

What Audience, What Labour?

A Review of the 2015 Dallas Smythe Memorial Lecture by Oscar Gandy

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In Dallas Smythe's old stomping grounds of Simon Fraser University, Dr. Oscar Gandy delivered the 2015 Dallas Smythe Memorial lecture. Arguing that inequality deserves state action, he linked financial inequality to capabilities and then to inequalities in political capital. He proposed this problem can be solved by linking the interests of those who are benefiting from the current system to those who are being marginalized by it. This can be done by framing messages to elites with the intention of making political use of their labour as audiences. While political audience labour is an important take away, it is difficult to divorce his understanding of how it can be exploited from his presentation of inequality as a domestic American problem rather than a global problem in this lecture. Additionally, while Dr. Gandy's definition of framing includes presenting solutions, he did not specifically address how the wealthy might react to understanding their interests as connected to the marginalized; ignoring current efforts of philanthropy and the rise of corporate social responsibility.

Grounded in framing theory, Dr. Gandy gave flesh to his argument using a tripartite structure: define the problem, identify parties responsible and offer solutions. He outlined inequality as a holistic issue occurring in the United States of America, affected by every major policy bill passed by congress. Beginning with financial inequality, Gandy demonstrated how the home is a place where financial inequality manifests into deeper social inequality with children in lower income families having statistically lower developmental opportunities. These social groups identified with such structural issues, like single mothers, are the most likely to support policies that target inequality. Opposed to them are married white males who self-identify as middle class and above. Dr. Gandy positioned his argument against these groups and their common sense understandings that financial inequality is not solvable and is beneficial in that it inspires people to work. It is this latter demographic, especially those who are wealthy, that Dr. Gandy identifies as having the most political capital.

Indeed, it is this demographic, society's elite, who have made the situation what it is today, with financial elites purchasing political influence, and political elites voting to entrench their class status. The core problem for inequality has been the state's role in enabling the extraction of wealth from marginal sectors of society and a lack of willingness to tax the wealthy and corporations.

While proposing that politicians are rational decision makers who would act in the best interests of the whole public, "if only they had the right information", Dr. Gandy also noted that these political agents listen to information with a grain of cognitive salt. If the source of a message does not come from a trusted source these policy makers are less likely to heed the information. Thus, Dr. Gandy argues to take advantage of the political situation as it stands today. Those effected by the cumulative disadvantages of inequality and most supportive of addressing the causes of inequality are the least likely to be listened to. Therefore, to be effective, efforts should be directed at those who can exert influence. While he proposed many specific solutions to inequality, such as taxing corporations and funding local social services, Dr. Gandy's point is that solutions are useless unless they are understood as desirable and actionable. This is why he proposed that inequality should be framed as crisis, since, from a historical perspective, political elites are most readily convinced that "their interests can be best served by making concessions to class segments below them during periods of prolonged crisis".

Dr. Gandy was not looking to transform core beliefs, but to take advantage of individuals labouring to serve their own interests. His intention is to get powerful members of the public sphere to exert influence on the political system, not just at election time, but also throughout the entirety of the whole policy process. Such change should be made at the state level, given Gandy's argument that this is where key structural causes of inequality begin and where most issues important to marginalized segments of the population, such as women's rights, have been effectively addressed.

The question is whether we are willing to accept Dr. Gandy's starting points and missing premises. For instance, is inequality a domestic issue? While he makes the point that many in the United States do not understand the scope of contemporary inequality, such as the size of the gap between the wealthy and the rest, his focus is on what to do with the wealth, not where it comes from. There is a strong argument to make that inequality in America is but a symptom of the inequality of America's trade relationship with other nations. One need to look no further than the theory of imperialist rents to understand how American wealth is interconnected with their presence in the world. Seeing inequality as a growing domestic crisis and treating it as solvable by correlating elite interests on this premise will only help to obscure the source of such elite's power and prevent the nation state from seeing past its own interests.

Furthermore, do the wealthy and elite need to be convinced that addressing inequality corresponds with their interests? For as much that Dr. Gandy emphasised the importance of framing messages in meaningful ways to targeted audiences, he seemed to neglect the fact that many elites believe in private approaches. Why ask the state to do something that they believe they can do better? Many wealthy individuals engage in philanthropy and most firms engage in corporate social responsibility. They are already connecting their success with inequality. These private solutions however are based on treating the symptoms of hungry children and polluted rivers, while leaving financial motives behind these problems, such as tax regimes and business operations, unchallenged. Perhaps this critique is unfair, for the point is not just to win the minds of the elite, which Dr. Gandy identifies as one of the biggest challenges, but to encourage a particular path of state-based action. This last aspect is something that Dr. Gandy did address, but only in a summation of the failures of the Occupy Movement and other left wing groups who do not offer specific state solutions, rather than focusing on how elites exercise their social power.

The message that the reproduction of labour occurs in the household and that it can be directed for self-improvement in both capitalistic and political areas however, should be heeded. By expanding our notion of the work audiences do, we can move away from critique that identifies the wrongs of the world and move, in solidarity with Dr. Gandy, to critique that sets out agendas for progressive action.