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Why Is So Little Left Of The Left?

How did Britain manage to rule the vast South Asian sub-continent with a handful of administrators, troops, and technicians? How are we to understand not only the confidence of the rulers, but the accommodation of the ruled? Why, half a century after the demise of European colonialism, has no alternative model of development taken hold?

How is it that in the so called First World the larger part of our vast production of goods and services takes place under work arrangements which offer the worker nothing but a paycheck at the end of the week? How are we to understand that people quietly accept work devoid of all other meaning?

Why, in the early years of the Soviet regime, did millions not only accept but enthusiastically embrace regimentation, murderous collectivization, and worse? How was this possible?

Finally, how is it that with all our knowledge, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Bhopal are household words?

Let me begin my answer with a little story. Some months back, driving from Cambridge to Western Massachusetts, the big news on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" was that the consortium created to own and operate nukes throughout New England had decided to close Yankee Rowe rather than attempt to comply with the National Regulatory Commission's requirements for proof that this problem child, the oldest nuke in the country, was still safe to operate. The company spokesperson insisted that the decision was purely economic, that the pressure applied by anti-nuke activists had not influenced the outcome. I don't think anybody was fooled: the costs of compliance were a direct function of the pressure activists had brought to bear.

My first reaction was one of elation—probably the reaction of all the participants and most of the readers of this symposium. But I quickly asked myself why I felt such pleasure. I certainly didn't have the knowledge to argue that there are superior alternatives to nuclear energy available. And conscious of how much energy my own family consumes, about $200 per month for the house plus about $100 per month to fuel up our vehicles, I am hardly in a position to preach conservation, even if $300 per month represents a reduction of perhaps 20 percent of our expenditure 4 years ago. So why was I so elated at one more defeat, perhaps the final one, for the nuclear power industry?

I didn't have to search long for the answer: what was thrilling, I quickly realized, was not defeating nuclear power as such, but defeating the experts, the folks who continually tell us to trust them because they know better. Shutting down Yankee Rowe was not a

victory for conservation, or even for conventional power, but a victory for ordinary people persisting against long odds to make their view of the world prevail.

Of course this oversimplifies. The activists must have included a fair share of experts, men and women who could argue before the NRC in their own terms. But none of these folks, "our" experts no more than "theirs," could go beyond a leap of faith on the crucial issue. The pro-nukes put their faith in technology and the possibilities for technological substitution; as the gods of technology and substitution have not failed us in the past, neither will they fail us in the future. Or more simply, the Machine of Progress ain't broke; accordingly, don't fix it. Trust us.

For the anti-nukes, this makes as much sense as trying to extend a successful run of Russian roulette: one can only be lucky so many times. The Machine only *seems* to be working.

Neither pro-nuke nor anti-nuke seems to recognize the vast uncertainties on both sides of the argument. The only thing they agree on is that the burden of proof lies with the other. Each claims victory on the grounds that the other has failed to prove its case. Neither recognizes that its own convictions rest almost entirely on faith, be it faith in the Machine or faith in the limits of the Machine.

What makes the one faith many times more dangerous than the other is its cosmological pretensions. Faith in the Machine of Progress is the centerpiece of a cosmology which is exclusionary in its universalism, marginalizing individuals, classes, and whole cultures through its claims to a monopoly of knowledge. Which brings me back to my starting point: what unites colonialism and development, capitalism and communism, economics and ecological disaster, is that they partake of this cosmology, a cosmology having its roots in a particular ideology of knowledge. This ideology is that knowledge is of one kind, that only one system deserves the name of knowledge, that other systems do not exist—except to the extent they are validated by the One True System.

My contention is twofold: first, that knowledge and action are based on a combination, a synthesis of, sometimes a tension between, what I shall here call E-knowledge (short for expert knowledge as well as for episteme) and T-knowledge (traditional knowledge or techne); but, second, notwithstanding this symbiosis in practice, that ideologically Western culture has elevated E-knowledge to a superior position, sometimes to the point that T-knowledge is not only regarded as inferior knowledge, but as no knowledge at all. Except to the extent that T-knowledge can be justified by E-knowledge, it remains superstition, belief, prejudice.

For E-knowledge the theory is that knowledge is obtained by logical deduction from firmly established first principles. This idea of course goes back to the Greeks, though Descartes made it a cornerstone of what is generally taken as the launching pad of modern philosophical inquiry. Modern science has replaced the naive Greek (and Cartesian) notion of "self evidences" with elaborate procedures for arriving at

acceptable first principles, and these procedures may indeed be the most distinctive modern component of Western E-knowledge.

