Symposium: How I Have Changed My Mind

Gaurav Desai

Old habits die hard. When I was asked to write for this forum, I instinctively went into research mode. How had other scholars changed their mind? And how did they describe that change? This kind of mind-changing material is hard to detect on the shelves of traditional libraries unless, of course, you are an “insider” in a field who has followed the intricate shifts in the thought of a particular scholar. So it was particularly enlightening when the website www.edge.org decided to have a forum on, shall we say, the true confessions of scientists, much like this special forum in College English. For the most part, the scientists changed their minds on how the brain works, or on the biological basis of “racial” difference, or on the nature of the “posthuman.” The short pieces make for fascinating reading, especially for those of us in the humanities, since they show that the best scientific expertise is that which is accompanied by doubt, and a willingness to shed oft-cherished views.

I am afraid I cannot report a radical paradigm shift in any of my own positions, but I do find that I have moved over time from what seemed to me to be pretty solid and identifiable positions – especially in the realm of politics and world affairs – to those that seem messier. Fifteen years ago, I would easily have identified a position or person as a “liberal” or a “conservative” and known exactly which side I was on. But over time, I have found that in actual practice, neither ideologies nor persons are so consistent. Just as the politicians who preach family values the loudest are often the ones who are caught amidst the worst sex scandals, often those who voice an ideology with the utmost zest are also those who fail to live up to the basic tenets of their belief systems. We need, of course, to be wary of such ideologues on either end of the political spectrum, but it also pays to remember that most people and positions cannot be so easily pinned down.

For those of us who teach literary texts, none of this should be news – after all, literary texts often present us with scenarios of ideological dissonance, pulling us apart in several directions at once, asking us to make moral and ethical judgments and then forcing us to question the certitude with which we make those very judgments. Over the years, I have found that travel also allows for such an experience of dissonance, where a particular conjunction of political priorities which makes perfect sense in one sociocultural location does not even cohere as a workable assemblage in another. Here, Claude Levi-Strauss’s early insight that the anthropologist is one who is positioned to be a radical vis-à-vis his or her own culture, but a conservative vis-à-vis the culture(s)he studies, does not go far enough to grant that the value system that we generally associate with “conservatism” or

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1 This short piece was written as part of a symposium sponsored by the journal College English to celebrate the Centennial of the National Council of Teachers of English. The Editor, Professor John Schilb asked eleven “major contributors to (the) profession” to reflect on how they had changed their minds about an issue or issues over their careers. The entire symposium is published as “Symposium: How I Have Changed My Mind,” College English, vol. 74, no. 2 (Nov 2011): 106-130. Copyright 2011 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with Permission.
“radicalism” might not always make sense as a coherent system in a culturally different context.

I initially began to think about these issues when I was working on my first book. I was looking at a figure like Malinowski, who, by most contemporary definitions would be thought of as a liberal. And yet, his letters show that he was not beyond having racist tendencies. Others (most famously Chinua Achebe) have seen similar contradictions in the thinking of Joseph Conrad. Uday Mehta, in his book on liberalism and empire, has similarly shown how Edmund Burke, the self-professed conservative, spoke up more vigorously against British atrocities in colonial India than did the liberal J.S. Mill who penned a famous treatise on liberty. Yet, we need not go to some of these luminaries to grasp the basic fact that not only do we often inhabit our ideologies in discomfiting ways, but also the coherence that we ascribe to ideological formations may in fact be more contingent than we would like to believe.

More than reading, it is travel that has helped me think through some of these issues. Visiting with Hawaiian nationalists and hearing their claims for indigeneity made me rethink the alleged “postcoloniality” of our historical moment. Discussing the politics of the language of literature in sub-Saharan Africa with colleagues in Quito made me think about how different political activists decide on the arena of political struggle that is most relevant to them. Lecturing on the politics of race in the recent U.S. Presidential elections to an audience of business school students in China, who, on their own initiative had read President Obama’s memoir in advance of my visit, yet again confirmed for me the differences between our (as in U.S.) knowledge of the world, and the world’s knowledge of us. Hearing a passionate argument for genetically modified food made by a member of the Kenyan Trade Commission during a conversation at Bellagio, Italy, where we were both visitors, made me think of how agricultural policies that we might question in the West are read differently by others with different resources and needs. The list could go on, but the lesson I have learned along with the scientists, is the importance of being open to conversation, to intellectual disagreement and to the possibility that some of the fundamental things that I have believed in may have to be re-thought.

The study of literature and the pursuit of travel have been ideal vehicles for precisely such engagement. When students approach me about career advice today, I invariably tell them, spend time in the library and in the archives, but don’t underestimate the power of what you might learn from just traveling to unfamiliar places and talking with others.