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‘I Could Only Do Wrong’: Academic Research and DiY Culture

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Our position is that of combatants between two worlds – one that we don’t acknowledge, the other that does not yet exist (Raoul Vaneigem 1981, 88).

Introduction

Notwithstanding the need to apply our critical faculties to what takes place within our own institutions (Castree 1999), the desire of many academics to rise to the challenge of making some kind of ‘difference’ beyond the academy and yet still to be rooted within it remains very strong. While this desire is broadly true for academics across the political spectrum, it is a concern that seems to tax particularly those of us from the ‘left’, as broadly defined. This group are the ‘radicals’ of this chapter.

One way into exploring the pitfalls, problematics and potentials of taking up this challenge is to examine closely the experiences of those who have tried to do so. This, to some extent, would also help to bridge Castree’s (1999) dualism between radicalism ‘out there’ (the wider world) and radicalism ‘in here’ (the academy). One could undertake a critical and reflexive evaluation of one’s own practices, a strategy apparent in a number of chapters in this volume. Alternatively, a sympathetic critique of the trials and tribulations of high profile radical academics can be undertaken, drawing also on the growing literature concerning the ‘crossing between the locations of academia and activism’ (Routledge 1996, 399). This is the approach I take in this paper. It has four main sections. First, I outline some recent experiences of two radical academics who have researched and

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commentated on what has come to be known as 'DiY culture'² in a range of media. In spite of seemingly being well connected to the groups with whom they critically engage, their reception by them has often been quite hostile. Second, whilst interpreting the experiences of the first academic, I discuss how a number of 'committed' academics have sought to balance and reconcile activism with their academic work. Third, interpreting the second academic, I adopt a more theoretical perspective which shows up both legitimate reasons why even the careful balancing acts performed by those in the previous section may not be enough to assuage critics. I conclude with a call for academics both to assert a particular critical role for their 'profession' within society and to remain committed.

A tale of two Georges

George McKay is now Professor in English and American Studies at the University of Central Lancashire (McKay 2003). He has researched and written widely on 'radical culture'. His best known publications are *Senseless Acts of Beauty – Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties* (1996) and the edited collection *DiY Culture – Party and Protest in Nineties Britain* (1998b). Both books are published by the respected radical publisher Verso and feature on many of our reading lists. McKay is involved with the movements he studies, too, describing himself as having been a 'punk, anarchist activist, squatter, painter and decorator and jazz musician' (McKay 1996, back cover) in his time. Yet, in spite of both this pedigree and the academic recognition he has received from his peers, writing a few years back in the *Times Higher* he reflected in quite negative terms:

While we were great at sitting around talking problems through, today's activists altogether prefer doing things. In fact, few talk of 'demonstrations' any more, but of 'actions' and 'blockades'. ... [T]heir activism has a new name – DiY culture. ... Coming from an older generation and, worse, being seen as an ex-activist, I could only do wrong as I embarked on academic research into DiY culture (McKay 1998c, 20-1).

For the present paper, the crucial part of this quote is the last sentence, as it reflects the response to his work by many within the movement(s) he has studied. This is immediately clear from two reviews of *Senseless Acts of Beauty*. These ultimately contrast in emphasis, reflecting a divide within activism that I return to later.

The first review is anonymous and taken from *Do or Die* (Anon. 1997), the more-or-less annual collection of 'voices from Earth First!'. The review starts badly, the first sentence being 'The title is offensive' (Anon. 1997, 145), taking the expression 'senseless acts of beauty'³ all too literally in fact. More significantly, however, the review goes on to bemoan the book's 'dense, laboured text', since this represents 'an inappropriate way to chronicle people and ideologies who shun analysis and constantly re-invent themselves

² DiY culture can be defined as 'a youth-centred and -directed cluster of interests and practices around green radicalism, direct action politics, [and] new musical sounds and experiences... a kind of 1990s counterculture' (McKay 1998a: 2).

