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Academic activism

Pasts, presents and futures of critical psychology

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From my limited perspective, I have found that academic activism can be a source of delight offering a sense of connectedness that is rare in academic work. It is also daunting. Activism can be as frustrating as it is satisfying. Making power relations visible, for instance, can be perilous, a good idea.

Academic work – the day job – mainly involves some mix of research, publishing, teaching, and helping to run the university. On top of this, some academics get involved in 'activism'. The activists have multiple definitions but when people speak about activism they are generally describing interventions, outside the day job, aimed at bringing about social change of some sort. This can involve working with civil society organizations, or one's trade union, leading and participating in rallies, street marches, and strikes. At a workshop recently, one senior academic well known for his activism was asked how he managed to combine the myriad of possible pursuits. Tidy the talking and the writing perfect, he explained. I'm no guard of the other stuff. The talking and writing, he explained, involved his day job, which was teaching and research in social policy, involved in policy debates, presenting to politicians, and speaking to journalists. Over the years, he had intervened outside the university in which, through his research on whistleblowing in organizations, I have some understanding. I thus write this from the position, here to be clear others are much better at these things. But having been asked, I am happy to reflect on the experience and particularly the critical question given the day job is inevitably bound up in this work.

Universities tend to be academic activism, most of the time. Activists can be presented to onlookers as embrace of virtuous, particular kinds of behaviour. In an era in which academic institutions are increasingly accused of the opposite. Universities can package accounts of academic suffering relevant in short stories for inclusion in university annual reports, and insert the stories with a picture attached. Of course, the extent of university approval likely depends on what the activity involves. Because most of academic work is not office chair work but is encouraged. Organizing in direct opposition to the university itself is probably not so favoured. Taking that challenge against gender pay inequalities in a university promotion, protesting the mass redundancies of influential scholars because they do critical work, these are not the same as being a good sort who does good work in the community. Or, if one is struggle-minded a better world, we clearly need a better understanding of what activism entails than that offered by the university. Where to begin?

Being useful

Being useful is perhaps an obvious place to start if activism involves attempting to work towards social change. This is not something we academics are always great at. But sometimes, if we are lucky, invitations to be useful arrive. For the past seven years, I participated in trade union activism, civil society organization members and campaigners from different countries have been working hard to bring about significant legal change in their home countries. It is well often much stronger protection for workers who speak out about abuses of power in their organizations. I followed this activity with interest albeit at a distance. First, the people involved were people of a certain grade, this was not given the mix of ideologies and beliefs inevitable present. Second, I was busy with my own research and teaching and I was a bit of a coward. Third, I had to compromise their positions, to work with difficult people to agree to disagree. And then the work began, writing to politicians, writing again, travelling to where the politicians would be, waiting, most exciting, knocking, travelling again, getting nowhere, and then the rallies and hoping they would be kept. But the group succeeded, a promising new law across all 27 Member States in due for December 2018. It could be not be perfect, there will be the inevitable flaws in the statutes and flaws in the implementation. But it is a significant start. Protections for workers in the EU and UK are talking about Brexit.

This achievement is important to say the least. It appeared doubly so from my perspective as an academic with a permanent job, most of those involved in activism and activism have had to do their travelling and their waiting in between raising funds for their organization's survival next year. In what cases, and how, is it useful for academics to be involved? I'm not sure. I am talking local this or the national radio, a commentator on a TV documentary, providing a quote for the newspaper, or writing an op-ed piece. Sometimes, these activities. It all felt uncomfortable at the outset, but I learned two things quite quickly. First, most of the activity involves waiting and hoping for the opportunity to be useful. Second, the time between waiting and starting to be the person giving time alone, a name has been given to the organization, the information immediately. The article is going to press tomorrow. Any other plans you might have need to be shelved. Someone else may step in. If I did not be perfect, there will be the inevitable flaws in the statutes and flaws in the implementation. But it is a significant start. Protections for workers in the EU and UK are talking about Brexit.

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Useful research?