E-Knowledge is purely cerebral, disembedded from the body, and indeed from particular contexts; E-knowledge produces universal knowledge. E-knowledge is instrumental, having nothing to say about the good and the beautiful, and indeed it eliminates these concepts from the realm of knowledge altogether. Its logic easily becomes the logic of calculation and maximization. The rules of E-knowledge for transmission and innovation are highly individualistic: in principle E-knowledge is an open book which anyone can read, and changes —either in the first principles, or more rarely, in the rules of logic— can be proposed by anyone. In practice, transmission and innovation are the special province of the schools, so much so that a nephew once identified E-knowledge with "book" knowledge, as contrasted with "street" knowledge (T-knowledge). Under E-knowledge, governance is (also in principle) a mixture of egalitarianism within the knowledge community and hierarchical superiority vis-a-vis outsiders.

T-knowledge can be contrasted with E-knowledge in all four dimensions of a knowledge system. In the first place it has a very different epistemology, emphasizing a variety of sources which range from intuition to authority. One way or another, experience is the key to T-knowledge. T-knowledge is embedded in practice, often implicit in nature, indeed often tacit knowledge literally embedded in body, as the knowledge of a wheelwright, surgeon or pianist is embedded in the hands as well as the mind. It is, in a word, non-dualist. T-knowledge obscures the distinction between ends and means—the medium and the message may not be one, but neither are they perfectly distinct as they are in the E-knowledge conception. Transmission and innovation are non-individualistic; transmission is explicitly embedded in a social process often a hierarchical one like the relationship between master and apprentice, teacher and student, parent and child. Innovation is generally respectful of, if not reverential towards, authority; commentary and emendation, rather than outright criticism and denial to pave the way for one's own new discovery, is the prevalent method of changing T-knowledge; the authority of the fathers (and mothers) is interpreted rather than denied. As to governance, T-knowledge in effect reverses the rules of E-knowledge. The knowledge community is hierarchical internally (as is the relationship between master and apprentice) but if not egalitarian in its relationship with other knowledge communities, it is at least pluralistic—Live and let live might be the emblem of its power relations with outsiders.

I should emphasize at the outset that I have no criticism to make of E-knowledge as one system of knowledge. On the contrary: we would not be human without our command of E-knowledge. The problem is rather the claim made on behalf of E-knowledge that it is all of knowledge, from which stems its proclivity to crowd out other, equally important, systems of knowledge. While E-knowledge is essential to our humanness, so is T-knowledge. Indeed, it is our ability to combine T-knowledge and E-knowledge that sets us apart both from other animals and from computers: animals have T-knowledge and machines have E-knowledge, but only we humans have both. Oliver Sacks's clinical histories, collected under the title *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (Summit Books, New York, 1985), are at once moving as well as entertaining evidence for the

grotesque, bizarre, and even tragic distortions of human beings that result from a loss of either T-knowledge or E-knowledge.

The problem then is ideology. It was the acceptance of the Western view of knowledge that made India's elites revere their British rulers and immobilized their powers of resistance. It was Gandhi's genius that he understood the need to attack this ideology as the precondition of independence. It is the tragedy of the post-colonial era that Gandhi's message has been lost in the undiscriminating acceptance of the Western view that more is always better, the failure to understand economic growth as chemotherapy for the cancer of poverty—necessary in context but almost as poisonous as the malady it is supposed to cure.

The dominance of E-knowledge has had important consequences for the organization of work under capitalism. Despite the necessity of T-knowledge to any production process, workers as well as bosses have accepted that T-knowledge is at best a somewhat illegitimate and deficient form of E-knowledge. This shared understanding has not only legitimized and thus empowered capitalists in their project of controlling the workplace. It has also limited the ability of workers to resist the project of capitalist domination.

A case in point is Frederick Winslow Taylor's "scientific management." The basic idea of Taylorism is to recapitulate the T-knowledge of production, of which workers hold a virtual monopoly, into an E-knowledge system accessible only to the boss and his agents. As Taylor noted in his classic *Principles of Scientific Management* (Norton, New York, 1967 [1911]), where T-knowledge rules the roost, the best the manager can do is frankly to place before the workmen the problem of doing the work in the best and most economical way... inducing each workman to use his best endeavor, his hardest work, all his traditional knowledge, his skill, his ingenuity, and his good will, in a word, his initiative, so as to yield the largest possible return to his employers. (p. 32)

Taylor knew T-knowledge all right—he has articulated it in this passage as nearly as one can—and he knew it for the obstacle it was to managerial control. To remove this obstacle, not only must managers get hold of the knowledge of workers, they must change its form. Thus scientific management is not simply appropriation, it is also transformation. Read the following excerpts from *The Principles of Scientific Management*, which describe the basic idea of Taylorism:

Under scientific management, the managers assume...the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulae (p. 36). These replace the judgment of the individual workman (p. 37). Thus all of the planning which under the old system was done by the workman, as a result of his personal experience, must of necessity under the new system be done by management in accordance with the laws of the science. (p. 38)