³ Anne Herbert, a writer in California for the *Whole Earth Review*, coined this expression in 1982. 'Random kindness and senseless acts of beauty' were surprise acts performed for others with no apparent reason but the kindness in their hearts (Perry 2003).

ahead of the state and academia' (145). Notwithstanding these grandiose claims for the DiY movement, the principal concern seems to be the way a 'drab', boring order has been imposed on DiY culture. Thus, the book is described as lacking the 'joy, fun and creativity' that would be present if written by, as the reviewer puts it, 'ourselves' (145). Thus, although sympathetic to the (partial) coverage of the author, the reviewer ultimately dismisses McKay as an outsider, the only evidence really being that he is an academic.

The second review takes a very different tone. It is taken from *Aufheben*, a radical Marxist based journal (McKay 1996). Again, the review is anonymous. Besides indicating a number of factual errors in the book, the principal criticism is that throughout 'symbols appear more important than the social relations that bear them' (Anon. 1996, unpaginated source). In other words, the (political) practices of DiY culture are neglected in favour of ideas and symbols as the material is rendered 'fodder for the cultural studies industry'. Again, it is McKay's position as an academic that seems to be the problem or, more pertinently, his status as a 'cultural studies' academic. Thus, unlike the *Do or Die* review, McKay's intention of producing an academic study from within the DiY movement is *not* disparaged but it requires, for *Aufheben*, a systematic and scholarly rigour not present in this book, which is too impressionistic. Too much of the author's own, inevitably partial, engagement with DiY culture seems to be a key perceived problem.

McKay, of course, is not the only academic who has been criticised by the very movement with whom they have considerable (critical) sympathy. Another good case is that of George Monbiot (2003). Besides being a regular media pundit and columnist for the *Guardian* newspaper, Monbiot is an established scholar. With a background in Zoology and Social Anthropology, he describes himself as a writer, broadcaster and academic. He is currently Visiting Professor in Environmental Science at the University of East London and Honorary Professor at the Department of Politics, Keele University. He has published three 'investigative travel books', plus *Captive State: the Corporate Takeover of Britain* (Monbiot 2000a) and is a UN Global 500 laureate.

Monbiot has been criticised from within the DiY movement on a number of occasions. However, I focus here on the reaction to his criticism of the events that took place in central London on May 1, 2000. One event in particular was of most significance. This was the 'guerrilla gardening' action called by the radical anti-capitalist movement Reclaim the Streets (RTS) (Reclaim the Streets 2003). The event involved people gathering in Parliament Square, which is just outside the Houses of Parliament, digging up the grass on the square and planting it with flowers and other plants. As with RTS's actions generally, this was a symbolic action to highlight the necessity of reclaiming public space and greening the streets. Further details of this event do not concern us here except that, at around the same time as the guerrilla gardening action took place, various acts of vandalism took place in central London, notably in nearby Whitehall.

Monbiot took the opportunity in the *Guardian* a week later to launch an intemperate attack on RTS for their action on May 1st (Monbiot 2000b). In short, he declared that RTS had 'lost the plot' and become infiltrated by thugs and nutters, 'an association of incoherent vigilantes, simultaneously frivolous and menacing' (Monbiot 2000b, 4). He went on to suggest that planting seeds outside Parliament was a 'futile' action against capitalism, seemingly oblivious of the potential of Carnavalesque symbolic actions (Chesters 2000). RTS, for Monbiot, had also completely failed to explain their

actions to the general public but had instead remained arrogantly aloof. In summary, RTS were decried as being a 'part of the problem' not of the solution (Monbiot 2000b, 5).

Monbiot's assault on RTS and the guerrilla gardening action did not go down well amongst members of DiY culture. For example, he was accused by the editors of *Squall* magazine of taking the *Guardian's* 'thirty pieces of silver for an exaggerated kiss and tell onslaught against RTS' (Anon. 2000, unpaginated). Similarly, in the June/July edition of *Fight racism! Fight imperialism!* David Yaffe (2000) described Monbiot's 'scurrilous and pompous' article as 'the most shameful attack on the event' (Yaffe 2000, 9), worse than those of the tabloid press or right-wing commentators. Again, Yaffe links Monbiot's stance with his press status, describing it as 'self-serving': it allows Monbiot to write 'about the evils of corporate capitalism... without taking effective action to change things, and so avoid putting his own privileged position as a *Guardian* columnist on the line' (9). Crucially for my later analysis, Yaffe ties Monbiot's position in with a faith in the local state as the axis of progressive change. For Yaffe this is merely 'political theatre, a farce of ineffective, powerless, local bourgeois politics' (9).