Our research itself can be useful. I recently spoke to a whistleblower in Ireland whose story was in the news. He had made a protected disclosure – a whistleblower statement – about dangerous breaches of safety at a well-known organization. He was now being punished and excluded by management, driven to publicise his story in the news media. As often happens, he was finding it difficult to conceive of a career outside this institution, a career which he had been fully vocalized by an independent inquiry. Your articles and books were very helpful, he said, in helping him to understand what was happening to him. He was not the first, he said. But did tell me what they said. It turns out that his case, which I had not heard of but which social activists in her youth, found the parts that attempted to explain what happens when organizations try to victimize against individuals who speak out. Knowing that I have been helpful for this couple making sense of what they were going through. They normalized – or at least explained – something about the bizarre and painful situation in which, having done the right thing, in the public interest, they were suffering along with their children. The articles and books I had written were being used by people who were experiencing something very real, intensely, and the fit again seemed to be inherently unfair. Knowing that I could do things like this expect for it is worth remembering that our work can, now and then, make a difference to people in difficult situations. It can help show these things to a new light. There is not the preserve of academics, it's just that we go about it more. Chatting to others who have spoken out, it is clear that stories of the many other people who have blown the whistle in organizations across the world, are a source of comfort. Other whistleblowers have tales too, have mortgages, experience financial struggles. Others have found themselves pretty much on their own, suffering from stress. The research can offer a sense of connection.

The numbers we produce can also be useful. While theory can help whistleblowers to some degree, there are often more immediate, pressing problems to deal with. Money is one, especially when one has lost the capacity to earn any, through the common practice of whistleblower blacklisting. I feel somewhat sheepish recalling a series of interviews ten years ago, for a research project on 'whistleblower blacklisting'. The interviews were fascinating and was stun off at the end of the discussion, my interlocutor would ask with whether I had some money they could borrow. Of course, I had none. I was a university lecturer on a precarious career. Now had they managed to? they wanted to know. These moments rendered my investigation into subjectivities in a different light. Frankly it felt a bit obnoxious. This spoken colleagues and I to carry out survey research into the financial and other consequences of speaking up, which attracted funding in 2008. We were given assistance of how the resulting report is being used. We heard from the lawyers of Dawn Primarolo, a US immigration services issue and whistleblower who spoke up about detained immigrants' repeated exposure to COVID-19, the carrying out of hypocrisies and other problems associated with immigration services. Dawn's supporters have used the report in drawing support for her ongoing case, and we learn about this through the media. The report has been used in parliamentary debates, including discussion of discriptive statistics. The simple points are not stating – whistleblowers suffer financially, and here is the price tag – do not, I am now learning, always sit well with academic journal reviewers, possibly because of this very simplicity. But the work found to be useful. I do not mention these examples to promote the study but rather to highlight another example where the activism felt does not always sit so well with the doing of the day job – in this case, publishing in highly ranked journals.

So, activism seems to be about being useful. But let's be honest here. The content is important, but the source perhaps even more so. What you say on the radio, what you share with people struggling against organizations, what you calculate from your survey results – a large part of the usefulness of these efforts is the fact that the message arrives to its recipient with the stamp of the university on the letterhead. In practical terms, it is the marshalling of the influence and authority held by the university that offers a valuable scaffold to the points you make. It is easy to forget, in the day-to-day ambitions and challenges we encounter within the walls of these places, how to those outside, universities still represent – more or less – solidity, longevity and authority. Of course, this is a generalization and there are many exceptions to it, and it is also the for when people are asked which professions are the most trustworthy, nurses and journalists, government representatives and CEOs. Controversies and ambiguities notwithstanding, credibility is a currency in which academics are rich. The academic is – not only – but to a large part, a conduit of credibility. Our activities and artefacts can enable symbolic support to flow from an institution that is, at its best, a place of learning, to individuals and small groups who struggle alone and who could use the help. Working with colleagues in my area, we try to achieve possible to share the platform, inviting whistleblowers as guest lectures (partly, as honorary academics, co-authors and researchers, offering a forum to speak where possible. Here needs doing, of course, but it is something.

Dissolve the boundaries

So if activism involves drawing on one's fortunate position to provide bits of usefulness, what else? Well, it involves dissolving boundaries, doesn't it? Or, is it on top of an already overloaded schedule? It appears to draw people, but why?

