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# Ethnographies of the Political: Honouring Malcolm Blincow

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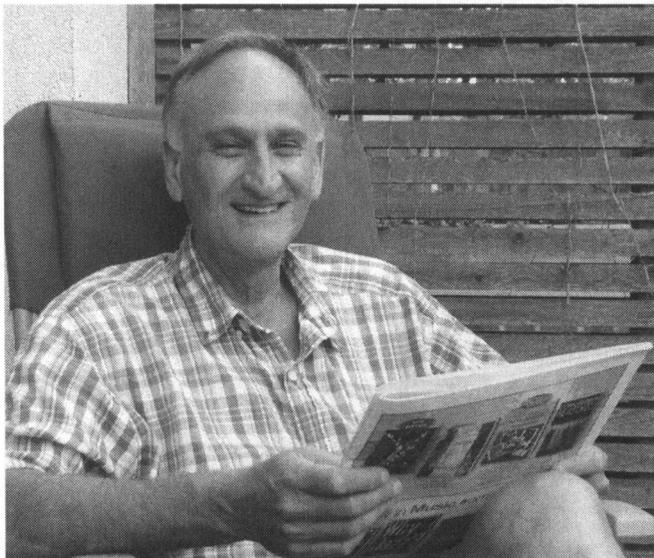


Photo by Veronica Schild.

After working for almost 40 years in the Department of Anthropology at York University, Professor Malcolm Blincow retired in 2012. To mark the moment and to honour his enduring contribution to critical pedagogy and scholarship and, most significantly, for inspiring a new generation of Canadian anthropologists, we bring together articles by Malcolm's former students that capture his keen interest and intervention in the anthropological studies of power and politics. Motivated by Malcolm and drawing from ethnographic research in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the articles individually and collectively represent a serious engagement with the question of politics at different locales and scales and showcase, as one contributor notes, the analytical and methodological salience of "rich ethnography and political economy to elucidate how broad social forces play out at the level of everyday practice" (Eramian, this volume).

Malcolm was actively involved with the intricate workings of the department, the university and, most passionately, the York University Faculty Association. Above all else he was a teacher par excellence. Teaching and research for him were not two disconnected aspects of scholarship, a wedge that our neoliberal universities wish to inscribe in their constant thirst for grant monies and cutting-edge and star-studded research and productivity. Instead, for Malcolm, teaching was a form of engaged scholarship, a long-term engagement, a commitment, an enduring relationship of learning, which stretched far beyond the walls of classroom or the university. An important element of teaching for him was patient and careful listening, an intellectual dialogue—which he had with each and every student and their work—and an ongoing quest to identify strengths in each and strive to help them do better. He was a legendary teacher, and many considered him to be a fantastic mentor, although Malcolm did not see himself as a mentor. This might seem somewhat ironic, because others

believed outstanding mentorship to be his major contribution, but, for Malcolm, mentoring implied a kind of directed learning from which he distanced himself. His pedagogical approach, regardless of his own preoccupations, was to allow students the freedom to go in their own direction. He critically read the work of both graduate and undergraduate students with utmost care, and his trademark review of your work—often returned overdue but never done without due consideration—consisted of a hard copy replete with comments and edited, typically in red, throughout. The attention to detail was frequently astounding, and receiving it was often a unique moment in learning and scholarship. He engaged with nearly every paragraph or sentence, as well as the whole; you could be sure that he was closely reading it, just as he would closely and patiently listen to you. Perhaps that is why Malcolm could never embrace the mentor–protégé model; it was far too limiting to his desire to engage, even with your footnotes, on a multiplicity of scales, contexts, historical levels, theoretical tangents and so on. His pedagogical approach was not so much that he knowingly provided *the* magic bullet to you, but rather it was through careful engagement that opened the space for the student to identify the missing piece in their own work.

Clearly, teaching was not about imparting instructions or providing templates of research but was a sustained process of learning and, importantly, inculcating a desire to learn from texts, from teachers, from peers and, significantly, from the political and historical events around us. Not only were critical engagement, listening and reflection crucial to Malcolm's teaching, but these were also the attributes that characterized him as an anthropologist. With one ear always to the ground, Malcolm paid attention to every fine detail, in fact thrived on it, embracing and encouraging a mode of fieldwork and ethnographic research that simultaneously tracked the micro- and macro-practices of everyday life. For him, a finely grained ethnography necessitated contextualization and a historically embedded sense of place. A love of history and context was nearly contagious in his presence. He would often provide a student or colleague a glimpse of his knowledge of some subject or period through a few comments or an aside, an experience much like stealing a peek into a previously unknown but vibrant cavern of events and interpretations.