Overcoming dualisms: the problem with George 1

Having outlined some of the trials and tribulations of the two Georges, the next task is to begin to understand just *why* they have provoked such fierce criticism. We start with George McKay.

In a paper in *Area*, Maxey (1999) reflects on his own position as both activist and academic (then a PhD student in Swansea), making particular reference to the way both positions have come together in the field for himself. With reflexivity, Maxey became aware of the very narrow way in which 'activism' has typically been constructed through a wide range of discourses, including the media, activist groups and academia. Overall, he feels that the resulting image of the activist and activism is extraordinarily exclusionary, with a stress on 'dramatic, physical, 'macho' forms of activism with short-term public impacts' (Maxey 2000, 200). Being unable to live up to this image serves to deter many like-minded people and ultimately helps to 'perpetuate society's dominant lines of oppression' (200). Maxey goes on to outline a more inclusive vision of activism based on a Gandhian Satyagraha, where one 'holds onto truth' over the long-term, undertaking strategic and contextualised actions (also see Maxey, this volume). He argues for greater recognition of our everyday production of the world and for an informed intervention in this production – as he says, we are 'all activists' and thus we can all be activists in some form or other.

Maxey's denial of activism as some form of exclusively bounded category also reflects a concern over the simplifying and reductive tendencies contained within dualistic ways of thinking. Dualism, an either/or logic with no option between the two, plays a central role in modern Western thought (Sayer 1989). From such a perspective, activism comes to be seen as an absolute state, with no alternative position other than non-activism. Such absolutism inevitably removes the majority of the population from activism's remit. Routledge (1996) has addressed this issue directly in a similar reflection to Maxey on his position as both academic and activist. Routledge bemoans the fact that the two states of activist and academic tend to be regarded as mutually exclusive, with the locus of the former being the 'lived moment' and that of the latter being the 'distanced' sphere of theory. Quoting Spivak, he regards this as a 'killing opposition' for both parties.

Routledge (1996) tries to overcome this killing opposition by seeking to place himself in a 'third space' between academia and activism. This space of critical engagement allows him to cross 'between the locations of academia and activism' (Routledge 1996, 399) through undertaking 'a simultaneous coming and going in a borderland zone between different modes of action' (406). The third space argument he draws upon here is that by neither seeing himself primarily as an activist nor as an academic he can be both, whilst at the same time gaining 'something' more through not being reduced to either side of a binary divide. However, taking the third space is not easy. For example, Routledge outlines some of the barriers to such a position faced by the academic – not least their workplace obligations and expectations. Indeed, Castree (1999) has commented on the conceit whereby activism is placed outside of the academy when there is still very much to be done inside to challenge the 'corporate university'. Overall, Routledge's account, whilst recognising the rewards of entering a third space, also suggests much of the difficulty of this task, especially for those of a less assertive and confident disposition.

Returning to the critiques of George McKay, I think we are now in a better position to understand them. In short, they both reflect the sorts of absolutist and dualistic ways of thinking that have been discussed by Maxey and Routledge. Specifically, McKay seeks both to position himself within a third space between activism and the academy, and to draw upon more diffuse ideas of both activism and academic work than is normally understood. In contrast, the critiques of *Senseless Acts of Beauty* operate within a more absolutist and dualistic framework.

The *Do or Die* reviewer adheres to a very limited idea of activism and does not appreciate how producing a fairly populist academic book such as this can also be seen as part of the movement. It is a form of activism, in other words, a status which McKay (1998d) himself notes when reviewing another book about DiY culture. McKay's study, whilst drawing out some of what I agree are the very real problems of DiY culture, is engaging and sympathetic and certainly has a role to play in countering more reactionary accounts of what is taking place. Just because he is not out on the front line, digger-diving, does not mean that he is to be dismissed. Besides his or her narrow definition of activism, the *Do or Die* reviewer also adheres to a very dualistic model of activism and the academy. McKay's middle (third space?) position is dismissed conclusively in the following sentence: 'A book claiming to chronicle and analyse our 'cultures' should be *one of two things*: a pure academic analysis, *or* a personal account of one person's adventures in subculture land' (Anon. 1997, 145, my emphasis). In short, McKay should stick to academic analysis as this is his profession.

