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Thinking about keywords, and mapping theory

How should we think about the problems that beset our current era, or is the issue worse than that, and that is that we aren't even sure what our most pressing problems are? The latter seems not to be the case, and yet what does seem the case is that we are not sure what terms, keywords, concepts, ideas, or theories might best get us to understand our social order. In no particular order the problems of our time would at least include rampant inequality, the climate emergency or catastrophe, the rise of right-wing and authoritarian movements, parties and governments, gender-based violence, especially as it affects women, and racial, ethnic, and religious hatreds. Are there any ways that we can group or systematise the myriad problems that confront us in terms of a set of concepts or an overarching theory or theories?

The editors of the **Platform** idea suggested that they want to "revisit the 'keywords' approach to discussing changes in discourse, ideology, and common sense" (Maré & Vale 2021: 87). The 'keywords approach' being referred to here is the seminal text by Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, originally published in 1976 (revised and slightly extended in 1983). In opening the case for theory in the inaugural **Platform: in theory** initiative (started in 2021 in the journal *Transformation*), John Higgins tellingly entitles his article, 'Theory as keyword/keyword as theory'. Obviously theories are formed by interconnected sets of concepts, and no concepts are theory-free once we start using them. The least that can be said about what motivates the 'platform'

idea is a concern with the general *lack of theory* in public political discourse these days. Putting this more strongly, it could be suggested that much of public political discourse is quite short-term in its thinking, and even *unpolitical* in its technicist approach to solving social problems.

In this short article I want to use Ian Parker's (2017) recent text on 'revolutionary keywords' to continue the important discussion of the concepts (keywords) we employ, and might employ in the future, in making sense of our political time. This is a necessary and somewhat urgent task in the context of the absence of theorising on South Africa. Finally, following Parker's periodisation of 'revolutionary keywords' since 1917 I want to suggest a similar task for a periodisation of local vocabularies since 1948. Parker (2017: 280) indicates what he thinks is at stake in fighting over, and for, keywords when he writes that "The task, however, is to work with these new revolutionary keywords not as abstract academic terms that can be defined and puzzled over one at a time. Rather, it is to notice how they are being put to work in political struggle, and assess what effects they have". Besides noticing how certain keywords and concepts are being used or put to work, it is also important to notice which concepts have been forgotten and dismissed as no longer useful to our current struggles. So, while we might think about the *new* revolutionary keywords, we also need to think about the 'old' words and whether they still have a purchase in our understanding of the social order.

A cursory glance at some recent articles in the broad area of social studies seems to suggest a re-claiming or at least a re-thinking of certain concepts: for instance, problematic, society (Burns 2021; Dubet 2021), alienation (Bianchin 2022; Øversveen & Kelly 2022), class (Øversveen & Kelly 2022). The journals *Radical Philosophy* (2012; Maniglier 2012) and *Theory, Culture and Society* (2021) have both had special issues devoted to the notion of a problematic. Savransky (2021: 3) notes: "Besieged by ongoing economic crises, global health emergencies, geopolitical instabilities, ecological devastation, and growing political resentments, *the intractable nature of the problems* that configure the present has never loomed larger or more darkly. But *what, indeed, is a problem*? Problematising the modern image that treats problems as obstacles to be overcome by the progress of technoscientific knowledge and policy, this introductory article lays the groundwork for a *generative conceptualisation of problems*" (emphases added). Interestingly, Parker's (2017: 7) collection of 50 keywords starts from the problem of language that certain political groups experienced in trying to "speak about their experiences and mobilise to change their conditions of life they always discover that the language of the rulers is not enough, that the dominant language shuts them out. New terms are invented, and there is a transformation of language at the very same time as politics is

transformed". This struggle over and through language could also be seen as an instance of Savransky's (2021) "generative conceptualisation of problems". Parker even uses the notion of problematic when discussing Podemos and Syriza as examples of an (political) event (see Parker 2017: 68-72). He defines "event" (one of his keywords) as "a way of conceptualising the eruption of the unexpected to transform politics. When we name significant political events we draw them into political discourse, and in that way we give them a life which extends beyond the one moment when they occurred" (2017: 68). And the problematic of course is the political and theoretical discourse that the event evokes and describes. Parker admirably demonstrates how the notion (problematic, if you will) of the event which derives from the complex theoretical work of the Marxist and communist philosopher, Alain Badiou, is put to work to make sense of two political eruptions or events.

