



Do you feel sufficiently Socrateased?

Barn raising and the perils of building on sand

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I Introduction

Michael Kahn writes in 'The Seminar' that Barn Raising is the ideal format for productive learning – 'the community pitch in and build it' (p.3). Well, in URST 400, instructed by Elvin Wyly, the community certainly pitched in and built a barn.

This journal, however, takes a critical stance on our collective building. What does the barn we built *actually* look like?

II 'Scholarship is a conversation'

Geography room 201 on Monday afternoons from 1-4pm was the site of productive conversations. That conversation reached its peak, in my view, on the 6th February as we debated Danny Dorling's (2011) book 'Injustice'. A space for collaboration as well as debate and discussion emerged, realising the aim of our Barn Raising exercise.

At its best, this barn was multidisciplinary. With students from psychology and engineering, sociology and geography, urban planning and anthropology, we set about our task of building with a plethora of tools, construction talents, and resources. Yet Kahn's assertion that 'the attempt to make connections between all elements of the seminar encourages the members to look at the material in different ways and this produces a good deal of learning' (p.5) is, in my view, flawed.

III Dilution...

A 'good deal of learning' (ibid.) was accepted at the expense of a 'great deal of learning'. Productive interactions in class became attenuated by the omnipresent ethic of dilution. Infinite connections between housing anecdotes, urban analogies, and academic amateurism, led to flaky debates founded on shaky foundations.

Was our barn built on sand? Certainly not if we take the ethic of 'Kenji Kant' emphasised in class. Yet given that the majority of students were operating at 5000ft below this academic altitude, there was plenty of slipping and sliding. Tying Heidegger, Marx, and Foucault to weekend stories of pizza, art, and underground music seemed flawed to the say the least.

Arguably, the disparate links between all elements of our conversation promoted an ephemeral educational style, poor pedagogy, and fleeting encounters with alternative futures. Should we consult Nick Carr's (2010:7) diagnosis of life in 'The Shallows', as we 'zip along the surface like a guy on a jet ski'?

IV Pedagogy

The open, flexible, and radical pedagogy of URST 400 was, however, refreshing. Space to think. To listen. To learn. To contribute.

Yet did this merely promote a superficial ethic; zipping from topic to topic, skimming across the surface, and dabbling in different schools of thought? We must be careful not to descend into mere verbal games, founded on subjective opinions cloaked in fuzzy, anecdotal, and obfuscatory rhetoric. Our academic practice was too often undermined by tangential red-herrings, distracting us from the task of effective building of the Barn.

In particular, what is the role for structure in such agency-dominated landscapes? Surely, boundless space is as unproductive as ceaseless hybridisation, which places demands on freedom with a form. Perhaps we should consult Giddens' (1984) 'structuration theory' here.

V Positively Radical!

Margaret Thatcher's TINA assertion that 'There Is No Alternative' is seeping into all areas of life. Even Ken Livingstone said about London that 'I Can't See An Alternative' (cited in Fainstein, 2010:128). Yet in the classroom we *do* have the opportunity to build alternative barns, to conceive of new models, and test new styles. Buckminster Fuller (1975) was correct in reminding us that 'you never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete'. So what exactly is that new model?

VI Seeking wisdom at extremes?

URST 400 successfully probed at the possibility of a new model, with radical openness, academic honesty, and multidisciplinary collaboration. Yet, given the fundamental flaw of dilution, how are we to move forward?

Fight Club provides the first step – we are to truly *listen* rather than merely 'waiting for your turn to speak'. As Dorling (2011:xv) asserts, part of our problem is constant 'self-justifying'.

This, in turn, calls for humility. As Jimi Hendrix famously said, 'Knowledge talks, wisdom listens'.

Finally, as Peter Marcuse stated at the AAG in NYC, our job as geographers is to 'expose, propose, politicise and historicise'. So let's get to work!