A DAY FOR CHRIS TILLEY: REFLECTIONS ON THE PERFORMANCE OF ACADEMIC LIFE

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This morning I was online at a gathering of colleagues, friends, former students, to reflect upon the life and work of Chris Tilley who died earlier this year [Link].

Appreciative memories; what remains; hindsight and legacy; influences.

There were the regular, standardized, and orthodox accounts of Tilley’s part in the theory debates of the 70s and after: positivism and its discontents in the social sciences and humanities. Some spoke of his academic writing, some recounted anecdotes, others presented their own research that had benefited from his influence.

Chris Tilley with Tor in about 2008.

A question in my thoughts – What remains of an academic life?

His passing in March has prompted me to reconsider the qualities and potential of academic *labor*, and what I now see with hindsight as the deepest foundation of his academic life.

People first – for whom we work

An academic melancholy. The percentages may vary (between 70% and 90% for the arts and humanities), but it is very clear and uncontroversial that most academic research is never cited (we might harbor hope that no citation does not mean no reading). Do we need the figures? Witness the experience in any university library – the miles of academic texts, testimony to life sentences of academic labor, and most of which, yes, will be hardly read. Is this what we work for?

Bruno Latour made the case (in his *Science in Action* 1987) that academic writing may seek citation, but is designed *not* to be read. One might challenge the assumption that close reading is the complement to academic authorship if we acknowledge that the apparatuses of scholarship, including style and citation, are to assure any reader that they need not read too closely to accept what is offered in the way of synopsis and conclusions. In taking up an academic text one might note a tight style that anticipates questions and critique and offers sufficient qualification and conditional context ("only if these conditions are met will what is proposed be a candidate for approval") to justify a quick perusal rather than a close reading. I have suggested in a recent essay on social theory in archaeology that much academic debate is organized around summarizing labels ("isms", positions, approaches, paradigms) that reduce and simplify, without the need for close reading and commentary [Link].

Another way of expressing this is to hold that what matters in the pragmatics of the academy is not so much what we write, but the way we act. This is more than McLuhan's "medium is the message"; it is about the performance of scholarship.

Tilley cut quite a distinctive character in his academic drama. Today we heard much of this character, his persona. Mike Rowlands even talked of him as an archetype – the trickster, the disruptive eccentric (an Odysseus of material culture?). Tilley had markedly apparent and negative attitudes towards authority and institutions – suspicious, refusing, and skeptical. This was a key component of his dramaturgy, and it was by no means all positive – all who knew him experienced his stubbornness, oftentimes curmudgeonly behavior. His persona involved the way he dressed ("never an ironed shirt"), the way he addressed you (anecdotes of his dry English humor).

And Tilley came to stand, literally, for embodied cognition – drawing on all one's faculties, cognitive, sensory, evaluative, in a forever searching, peripatetic, interpretive stand towards research (look here, notice that, what happens if you focus all your attention on this matter rather than that?). We heard about how he led inspiring student field trips. His paradigm was field walking, restless probing and questioning in repeated returns to fields of interest, on foot, grounded. We even heard how he had offered heart-felt advice on choice of footwear for a coastal field project!

One might call this an academic *habitus* – attitudes, gestures, dispositions, manners, modes of behavior and modes of engagement with objects of interest as well as with colleagues, students, others.

Tilley modeled a certain package of behavior, a *habitus* encompassing certain values, a distinctive academic mission and vision. While he would perhaps not like to acknowledge it (an ironic aspect of the trickster archetype), it is clear to me that Tilley played a marked role of academic leadership. I have heard this in many responses to his passing – how he led the way in opening space for others to explore, his work granting permission, his position and standing backing up his encouragement and exhortations to probe and question. I am reminded of how in the early days of our collaboration our progressive mission as outsiders was to raise the bar on standards of academic debate – that one might spread the wings of adventurous research.

Tilley's energy was untiring. His prolific projects and productivity signal this, though, again, it is the many anecdotes of his vitality that strike me. To me, they concern the *ergonomics* of academic labor.

At its conceptual base, ergonomics is about the regulation, disbursement and consumption of labor, work-as-energy. Energy management. We all know of colleagues, of administrative procedures, of bureaucratic requirements that sap energy, leave us drained. We all also know of circumstances and opportunities that energize and motivate. Tilley reminded us of this. Danny Miller spoke of the energy in Cambridge academics in the 70s and 80s, Esther Solomon spoke of a similar energy in the anthropology department at University College London at the end of the 90s.

Tilley so often left many of us feeling energized.

Generosity in diversity – internationalism

The constraints of academic discipline regulate our research, teaching, service and administration. Institutions offer infrastructures that enable and facilitate our work.

Tilley will remain part of the story of archaeology and anthropology at University College London. Faculty and students have been attracted to the academic programs where they were co-workers, where they were taught and supervised. Without this institutional infrastructure of a first-rank university, Tilley's energy would have been so much more dissipated and received much less validation; he would not have reached those he did.

Tilley joined the anthropology department in the 90s as part of the promotion of material culture studies. The concept of material culture has leant special coherence to an expanded interdisciplinary vision of anthropology. One might call it an academic *meme* in the way that the concept and its institutional mobilization has captured interest and aspiration across many fields concerned with artifacts and materiality while remaining within the domain of anthropology. It is notable that after 1992 Tilley rarely, if ever again, referred to his work as archaeology. The particular genealogy of the meme in the context of an expanded *anthropology* also accounts for the extraordinary lack of engagement and connection with another meme concerned with making and materiality – *design*, and, by implication, design studies.

Other memes through which Tilley directed his work into interdisciplinary fields were noted in the talks. Danny Miller mentioned "epistemology" – a concern with the character of knowledge building in the social sciences and humanities; "immersion" and "interpretation", mentioned by Julian Thomas and others as such a characteristic disposition in Tilley's work. These vital memes were the foundation for what some have described as his intellectual generosity. He ranged widely and even eclectically in a willingness to take on new ideas.

And he did markedly shift his own ideas and principles. A rigorous focus on debates in social and cultural theory was a characteristic of his earlier work that gave

way over the decades to immersive engagement and embodied cognition – a shift in emphasis in his academic habitus. This was part of his motility – his capacity and competency in being mobile, and in many senses literal and figurative, while also being grounded in a capacity to engage with the world shared by everyone – embodied cognition and a fluid, restless questioning.

Tilley stood above all for an open and universal disposition of human being-in-the-world-with-others – human species-being. This was what used to be a core tenet of the radical left – an internationalism that respected and celebrated diversity while acknowledging a common and universal interest in addressing the inequalities and injustices of globalist capitalism in late modernity – common interest shared through the very diversity that makes us human. Tilley offers us his way of doing just this – reconciling universals of human experience with the deepest of respect for the diverse textures of living in the local.