Marxism has always wanted to claim a dialectical coherence between theory and practice, but it too has suffered a retreat into abstract theorising that on close reading seems very far removed from the problems facing the social order. However, Poulantzas (1978: 12), the Marxist political theorist, argued that theoretical work "whatever the degree of its abstraction, is always work bearing on real processes". Parker's (2017) achievement in his discussion of the 50 chosen keywords is to close the gap between abstract theories and concepts, and the real world to which they apply. Critical theories, certainly from Left and radical thinkers, usually have a prefigurative role as they not only describe "past or present social reality in the manner of empirical social science. [They] also raise the issue of what is desirable. As such, [they] necessarily contain a political dimension. [...] *Critical* theories are theories that more or less comprehensively challenge the existing social order" (Keucheyan 2013: 2). This is precisely why Williams (1983) called his keywords text a "vocabulary" and not a dictionary. Williams was not making a case against dictionaries, but rather arguing for an elaboration of the concepts that we commonly use to make sense of complex social and cultural conditions of life (see Williams 1983: 17). The words in his vocabulary of culture and society are those that involve *ideas and values*, and these are the kinds of words that we "fight" over. As Higgins (2021: 90) notes "Keywords are best understood as both the stake and the site of conflicts over meaning in, and the consequent possibilities for the understanding of, a social order".

Parker (2017: 7-8) describes how he "chose" the 50 words and what method he used to discuss each keyword as follows:

> So, this is how I put the book together. I noticed when an unfamiliar word appeared from the Black feminist movement, for example, and how my comrades struggled to make sense of it, and how

> they reframed it in their old political language. Then I would use that word in a way closer to how it was meant to operate, but instead of simply explaining it I would put it to work on a different topic. Then we could see better what uses it has, how it takes us forward in understanding what is going on, and creates alliances. This book is composed from an accumulating set of "keywords" that were originally posted online. I got feedback from inside groups and from those who still shun revolutionary parties, and gathered suggestions for new terms, until I accumulated fifty of them.

He importantly adds that he did not critique the words, but rather was concerned to 'engage constructively with them, to show how they work' (Parker 2017: 8).

The collection of 50 keywords, arranged alphabetically, is bookended by an introductory memoir of Parker's political history as well as his method of selecting the keywords, and is concluded by an analytical mapping of a 100 years of keywords located in important historical and political eras. Parker keeps to his word in each entry when he shows how the chosen keyword is used and then applies it to some practical, and usually political, context. It is not possible, nor appropriate, to discuss a range of the keywords that Parker selects, but rather to point to the inventive way he discusses each entry. For example, the entry for "agency" starts off with a very brief statement or "definition" saying that, "Agency tries to name individual and collective action, action which may be either isolated or, better, connected with change" (Parker 2017: 19). He then puts to work the notion of agency in discussing the suicide of a Dalit student (Rohith Vemula) at the University of Hyderabad, and the ensuing protests that this invoked against the right-wing nationalist government of Narendra Modi's BJP.

While some of Parker's entries might strike readers in southern Africa as a little unusual as keywords in revolutionary politics, this would be an unfair criticism as he is not writing for a southern African audience, but for a European audience as Parker himself is a British Marxist academic and political activist. This is not to suggest that his choice of keywords is parochial as he puts each entry to work with a myriad of international(ist) examples and contexts. He is not unaware of the difficulties in the choice of words in his text, and this would apply to any keywords approach that is trying to map a complex political terrain. Parker (2017: 280) points to this problem when he writes, "I hope you will disagree with the terms I have chosen and marked as 'keywords' and with the way I have mapped them. I have not been able to argue in detail for each of them here or to show why they can be linked together in the clusters I have described". He then makes a very interesting and challenging further point about the keywords he has chosen and described when he says,

> I have not been as clear as I wished, but in some cases the issue
> of clarity is precisely part of the problem I am addressing here.
> Our different theoretical traditions of explanation and, more
> importantly, our different conceptions of socialist politics cut up
> the world in different ways. We cut it up in language and we use
> keywords in distinctive ways in order to do that (Parker 2017: 280).

The challenge as I see it is in thinking about what keywords would we assemble in
this country as a way of helping us be more precise in our political deliberations,
both practically and theoretically. The greater difficulty in South Africa at the
moment seems to be the disparate nature of the left and the seeming absence of
any shared view of the nature of a future society or programme of action outside
of criticism of the ruling ANC government. The project that the **Platform** initiative
has set itself is an attempt to encourage critical conversations about concepts and
theories that might allow us to think utopianly about the kind of society we would
be prepared to fight for and build. Given the current state of the disintegration
of the social fabric and the forces at play that seem hellbent on keeping the
kleptocratic classes in power, it is easy to become demoralised and nihilistic about
the alternatives. And yet as Unger (2009: 1) reminds us, "The world suffers under
a dictatorship of no alternatives. Although *ideas* all by themselves are powerless
to overthrow this dictatorship we cannot overthrow it *without ideas*" (emphases
added). On this score, Shireen Hassim (2021) adds a new word for us to consider
in our politics and in our thinking about creating a decent and *caring* society,
namely *care*. In discussing the debates about care Hassim (2021: 57) notes that
debates "on how to recognise and value care influenced the emergence of a
politics of care. In the political domain care has been tied to notions of citizenship,
where care for others is positioned as a core democratic quality. Making care a
part of arguments about democracy itself had some success". Hassim further
suggests that by making care a keyword in our political discussions we are liable
to think about how relationships between people and within institutions could be
different based on practices of care. She ends her article with a call to add some
words that she feels should be part of our vocabulary of keywords, and writes,
"Creating societies that are less hierarchical is a matter of creating new forms of
human relationships; in this respect we need to add dignity and fairness to the
lexicon of radical keywords" (Hassim 2021: 63).

