LIFESTYLES OF THE RICH AND RACIST

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Since day one of the formation of the Coalition for Justice you have been a guiding force for us all. Your great efforts have been an energy that has been inspiring and strengthening. To care so much in an attempt to have us recognize as a coalition, as people, that these events not only affect us as individuals, but as a community, will last with us far into the future of this group. The genuine friendships are invaluable—we have all inspired each other. Our wishes go with you, but we know this is not goodbye—it’s a reason to celebrate everything we’ve gained and everything we have to gain! –The Coalition for Justice

A yellowing piece of paper taped to white cardboard backing inside a smudged aluminum frame bears this note above. The paper itself was originally wrapped around a small wad of bills (over $200 in singles, fives, tens and a few twenties). It was given to me as a going away present from the Coalition when I left the Hamptons after having taught at Southampton College for three years. During my last year there, I worked with a group of janitors, students and community activists who protested the College’s outsourcing of the custodial unit. My increasing displeasure with the institution and the administration’s increasing displeasure with my political activities led me to seek a job elsewhere. Although the efforts to reverse the outsourcing continued (and I traveled from Boston to Southampton once a month over the next year for meetings or events), this note marked a shift in both my involvement and in the groups’ own work.

This is probably a hokey way to start a piece on covert racism. Maybe it betrays a little bit of my own not-so-covert racism as I look like one of those white guys who really gets off on having people of color like him. I will reflect on this dynamic later in the piece, hopefully without too much self-absorption or aggrandizing. But part of this story is my own transformation, and my own transformation is part of the theoretical and sociological analysis that I want to discuss. Too often academics and their activist work disappear in their scholarship, even when political engagements strongly influenced their intellectual endeavors or the theoretical schools they inherit.
For example, I wrote some articles a few years ago (Dolgon 1992 & 1995), critical of the cultural studies movements in the humanities and social sciences. The 1980s and 90s witnessed the rapid growth of scholarship and institutes related to radical cultural studies (Barker and Beezer 1992; Hall 1992; Harris 1992). Yet, the role played by scholars’ own political engagements in the development of the field appeared less prevalent. Despite the fact that cultural studies’ evolution was steeped in direct political action (Mattelart & Siegelaub 1983; Archer, et al. 1989; Williams 1990), professional intellectuals began obsessing more about analyzing political culture than engaging in it. I remember one of the directors of the University of Michigan’s Center for the Study of Social Transformation telling an eager group of my graduate student cohort that our role as intellectuals required us to spend more time building theory than building movements.

In response, I wrote that too many scholars were posing culture as a totality, and then positioning themselves above the field of struggle and remaining free from implicating themselves as always necessarily a part of the contest. This positioning lead to what Brennan (1991) called the “problem of constituencies” where “the new information class, ever adept at investigating the field, is invisible to itself.” Stuart Hall and his colleagues from the British Cultural Studies group had cut their teeth, first in post WWII popular education programs and then in 1960s anti-racist and urban organizing efforts in London. Many North American writers had been influenced by the Latin American cultural studies work coming out of Chile, Cuba, and elsewhere in the 1960s and 1970s. In each case, practical political analysis, strategies and organizing influenced intellectual work on the role of culture in constructing and challenging power. But, as the movement grew and cultural studies became formalized and institutionalized, scholars grew increasingly disengaged from political action, more prone to focus on cultural and political analysis than on actually engaging and changing culture and politics.

These dynamics, the ways in which institutionalization and “professionalism” alienate engaged scholarship, as well as how one’s own identity gets shaped and reshaped by commitments to different constituencies, continued to impact my work. When College custodians were outsourced by the Southampton administration, deciding to get involved was easy. Yet, aside from the personal and political decision involved, it also meant once again thinking about the relationship between identity and scholarship, theory and engagement. It meant