In the end, Taylor never achieved more than partial success. Running a factory on E-knowledge alone is a fantasy. Like one of Oliver Sacks's more extremely afflicted patients, a factory run on pure E-knowledge might be grotesque or comical, but it could never function with any semblance of normality. Partial though it was, the success of scientific management and related managerial initiatives has been sufficient to undermine the epistemological foundations of workers' control by legitimizing the transformation from T-knowledge to E-knowledge as "progressive," allowing resistance to be labeled as "anti-progress." Workers and trade unions, sharing the Western belief in the superiority of E-knowledge, were put in the position of fighting limited rearguard actions as they accommodated to a form of progress in the workplace that increased the dominance of the machine and the rule book—and those who set the pace of the machines and wrote the rules. Believing that E-knowledge subsumes T-knowledge, it was next to impossible to make a determined defense of T-knowledge.

The obstacles to liberating the workplace lie not only in the dominance of classes in whose interest it is to perpetuate the authoritarian workplace, but also in the dominance of the knowledge system that legitimizes the authority of the boss. In this perspective, to liberate the workplace it is hardly sufficient to overthrow capitalism. The commissar turned out to be an even more formidable obstacle to workers' control than the capitalist.

The logic of the organization of production in the Soviet Union and other Communist states was similar to capitalist logic. The Communist Party reinforced its monopoly of political power by organizing production in ways which reduced the role of T-knowledge and hence the exercise of control by workers to a minimum, the better to foster the authority of the boss. In this sense, Communist bosses had the same goals, and used the same means, as capitalist bosses.

But this leaves open an important question. Why did workers, who fought and whose comrades died for the Revolution, acquiesce in the cadres' project of domination? Naked power and terror are too familiar a part of the story to require elaboration. But even terror goes only part of the way towards an answer to the question of acquiescence. Projects of social transformation, particularly those carried out under the banner of Marx and Lenin, have never questioned the knowledge system of capitalism, only the uses to which capitalism has put knowledge. (It is not, as Marxists are wont to say, accidental that Lenin himself was a great exponent of Taylorist scientific management.) Thus the dominance of E-knowledge has gone unchallenged. And along with it, the devaluation of T-knowledge. Soviet-style socialism offered workers different rules of the game of class mobility, but power remained the ally of E-knowledge, and E-knowledge remained the knowledge system of the powerful. Since workers shared society's devaluation of their knowledge as workers, their T-knowledge, they had little psychological room to maneuver. As a class they accommodated themselves to the exigencies of class power disguised in the gospel of efficiency, whatever their possibilities as individuals to escape the working class.

Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Bhopal—as well as the more quiet crises of lakes polluted by acid rain, of rivers polluted by nitrates, of air that we can hardly breathe—are the direct results of the economist's conceit, the pretense that we can calculate and optimize our relationship with the environment. Note the word "pretense." Given the uncertainty, decision makers do not and cannot mobilize the apparatus of calculation and optimization. Without something to peg probabilities on, we all fall back on quite different methods—on intuitions, conventions, authority—in short, on T-knowledge rather than on the E-knowledge which drives optimizing behavior. Nevertheless, the pretense of calculation and optimization is necessary: It legitimizes, once again in the name of superior knowledge and progress, the disenfranchisement of those who might object to the destruction of the environment.

A healthy relationship to the environment must be based on a disposition not to take chances where there are safer alternatives available. This, I hasten to emphasize, is not because anyone knows that ozone depletion, the greenhouse effect, acid rain, and so forth will be calamitous, but precisely because we do not know one way or the other. It is our uncertainty rather than our knowledge which dictates dropping the pretense of E-knowledge calculation and optimization and frankly embracing the T-knowledge of prudence and judgment.

It goes without saying that what's left of the Left has much thinking to do before we ourselves or anybody else will take us seriously again. As long as we are in the thrall of an ideology which marginalizes and denigrates all knowledge which cannot be cast in terms of E-knowledge, we shall never understand our history of political failure. Worse, we shall never transcend these failures.

The Left has consistently recognized the project of human liberation must confront the interests of the powerful. But we have failed to confront the knowledge systems of power. And unless we are willing to confront the ruling ideology of knowledge our attempts at radical transformation the economy, polity, and society are doomed to failure. As Robert Pirsig put it in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Transworld, London, 1976):

> To tear down a factory or to revolt against a government...is to attack effects rather than causes and as long as the attack is upon effects only, no change is possible. The true system, the real system, is our present construction of systematic thought itself, rationality itself, and if a factory is torn down but the rationality which produced it is left standing, then that rationality will simply produce another factory. If a revolution destroys a systematic government, but the systematic patterns of thought that produced that government are left intact, then those patterns will repeat themselves in the succeeding government.