The *Aufheben* review also gets caught within the activist-academic dualism. This reviewer though is much more sympathetic to academic research and seems to have a broader notion of what merits activism. This is to be expected, given the Marxist roots of the publication. However, the reviewer still seems uneasy with the idea that a study such as *Senseless Acts of Beauty* does not have to be *either* an academic study *or* a study based on practice within the DiY movement.

In summary, there are certainly legitimate criticisms to be made of *Senseless Acts of Beauty* but I feel that there are other issues at stake in the critiques considered which do little to help bridge the divide between activism and the academy. Specifically, a dualism between academic work and activism is all too pervasive and only serves to reinforce

overly narrow understandings of what constitutes activism. George McKay has fallen victim to this restricted vision. His book is assigned to the category 'academic' and attacked either for being inappropriate as it is academic or for not being academic enough.

Legislator or interpreter? The problem with George 2

The 'problem' with George Monbiot – as presented here – is more of a problem of the status and role played by his own discourse than of those of his critics. This can be addressed via a consideration of the actual role played by academics in society and their possible normative role with respect to radical political agendas. I draw here on Zygmunt Bauman's (1987, 1992) distinction between academics as 'legislators' or 'interpreters'.

The status of academics

The rise of modernity in the post-Enlightenment is linked by Bauman with the rise of the legislative academic. The modern state was keen to impose its universalistic and rationalistic vision on all aspects of everyday life. As a consequence, we saw the development of specialist departments, the gathering of detailed statistics, accounting techniques, etc. The modern state, however, was unable to develop and deploy these controls on everyday life on its own. On the one hand, this was because of a lack of experience and expertise. On the other hand, as quite a new formation, its legitimacy was still in question. For both of these reasons the state turned to 'men of science', heroic cultural symbols of the new age, who worked hand-in-hand with the state to mould and shape society. This was for Bauman the age of the academic as legislator.

This authoritative equality between the state and academics was not to last, however. The consequence was that academics lost a degree of their authority and privilege. Bauman links this to the move to a postmodern society, whereby the promised future mapped out by the academics no longer appears anything like certain. Academics' role as navigators towards the future is lost. In addition, the political technology of the state developed considerably to the extent that it no longer had such a dependence on intellectuals. Planning and social engineering were taken over by market forces. Even in the sphere of culture, the academic was bypassed: the state neither needed to control culture with a strong authoritative hand, nor would the public continue to defer to the cultural dictates of academics' 'good taste'. Academics were left high and dry. Whilst many embraced the new times and went with the flow, others remained within their own circumscribed worlds. A retreat from legislation also saw a retreat from activism more generally, notably from that which engaged with the world beyond the academy. After all, what was the point?

Bauman does not accept this situation and calls for a new role for academics. First, they can become 'interpreters' rather than legislators, which is more closely aligned to the epistemological foundations of postmodern society. As Smart (1993, 102) expresses it, postmodernity presents 'the prospect of living *without* securities, guarantees and order, and *with* contingency and ambivalence'. Interpretation involves 'communication between systems of knowledge enclosed within their respective stocks of knowledge and communal systems of relevance' (Bauman 1992, 22). The intellectual 'experts', whose task it is to achieve this communication, are required to possess 'a unique capacity to lift themselves above the communication networks within which respective systems are

located without losing touch with that ‘inside’ of systems where knowledge is had unproblematically and enjoys an ‘evident’ sense’ (22). Crucially, this is precisely *not* to promote a ‘heroic’ status for academics but to recognise their specialist skills, such as writing and other communication skills. Interpretation is necessary, not least because no one group should be regarded as having a privileged insight into its own history and existence.

