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# Activism and the Academy

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We often use editorials to fulminate about the state of the world, and offer suggestions as to how to make it better. I am not comfortable with either of those options for the moment (though I have done my share of both in the past). Rather, I would like to worry away at what seems to be an unexplored bifurcation in my political-academic life and, I suspect, in the lives of others. Put crudely, my anxiety centres on the fact that we tell ourselves and our students that everything is simultaneously political and theoretical, yet we seem to have a hard time connecting the two outside the university.

On the one hand, I am involved with a section of the academy – well represented by readers of and contributors to this journal – that likes to call itself such things as oppositional, critical, progressive, and even emancipatory. I have just come back from the San Francisco meetings of the Association of American Geographers. As usual, the sessions that I attended were thick with calls for challenging power and contesting hierarchy. I have been an active participant in these conversations, many of which I find useful and politically engaging. However, these battle cries, all too frequently, were in a language that made sense only to the cognoscenti. There was little if any talk of the political purchase of critical ideas beyond the walls of the classroom or the pages of academic journals.

At the same time, I have found myself increasingly embroiled in political activism outside the academy. This includes work around neighbourhood organizing

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and the democratization of the planning process, as well as active involvement in local community radio. I find this work personally satisfying and politically important. I know that there are many others who are similarly engaged.

I have been struggling with the linkages between the academic world and my community activism. The two clearly feel like they should be linked – many of my interests in one sphere fold over into the other. There is an assumption that what we do as academics will “make a difference,” although how and where are left unclear. So can I be an academic and an activist at the same time? If so, how? Asking this question, it seems to me, takes us to the heart of many knotty and unsettling questions that also relate to academic inquiry and critical theory. These include personal questions of self-validation (who gives a damn about academic angst anyway?), institutional dilemmas (our status as highly paid professionals in a rapidly proletarianizing world), and political or intellectual issues (what is our work supposed to *do*?).

There seems to be a notable lack of discussion about progressive activism and the academy. In geography we used to worry about it a lot more, as witnessed by early issues of *Antipode*, or the examination of “relevance.” Clearly, this is not something that worries the academic ‘mainstream,’ which in my discipline has long been intently activist, although the politics here range from the liberal to the downright reactionary, as geographers market themselves to capital or the state to facilitate their interventions in space.

So why the silence? Several reasons spring to mind. One likely option is that, for many, it is not an issue, given that many progressive academics seem to think that “activist” work is not really “intellectual” work. If people engage in “external” struggle, they do so “on their own time,” as citizens. Certainly this is something that tenure committees seem to believe. For example, my university carefully codes it as “community service” and weighs it as some small percentage of my total academic worth. That uncoupling of the categories “academic” and “activist” seems, for me, difficult to sustain. I was struck by the view of one friend, who noted that she did not see herself as an academic occasionally engaged in activism, but thought of herself as an activist who happens to be an academic. It could also be said that such a distancing evades a special charge – what Noam Chomsky once termed the political “responsibility of intellectuals.” Intellectuals in the academy enjoy a special privilege that comes from political liberty, access to information, and freedom of expression. “For a privileged minority”, Chomsky (1969, 324) insists, “Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth behind the veil of misrepresentation, ideology and class interest through which the events of current history are presented to us.” To neglect that responsibility is, at the very best, to acquiesce to oppression.

There are more recent reasons for this self-silencing, perhaps, as we come to embrace a postmodern humility, and caution against speaking for the Other. Although

such a prudence is laudable, it can also all too easily become a self-serving excuse for inaction. We certainly need to be alert to the perils of the academic colonization of community life, but we should also avoid any romantic assumptions of some authentically ‘pure’ field of activism. The activists I have encountered have all had complex, and occasionally self-serving, agendas. As we all occupy multiple subject positions, so activism is a field of contradiction and diversity.

