

## CHAPTER 1

### Knowledge, Truth and the Burden of Committed Intellectuals

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#### Introduction

I settled on the topic (*Knowledge, Truth and the Burden of Committed Intellectuals*), before I became aware of the topics to be addressed by other contributors in this colloquium. All the elements of the theme of this colloquium separately, and the theme in its entirety, can reasonably assume that we are going to proceed on the basis of some knowledge. What we cannot assume is that the discussions are going to be, necessarily, based on truth. This is because *knowledge* and *truth*, most of the time, are two totally different things. This distinction may look strange. I, indeed, did not, myself, notice that a difference exists between the two until I had the occasion to scrutinize the motto of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), *Knowledge, Truth and Service*.

Knowledge, simply contemplated, implies an awareness of certain facts that enables us to deal effectively with certain practical problems. It is circumscribed by its methods and the nature of the evidence it gathers to create that awareness which also establishes the “facts”. To that extent, what we consider knowledge is limited by the methods and, consequently, the evidence which the methods assemble. While what we call knowledge may lead us to the truth, it is not necessarily the truth. The progress of different fields of science for example, shows that scientific knowledge is highly limited, and influenced, by the sociology of the scientific community and by the methods and facilities that make the advancement of knowledge possible.

Our “knowledge” of agriculture and its progress had, for example, led some of us to generally accept that humans have not only “conquered hunger” but nature! Enters the ecologists who combine that knowledge with other knowledge to enable us approach the situation more *truthfully!* William Ophuls and A. Stephen Boyan, Jr. (*Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity: The Unravelling of the American Dream*, 1992: originally published in 1977) observed:

Ecology’s synthetic nature distinguishes it from the more reductionist branches of science. On the grandest scale, ecologists try to understand the process of life in the context of the chemical, geological, and meteorological environment by assembling the isolated knowledge of specialists into a single, ordered system. Indeed, the subject matter of ecology is so large that simple experimentation is often not feasible. Hence ecologists often conduct observational studies on a functional unit called the ecosystem (the community of organisms living in a specified locale, along with the non-biological factors in the environment—air, water, rock, and so on—that support them, as well as the ensemble of interactions among all these components.

All ecologies have their limits; and interactions of factors have inexorable consequences. Human beings have been perhaps the most influential organisms on our planet especially since humans began to claim that they had “conquered nature”. Human beings also have exploited the resources of this planet, until recently, with limited attention to the dangerous consequences of human activities. Natural habitats have tended to evolve what ecologists refer to as *climates or poly-climates*. Again as Ophuls and Boyan Jr. (*Ibid*) observed:

Humans have lived as breakers of climates, which contain the stored wealth of the ages in their plants, animals, and soil. Instead of living on the income (the production) of the biological capital inherited by the species that populate such ecosystems, humans have invaded the capital itself. One of the first and most important human interventions was the use of fire: Early humans found that burned-over areas produced a new growth of succulent grass that attracted an abundance of game. However, the agricultural revolution resulted in the greatest simplification of natural ecosystems, as described by the cultural ecologist Roy Rappaport:

It is not cultivation alone that simplifies ecosystems. The sheep rancher does not want bison eating the grass that could be used to feed more sheep, so the bison must go. Ecological poisons such as DDT and radiation also simplify ecosystems, because they tend to kill the organisms high on the food chain, leaving behind large numbers of as few resistant species”.

Human activities generally simplify and homogenise environment and destroy ecological systems which are complex and highly integrated. In these situations, the needs of man in society individually and collectively need to be organised in ways in which what the environment has to offer is equalised or democratised, and in which the needs of polities and overlapping generations of people in society are also democratised and equalised. Therefore, to ensure these, some regulation of the exploitation of the environment will be required. A quotation of Edmund Burke by Ophuls and Boyan Jr (*Ibid*) is appropriate in this regard.

Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their dis-position to put moral chains upon their own appetites... society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forego their fetters.

The general default modes of human societies in situations of wars, environmental disasters and ravages of epidemics and pandemics (as in the current COVID-19 case) corroborate these assertions rather eloquently.

The concept of sustainability itself is a rather tricky and controversial one. First, it may suffer from the disability of hegemonic forces prescribing its boundaries as we often find with “development agencies” that assume models and prescribe means and processes for constructing or attaining such models! In many cases such forces and their intellectuals are essential

positivists. Amartya Sen (author of *Development as Freedom* 1999, and Nobel laureate; an economist) and John Maynard Keynes (up to a point) in the late 1920s and early 1930s before him, in spite of the risk of erecting typologies, will fill this category. We may locate Oswaldo De Rivero (author of *The Myth of Development*, 2001)

Paradigms are limited by their social and ideological ambience. Today, in the peripheries like Nigeria, the dominant paradigms, including that of sustainability, is the creation of neo-liberalism at least some of whose original protagonists are repudiating with varying intensities of elan.

