audience as possible. This means we have to

‘sell’ our research to the reader, and make sure we have as wide a readership as possible.

Before there is a backlash against the notion of ‘selling’ research, let me explain myself. First off, it can’t be that bad a thing, as we are all *already* doing it. Whenever we submit an article for a journal, the first aim is a catchy title, the second is to write an abstract which will interest the reader – we are selling our story so to speak. Similarly when we give job talks and present in hour long university seminars, or twenty minute conference slots, we are selling our research. Ultimately one cannot cover all the technical detail of 6 months research and 40 pages of material in a 20 minute conference presentation – and one shouldn’t – but we try to convince and interest the audience in our work. We are already ‘selling’ our research; I am just suggesting you aim for a bigger audience...

Take a page out of Keynes and Friedman’s book and use newspapers, books and media to put your ideas out there. This is important as not every social scientists work will change the world – sorry to say so – but you can make an impact if you are able to put your thoughts to a large number of people. Ultimately social change is affected by attitudes and notions across society, and not through the shouting of single voices. Joe Stiglitz in recalling his first visit to China confronted this issue head on. In China his publisher had no distribution agreement, but his books were on every book-store shelf. In wondering whether he should report this plagiarism, he asked himself if it was “better to be paid and ignored, or pirated and widely read?” He never filed any complaints, and why should he? He suddenly had 1.2 billion extra listeners.

Of course not every idea is brilliant and not every theory warrants academic publication or public disbursement. This is where good research comes in. If the theoretical contribution is not novel and thoroughly explored, it will not be published in academic journals, and will not be interesting for future generations of social scientists. Similarly if the core of your work does not coincide with the *zeitgeist*, it is unlikely to capture the public imagination or influence policy. Almost every social scientist will agree with the first statement and some will balk at the latter proposition. For those who balk I recommend a look at Milton Friedman’s first 20 year academic track record. Friedman published widely with little real policy effect. It was only in the 60’s and late 70’s as the economy changed and he actively promoted his views through the media that Friedman’s monetarist revolution came about. That revolution is no testament to the validity or sustainability of his ideas, but is a definitive indicator of how important it is to publicly promote your ideas, a lesson Friedman retained till the end. It is also an indicator of how important it is to capture the mood of the times and understand current events. We are taking this onboard in launching a blog on our site, to follow events and new research.

On research however, I must close with the sign that Deirdre McCloskey has on her wall: “Indente alte in gubernando” or ‘aim high in steering’. Be ambitious; aim for the highest possible standard of scholarship and never be afraid to think big and ask big questions. Remember: What you do is important, but you have to convince everyone else of this too.

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