Contextualization, as we know, is an important aspect of writing history, and the meaning of context resonates with its etymological roots in making something new, or a weaving together. For anthropologists, contextualization is even more vividly illustrated in their

research methods of participant observation, fieldwork and reflexivity. Participant observation as the discipline's trademark method is descriptive, but participant contextualization might have been a better, if less elegant, name. The most important aspect of participant observation is to be immersed in context, to act and feel a little like a participant so as to gain greater insights into the context of whatever is being studied. Therefore, our disciplinary practice plunges us awkwardly into new contexts, where we can attempt to grasp some of the strands of any moment woven together. With such an emphasis on context and contextualization, for Malcolm, anthropology is a fertile space for the cultivation of contextualizations, from the immediate ethnographic present to the vast sedimented landscapes of history.

In bringing students to reflect on and engage with embedded histories and contextualizations of space and time, Malcolm was frequently able to remind students not only that anthropology drew inspiration from the events around us but also that anthropological concepts, categories and theories must emerge from and respond to the changing political and economic milieu. Here, he insisted on capturing the multiple encounters that traverse different scales and locales, be they encounters in the field, encounters with our "subjects" of research, encounters between competing registers of knowledge such as between the particular and the universal or, in our institutional spaces of work, between research and teaching. For him, anthropological thinking and practice, in one way or another, were always born out of encounters in context. In attending to the encounters, anthropology was thus accountable to the *politics* of relations and interactions, describing how encounters often bring discordant epistemologies, practices, agents or ideologies to chafe each other, producing, in all instances, tensions, conflict, negotiation, accommodation, incorporation. It is this foundational attunement to the charged politics of encounters and how they constitute and reconstitute social relations, make knowledge, reproduce inequality and secure domination at multiple levels that Malcolm calls the "politics of power," which makes anthropology well positioned to grapple with the nitty-gritty, down-to-earth matters of politics.

While engaged with the politics of power operating at multiple scales (as he discusses in his interview with Daniel Yon later in this issue), Malcolm was weary of considering power as omnipresent. At a moment when anthropologists were attending to the politics of virtually anything—of place, nature, identity, sexuality and so on—Malcolm was critical of a loose and pervasive sense of power, which risked overlooking the very structural and deeply historical relations of power that shape, often

violently, the complex terrain of contemporary modernity. Instead of a casual and superficial nod to politics of power, he insisted on tracking different modes of power, paying special attention to the dense networks of political actors, noting the roles of various intermediaries and middlemen who, embedded in the formal and informal context of social organization, negotiated the charged cultural interstices of material and symbolic power. It was this keen interest in the grey zones of power that attracted Malcolm's attention the most and led him to investigate the politics of factions, political parties, nation-states and, ultimately, the formation of the imperium.

Malcolm's undergraduate course—Violence and the Making of Modernity (as Yon reveals in his interview)—is a pedagogical example of weaving together history and context and identifying the encounters that track the project of modernity. It teaches how the making of modernity “needed constantly to extend itself and universalize itself through violence.” The goal is to know “how violence gets organized” in the context of institutions, and one of the prime institutions is the military and its technologies of violence. In this light, Salman Hussain's article in this volume explores aspects of this institution through an analysis of the 2006 *U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. The manual is part of a framework to “legally justify the use of force.” Hussain found that the instrumental use of categories of combatants and non-combatants works to “enable and justify violence on those who are ‘outside’ the appropriate categories.” He expands his historical analysis to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and the use of drone warfare and, most importantly, how this is operationalized on the ground in Afghanistan with the cultural engineering of the Human Terrain System program. Hussain demonstrates that this categorization was put into practice, balancing authority and violence with a flow of funds directed through carefully mapped kinship and political networks. Such rewards, in the words of one U.S. military strategist, “gave us the means and political capital to motivate otherwise wary residents to help. Authority without money would have reduced us to pleading with citizens to cooperate”; counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan “still revolves around imposing our will on the adversary” (Crider 2009:15, 19–20).