Secondly, precisely because the world is in crisis at global and local levels, more inclusive, and therefore more scientific responses (themselves, paradigms, but anti-theses of the subsisting neo-liberalism) continue to pose the alternatives.

### **The Burden of the Intellectual**

Without prejudice to the increasing demands for *specialist* knowledge, we must pay appropriate attention to the robustness and integration of elements of knowledge articulated by ecology above. Arundhati Roy 2004 had the following to say about specialisation:

Today's world of specialization is bizarre. Specialists and experts end up severing the links between things, isolating them, actually creating barriers that prevent ordinary people from understanding what's happening between them. I try to do the opposite: to create links.... which connects the very smallest things to the very biggest...how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom, your bed, into the most intimate relationships between people—parent and children, siblings and so on.

The varieties of burdens we bear as individuals or collectivities arise, invariably, from our commitment. A rather notorious comment on the commitment of the intellectual was the one by Paul Baran (*The Longer View*, 1969) which I quote:

The desire to tell the truth is therefore only *one* condition for being an intellectual. The other is courage, readiness to carry on rational inquiry to wherever it may lead, to undertake "ruthless criticism of everything that exists, ruthless in the sense that the criticism will not shrink either from its own conclusions or from conflict with the powers that be". (Marx).....

The more reactionary a ruling class, the more obvious it becomes that the social order over which it presides has turned into an impediment of human liberation, the more is ideology taken over by anti-intellectualism, irrationalism, and superstition. And by the same token, the more difficult it becomes for the intellectual to withstand the social pressures brought upon him, to avoid surrendering to the ruling ideology and succumbing to the *intellect workers' comfortable and lucrative conformity* (my emphasis). Under such conditions it becomes a matter of supreme importance and urgency to insist on the function and to stress the commitment of the intellectual. For it is under such conditions

that it falls to his lot, both as a responsibility and as a privilege, to save from extinction the tradition of humanism, reason, and progress that constitutes our most valuable inheritance from the entire history of mankind.

This circumscription imposes a *broad*, comprehensive and enormous burden on intellectuals (that includes academics, lawyers, students, professionals and all thinkers in western and traditional intellectual engagements). It does not limit the areas in which intellectuals must seek the truth and disseminate same.

### **Hubris of the conquistadors as the ultimate problem of sustainability.**

When the Soviet Union collapsed in the late 1980s under the supervision of the high priests of Neoliberalism from Chicago, mainstream western economists lined up behind Francis Fukuyama who declared “the convergence” of capitalism and socialism—more commonly characterised as “the end of history”! Or, rather, the “triumph” of capitalism in the age of globalisation and neoliberalism. The development of science, especially ICT and biotechnology in the last decade or so, supplied definitive energy to this hubris fuelling it and globalising the attendant disasters (especially wars, environmental crises and pandemics)!

The result had been greater integration of global economy, legendary corporate profits, more and globalised violence, greater inequality among regions, and among and within nation states and more generalised poverty in the world. All of these are in spite of the promises of science and technology and the general moral outrage that have been dulled or rendered blunt by the activities of “charities” and “corporate responsibilities”.

### **Tentative Conclusions**

Clearly our conceptions of “knowledge” at global and local levels limit the range of actions we can embark upon. The hegemonies of what is called the “knowledge industry” prescribe the path to the truth and in all its ramifications including the language of “seeking”; hence the repression or obliteration of alternatives that seek to repudiate the “there is no alternative” (TNA) hypotheses. The intensifying “trade wars” and the crises of epidemics of diseases and violence are important cases in point.

But before the 2008 “global meltdown”, the more recent trade wars, the asymmetrical and, largely proxy, wars in North Africa and the Middle East which fuel mass migrations, overlapping generations of intellectuals (Cheik Anta Diop, Mowugo Okoye, Bade Onimode, Bala Usman, Julius Nyerere, John Perkins, Samir Amin, Noam Chomsky, Segun Osoba, Naomi Klein, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Barbara Stahl, Catherine Caufield, Arundhati Roy, etc. etc.) have been enduring the burdens of striving to transcend the hubris and the attendant myopia of dominant “knowledge”.

Let us wrap up this conclusion by pointing at the plethora of efficacious, but now endangered, species of responses of various human societies to their environments prior to current regimes of homogenisation. For example, six cardinal imperatives or axiomatic prescriptions by the Yoruba for harmony with their ambience had survived IN OYO HERE (Odejobi, personal

communication)! I paraphrase them (their Yoruba renditions are more robust and more intelligible) and enumerate them:

- The symbols of intellect must never be trivialised;
- The cord of family must never be allowed to break;
- Nothing should be done, by omission or commission, that may disgrace the ancestors;
- No one should be forced to do anything against her/his free will;
- Nobody should sell land;
- Nobody should kill a gravid animal.

**Will the hubris of today's dominant and homogenised knowledge, culture and world view allow humanity to apprehend the current crisis of human condition?**