My search for models of academic activism took me to Cornel West’s (1991) four models of “intellectual vocation.” Although all of these are in some senses personally appealing, none seems ultimately sufficient. Two of these centre on the politics of the academy. The first he terms the oppositional professional intellectual. This, drawing upon Foucault, directs us to do political work where we are, in the academy, perhaps through critiques of the production of knowledge and the regimes of truth, revealing the manner in which intellectual knowledges can constitute objectionable forms of subjectivity, for example. This is a struggle confined to the classroom, conference, or journal. A second, related position is that which centres on the building of critical groupings within the academy, using academic resources to build comradely networks, sustaining and nourishing oppositional intellectual communities. Both of these are appealing – I feel myself implicated in both – but both also seem insufficient. There is also an implicit (sometimes explicit) assumption that this is as far as we can go – perhaps because of the chilly climate of 1990s neoconservatism outside the academy. However, precisely because of this, failure to engage in ‘wider’ activism seems inexcusable.

So what of academic activism outside the university? West offers two models, the latter being the one he feels comfortable with. First is the position of the professional political intellectual. Here the call is for direct critical intervention by intellectuals in civic discourse and public debate. There are several examples of this in an American context, including Edward Said, Catherine MacKinnon, bell hooks, Alexander Cockburn, and Noam Chomsky. These interventions can take various forms, including those that centre on struggles over the creation of meaning (MacKinnon) or those that take on the more traditional role for the academic as tenacious documenter. Chomsky's (1969) injunction to “speak truth to power” falls into this latter category.

There can be no doubt of the mobilizing and inspirational role of such figures. Yet there are real problems with such strategies, as these individuals would, I am sure, recognize. First, there is the fact that to engage fully in public discourse, critical insight must pass through the screens and filters of the dominant media. I have done enough work in alternative media to have a clear sense of what that can do to ideas. Second, there is the personality cult that can go with exalted public position. Although this is something that can be consciously used by the intellectual – Chomsky comes to mind here – it can also lead to elitism and the reproduction of hierarchy.

Finally, West offers his preferred model of the intellectual as a critical organic catalyst. This requires that the academic function inside the academy in order to stay attuned to “the most sophisticated reflections about society and culture” (Chomsky, 1969, 34) whilst also being grounded outside the academy in progressive organizations. To be a critical organic catalyst, for West, is to “fuse the best of the life of the mind from within the academy with the best of the organized forces for greater democracy and freedom from outside the academy” (Chomsky, 1969, 35).

Again, this seems engaging at some levels. The idea of a “double grounding” is attractive, for example. However, it seems distant from much of the activism that I have engaged in. The divide between the academy, with its “life of the mind,” and the “organized forces” outside the academy, seems difficult to sustain. At its worst, it implies an elitist model of community groups as the instruments of activism, rather than its subjects. Not only are many of the community folks I have worked with leery of the academy and of academics – often for good reason – but the life of the mind is often a lot healthier in many of the community settings in which I have found myself. Also, the role I have been asked to play – if I am a self-identified academic – takes many and different roles. My supposed position as an “impartial academic” means that one group I have worked with has used me as a strategic mouthpiece, given that individuals feared the consequences of speaking out publicly for themselves. In other cases, it is the material resources of the university – data, libraries, contacts – that people seek through me, rather than critical insight.

Yet critical insight is an undeniably powerful political resource. This does not mean that academics are not the only ones with that insight, of course – there are still many organic intellectuals out there. Yet there is still space for progressive academics to offer useful contributions; perhaps by offering theoretical narratives or conceptual framings for local events.

But I am still left with a search for an alternative model, one that navigates between the opposed perils of academic elitism and political disengagement. How can we contribute to and learn from progressive struggles without reinforcing the hierarchies of privilege, silencing those with whom we work? What can I offer? What do grass roots activists stand to lose from such an exchange? Does my status and economic power necessarily create distance? Is our role that of catalyst, facilitator, or student? How much of my angst entails a quest for self-validation or ‘holier-than-thou’ status? How much of ourselves are we willing to put on the line, given an institutional system that rewards docility and obedience?

## References

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