The three articles by M. Gabriella Torres, Laura Eramian and Kathleen E. Gordon share a commonality in the sense that they are ethnographic explorations of the fallout of political events that shaped the contexts and sites in which they do their fieldwork. Thus, there

is a contextualization of the past and the present and careful analyses of the encounters that resulted in genocide or in class-based exclusionary territorial practices. Torres' work in Guatemala City after decades of dictatorship and civil war situates us in a central neighbourhood of the city, where the violence and ethnic tensions of the past continue, albeit in new domestic forms. Eramian provides an ethnography of everyday identity in Rwanda about a decade after the Rwandan genocide, while Gordon's article explores the dramatic period of tension between vendors and controlling shopkeepers in Challapata, Bolivia, which resulted in a new marketplace in another plaza and the formation of vendors' associations but, over time, was replaced by complacency to inequalities. All three articles are situated years after these very dynamic events occurred, yet the often subtle expressions of the present reveal more than just what has changed and what has not. For Gordon, while a disadvantaged group has obtained better access to the market, and vendors no longer engage as they did in local and national politics, “what may begin as a struggle to assert the rights and livelihood practices of a disadvantaged group can be transformed to reproduce the conditions they once fought against.” Yet Gordon reveals that “inequalities among vendors have re-emerged,” not articulated in the sense of being between the powerful and the powerless, but among and between vendors, with market competition factors like stall size, location and access to wholesale business more important than class or ethnicity, which are much less relevant in relation to market competition in Challapata.

Torres uses the post-civil war moment to contextualize the particularities of neoliberalism, inter-ethnic inequality and segregation in Guatemala City, a city that continues to experience very high levels of homicides and political violence. Living in a neighbourhood near *el Centro*, Torres and her family found themselves immersed in a neoliberal conception of the self and family, where political involvement gave way to “individual preparedness” (Goldstein 2012:14). Through conversations about and analyses of residential practices, Torres reveals how establishing a sense of control and safety through intelligence systems, security guards and barbed wire nevertheless left other concerns about insecurity, extending to suspicions directed at workers or security guards who must be given access to the home. Torres was regularly counselled how to safeguard herself and her children. She learned the sentiments of those who take insecurity into their own hands, even as they begin to wonder whether they have “consumed” security to the point of building their own jail. Through

her work, we can begin to appreciate the context of ethnicity, conflict and violence that is projected into the notion of the insecure street, resulting in a neoliberal domestication of national conflicts into the realm of embodiment and consumption.

Eramian's foray into Rwandan ethnography and the fraught ethnic boundaries that emerged after the genocide examines how "difference is produced, evaluated and interpreted in everyday social relationships." We may not be surprised to find that this identity is situational, but her choice of a context in which to examine this is remarkable. Through two thoughtful ethnographic accounts, we see situational identity play out for Charles, a professor at the National University of Rwanda. Despite the outlawing of labels, Eramian establishes that Charles is of Hutu background, but because of his education, position and relative wealth, he is marked by "stereotypes of Tutsiness in spite of his Hutu ethnic descent category." His willing participation in the obligatory *umuganda*, or "community work," solidifies his good reputation in the community in terms of reflecting the current ethos of non-elite work. But Charles' role of patron—he is a "generous donor to several young people whom he helps with school fees"—simultaneously reveals his generosity and also emphasizes the negative qualities associated with Tutsiness. Eramian teases out many of the nuances of the situation in a vivid portrayal of what it means to live identities in the context of changing national politics and sensibilities.

Finally, Karl Schmid's article combines history and ethnography to provide a broad contextualization of tourism. In the process he asks whether there is a theoretical frame that can encompass this practice when, at times, it falls outside the boundaries of neoliberalism and governmentality and speaks to relations that encapsulate capitalist but also non-capitalist processes. David Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession seems to accommodate the very disparate processes of loss and accumulation, including of land, belonging, reputations and representations. In so doing, Schmid's use of the long history of Luxor allows him to cover not only the present but also the formative period of tourism and the beginnings of mass tourism. His approach is to paint in the nature of these new encounters, both the everyday and the extraordinary. This puts us with the embedded scholar Vivant Denon as he buys

souvenirs in a still-smoking Napoleonic battle scene, with the Egyptian dragoman tour guides as they air their grievances against the Victorian Thomas Cook corporation in the London *Times*, and with under-employed Egyptian informal guides in Luxor, watching from across the boulevard as transnational tourism corporations choreograph the movements of package tourists, a "plastic tourism" that leaves little for the guides' own livelihoods. With historical context and ethnography it is possible to understand this loss and accumulation, through themes of land, livelihood, consent, control, heritage and belonging.

At the 2014 Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA) conference, several contributors had the opportunity to present these papers to Malcolm and to hear his reaction as a discussant. As usual, he provided thoughtful insights and connected the dots that link the papers and urged us all, yet again, to go after the nitty-gritty and messy aspects of the politics of power in a way that only ethnographers can do. He made a point of emphasizing his gratitude for the opportunity he had to learn from others, his colleagues and his students, many of whom went on to become new colleagues. At the same time, this was a very heartfelt acknowledgment of his passion for dialogue and discussion. Assembled here are some of the results of this cherished dialogue with Malcolm, in honour of his contribution to so many people over his long career in Canadian anthropology.

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