Second, besides becoming ‘a translation service’ through interpretation, academics for Bauman should retain modernity’s ambition to improve society through reason. This has to be done within the constraints of a postmodern sense of continued and irreducible openness. Work by David Harvey (1996, 2000), with his attempts to negotiate between universality and particularity, and Iris Marion Young’s (1990) promotion of a unity of difference reflects this sort of reflexive modernist strategy.

Although personally agreeing with Bauman’s *normative* model, he is too quick to dismiss the role and status of academic legislation in today’s society. I do not consider the academic as legislator to be dead at all. The late Pierre Bourdieu made this very clear in one of his final books (Bourdieu 1998). Here, he posits neoliberalism as representing a deliberate ‘conservative revolution’ (Bourdieu 1998, 35), whereby conservative ideology has been brought back centre stage primarily by dressing it up in academic language, notably that of neo-classical economics, so as to make it appear natural and inevitable. As this description suggests, for Bourdieu, academics continue to play a key legislative role in promoting the globalised neoliberal project. They form a key part of the ‘state nobility [this very name hardly suggests a lack of authority], which derives its convictions of its legitimacy from academic qualifications and from the authority of science, especially economics’ (25). Bourdieu talks of a ‘chain of authorities’ (55) imposing neoliberalism upon the world. This chain ‘runs from the mathematician to the banker, from the banker to the philosopher-journalist, from the essayist to the journalist. ... These are people who exchange ideological services for positions of power’ (55).

Bourdieu’s idea of a chain of authorities can be extended to objects as well as people. It need also not be deliberate. There may be situations in which individual academics quite unintentionally serve specific political ends with which they are not in agreement. Using the metaphor of a chain, it is easy to imagine how this could occur (links in a chain, missing the bigger picture, etc.). Returning briefly to Bauman, he does recognise some retention of a legislative role by academics. However, this is a largely introverted affair. As he puts it, ‘if the ‘legislative’ role is retained ... it is confined to the intracommunal territory, to legislation from the ‘inside’ of a tradition’ (Bauman 1992, 19). Whilst this seems far too modest, the danger of diverting attention to such *internal* legislation is to neglect the role that these same players may play in the type of chain suggested by Bourdieu.

Monbiot as legislator

We can now return to George Monbiot and the furore that surrounded his critique of the guerrilla gardening action. The central question here to ask is *where* he is positioned as an academic in the framework just discussed. Monbiot came to be known in Britain initially through his role in establishing and being a spokesperson for The Land is Ours (see *The Land is Ours* 2003). Although valued by the group for his sharp and articulate character, which helped generate plenty of positive publicity for events such as the 1996

squat of derelict land on the banks of the Thames in Wandsworth, London (Halfacree 1999), his high profile also caused resentment. In short, Monbiot was attacked for adopting a leadership role within the DiY movement, a movement that prides itself (accurately or not) as being non-hierarchical (McKay 1998a). Indeed, Monbiot himself recognised problems stemming from being 'Loud, bossy and incapable of holding my tongue' (Monbiot 1998, 180) and he subsequently moved more into the background within *The Land is Ours*. He goes on to claim that this difficulty also pushed him further into journalism, which is where the recent problems are situated.

At first sight, Monbiot's prominence and personality may be expected to detract from a position as an interpretive academic. However, looking more closely this need not be the case. As an academic, he is bringing certain powerful skills to the DiY context, especially those of communication, and deploying them effectively. Indeed, given that he has a high profile *Guardian* column that is often quite unsparing in interpreting various strands of DiY culture for the liberal *Guardian* world, he has done a very good job. He is certainly an activist at least as much as McKay is. However, Monbiot's difficulties stem not just from his personality.