The possibilities of adding keywords to our lexicon for a radical politics are
endless, but let me suggest at least one in the context of this discussion. Martin
Hägglund (2020) in an important recent text where he develops an elaborate
argument for what he calls a commitment to secular faith and spiritual freedom,
grounds his idea of the secular in the notion of *time*, and especially the *finite time*
that humans have on earth. According to Hägglund the idea, or rather reality, that

our time is limited, is finite, positions us as fragile beings and beings who know we are going to die. And death holds us in a relationship of mutual care for each other. Hägglund doesn't spell out in detail the practical political implications of this, but it strikes me as having profound implications for a *politics of care* at a local level.

Besides developing keywords and concepts to help us think about our current conjuncture and how we might best analyse the political predicament of our time, we need to reflect on the history of our struggles and the concomitant theories of emancipation. Keucheyan (2013: 7) puts it bluntly when he states: "In the beginning was defeat. Anyone who wishes to understand the nature of contemporary critical thinking must start from this fact". This is a similar point that Ronald Aronson (1983) made when he argued that any politics based on hope in the future needs to confront the dialectics of disaster of the past. The past disasters would include world historical events – the Holocaust, the Vietnam war, South Africa's apartheid – and the theories that tried to explain these events.

Keucheyan maps some timelines in his attempt to make sense of the defeat of critical thinking. His first periodisation (1956-1977) includes the emergence of the New Left around 1956, "the year of the Suez crisis and the crushing of the Budapest uprising by Soviet tanks" (Keucheyan 2013: 7). The second periodisation is the defeat of critical thinking between 1977-1993, and especially "inaugurated" in 1989 by the fall of the Berlin Wall. He then presents us with three historical trajectories that end in the 1989 defeat of critical theory. The first option for a periodisation "consists in arguing that what ended in 1989 was a cycle begun in 1956 by the Egyptian and Hungarian crises and the ensuing reactions of the radical Left" (2013: 8). The second option for a periodisation that ends in 1989 dates back to the Russian Revolution of 1917 or the 1914 war. And extending even further back in time is a "third possibility ... in believing that 1989 ended a cycle initiated at the time of the French Revolution of 1789" (2013: 8). So, Keucheyan concludes, "Three beginnings – 1789, 1914-1917, 1956 – for one ending: 1989" (2013: 9). The point of these periodisations is to simultaneously map world historical events with the critical social theories that emerged at the time to account for the changes in social and political relations, and to assess their explanatory efficacy. In short, what theories survived the eruption of dramatic historico-political events, and what new theories and concepts were needed to explain the changing social order.

In a similar way to the historical mapping of Keucheyan, Parker (2017) ends his keywords text with a historical mapping of concepts indicating both certain continuities and ruptures over time. Significantly, his periodisation is very similar to that of Keucheyan. The periods that Parker identifies for his three cluster diagrams of keywords are: Keywords before 1917; Keywords after 1917, and the

fifty years thereafter, hence to 1967; and Keywords after 1967, or Keywords now. Parker is not suggesting that the keywords that he has identified for each historical period are fixed, and instead is concerned to demonstrate the dialectical relation between the concepts (or keywords) and the social worlds of which they are a part: a part of the problem and a part of the explanation.

The 'mapping' approaches of both Keucheyan (2013) and Parker (2017) are complex conceptual attempts critically to interrogate the keywords we use in political discourse in the hope of refining our vocabularies and practices of social transformation. Might it not be a challenge for some social historian of ideas to try a similar conceptual mapping of critical and radical keywords since 1948 in South Africa? Although not being an historian myself, some time periods suggestively come to mind:

1948-1960 – the National Party victory to the Sharpeville massacre;

1960-1976 – the repressive and 'quiescent' decade until and the event of Soweto 1976;

1973-1989 – the 'Durban moment' and strikes of 1973, and the decade (1980s) of resistance and heightened political struggle against apartheid;

1990-2000 – the end of apartheid and the optimism with the birth of democracy;

2001-2017 – neoliberalism, State capture, and endemic corruption;

2017-2022 – the Ramaphosa presidency and the tragedy of Covid.

It would be fascinating and elucidatory to see what key political concepts (and theories) were in operation during these historical periods, both as an intellectual exercise and a critique of political strategies adopted at the time. As Parker (2017: 264) reminds us, "revolutionary theory is articulated in language, and how we describe the world has consequences for how we think we can change it".

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