The key problem lies with Monbiot's tendency to slip into a legislative stance, whether intended or not. This legislative stance is not primarily externally orientated. Indeed, Monbiot has been quick to undermine any extra-territorial ambitions he might have. For example, in 1999 he was appointed to the Rural Sounding Board, an informal committee, but then promptly expelled from it for attacking the former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food as institutionally corrupt (Chapter 7, 2000). State co-optation clearly failed here. Instead, the key problem with Monbiot's *Guardian* article was its tendency to try to legislate *internally* within DiY culture. This is reflected in the style and content of a number of the points he uses to beat RTS (Monbiot 2000b):

- His assertion of a particular (and narrow) definition of non-violent direct action;
- The perceived lack of a coherent revolutionary programme;
- RTS's failure to maintain a dialogue with the press; and
- The dismissal of the guerrilla gardening action.

Crucially, these points did not come from the democratic perspective of an interpreter with specific skills but from someone legislating over the movement.

These assertions of problems within RTS were bound to raise hackles but this was made much worse by *where* the article was printed. It is here that internal legislation starts to move towards external legislation. Certainly, Monbiot's status as a *Guardian* columnist is a double-edged sword. Although promoting DiY culture most weeks in his column, such an assertive undermining of that same culture in the post May 1st article from someone who is supposedly a part of it can easily find itself located in a well armed chain of authorities dismissively critical of DiY culture. And in a supposedly sympathetic newspaper as well! This is especially the case when the discursive structure and emphases within the article focus on the same issues and priorities – the same agenda – as those of the more conservative press. There is no attempt to counter this hegemonic discursive structure. Thus, whether he likes it or not, Monbiot ultimately becomes entwined with issues of *external* legislation linked to the ideological agenda of the status quo.

In summary, Monbiot appears to have moved away in this article from a combination of critical interpretation to one of perniciously located internal and external legislation. In terms of internal legislation, as 'Colin' (2000) commented rather bluntly on the RTS web site: 'His [Monbiot's] type hate any dissent they don't control.' For external legislation, Ros Witcop (2000) put the critique as follows, again originally on the RTS web site: 'George Monbiot's condemnation of Reclaim the Streets ... was no more original than those in other newspapers. However, his claims that the May Day action was a 'futile' way to oppose capitalism ... does need a reply.' Monbiot puts his faith in a political system that is *explicitly rejected* by RTS, and the May action should be seen *explicitly* in this context – hence, the reluctance of RTS to address the press, etc. Thus, we also have Yaffe's particular rebuke of Monbiot for putting so much faith in the local political system. In addition, his article is located where it could cause maximum damage to the proselytising ambitions of DiY culture, being on one of its key margins. Hence, Monbiot's critics' particular dislike of his status as a *Guardian* contributor. Thus, I find Monbiot (2000c) himself rather naive in a subsequent email to RTS where he berates them for telling him that he should not have made his attack in the *Guardian*. After all, *who* did that article really serve, being located in such a place *and* adopting the ideal structure to achieve congruence with conservative chains of authority? As the Squall editors (Anon. 2000, no pagination, my emphases) expressed it with respect to the attacks made on RTS: 'The barrage of criticism... [was] staggering both in its *complicity with mainstream political strategy* and for the inanity of its pointless self-destruction.'

Conclusion: no easy choices

It does not finally matter *who* wrote what, but rather *how* a work is written and *how* it is read (Said 2001, 385).

The analysis presented here is orientated primarily around a limited and selective amount of output from two named academics. Yet, even with such restricted material, it should be clear that there are often no easy choices in deciding strategy and tactics for the balancing of academic research and activism. Of course, criticism is good, and should be constructive, but it can also be wounding. It can also be *interpreted* and this is what I have tried to do here through an academic lens. Post-structuralism has warned us how we are never fully in control of our textual and other products (see also Sibley, 1998, on the connection between knowledge and social control) but greater critical reflexivity can perhaps help us exert a little more control through recognising some of the ideological pitfalls identified here.

Finally, what of the author of this paper? Personally, I go along fully with seeing 'activism' as being more than just physical actions, and support searching for a third space between activism and academia. I also believe that, the division of labour in society being what it is today, 'academics' do have a relatively distinctive contribution to make through their 'expertise'. With Bauman, I support the adoption of an interpretative plus critical reflexive modernist orientation in our work. Rejecting any 'end of history' thesis and resisting the legitimisation of the present, there is still a world to be won, even if sometimes it does seem as if we can only do wrong.

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