The question of why we get involved in this kind of thing has been explored at length. Ideas of material obligation are put forward, often accompanied by philosophical exhortations that we must depart from a narrow individualistic worldview. We must instead fulfil our responsibilities to other people in a reciprocal manner. I will help you because I know I will help you in turn'. But there is also a psychological dimension to this. Some people who become involved in activism are a psychoanalytical understanding that foregrounds the mutual constitution of subjects who come into being as responsible from the other. Such approaches highlight our intervening even before birth through material connections inspired by Donna Haraway, and connections made through language as highlighted by postmaterialist feminist theorists from Judith Butler to Jessica Benjamin. Drawing on these ideas, organization scholars problematize – or at fundamental level – the self-other boundary and the alternative of individualism that makes today's academic work. As academics we are human, that is, we are embedded, intertwined, implicated in relations that feel we other perceived we are not. Our embedded academic selves are thus latently concerned with the suffering of others, and we are implicated in it, and we are implicated in others we encounter in our work. The extending exists because, simply put, without these others, we cannot be. The academic writes within a relational, ethical, matricial space where we connect to the other... And so we get hurt when the other is hurt?, we should therefore write and act – from this position (Fotaki and Harris, 2018: 238).

This helps to make sense of academic activism, at least my limited experience of it. It seems that we do it because we are connected to those we encounter in our work, and we are implicated in the self. It comes from a sense of boundaries dissolving. Sociologists have discussed this over years of academic practice. Activism is so very different to the rest of what we do, at least in much of the social sciences. The publishing side tends to be all about the individual, the academic authors the paper. The professors get the grant, and if others are involved in bidding she is asked to quantify the specific value of her contributions. The research is for the theory, a singular focus of attention. Academics can seem so totally set up for individual attainment, for competition, for self-aggrandizement. Its structures and cultures shape the subjectivities and set in a very way. Even critical management studies, an area focused on organizations, can be a place where individual academics can be competitive with each other and surely make sense to stick together given the risk of capitalism and its logic of individual catastrophe, and all that. The phenomen of activism work is partly to do with how odd the day job can feel sometimes. Sometimes the solidarity shown in activism, by those EU partners campaigning for legal change for instance, leaves me in awe. There is a desire to be part of this. Academic activism – the pieces parts – removes the actor from the subject of the work and places them the sentence. The author fades into a sea of activity. Her value now stands in direct proportion to the extent to which the attention she has made can be used by others.

Of course, as anyone familiar with a psychoanal approach will note, it is not all attentiveness, light and celebration of connection. Somewhat awkwardly, academics are often engaged in the everyday mechanism that accompanies human existence. We go around upholding, bolstering and defending the self, same as everyone else. What we may tell ourselves is commendable altruism is simply part of this ongoing project. We are others drawn to research topics that – somehow – do something to us. That gives us something to which we feel connected. Sometimes strongly to find my own voice. Feeling it easier to stay silent. I am not proud of displays of cowardice, but I am not the only one, I know that. Sometimes, I'm in a place where I am actually display a hackneyed, who always act on their principles. It is desirable for me to be around people like this, I needed? Does it, and I can feel how painful this sounds as I write, do something for me. As long as the margins – looking on, writing, speaking about the people who fit through to showing out an op-ed or too a fantasy that I am making a difference? Likely. Can I live with that? I guess it might be this question that keeps me going back. If we are honest, it is not wholly unlikely that a stationing of guilt, a desire for elusive solidarity, a glow of second-hand honesty, all colour this kind of endeavour. But I digress. Perhaps that is ok.

Bring back the boundaries, please

All this said, sometimes I feel nostalgic for my boundaries. They offered protection from what can be a chaotic new world. Writing opinion pieces, and engaging going on the radio or television, are activities that put your name out there, even a little. They effectively signal – to others, to the world, to oneself – that one is a person who does such things. Academic activism enhancement. Have others are supportive, creating connections on social media, sharing useful information and generally remaining goodwill. And there are always some people who find what you doing and saying highly offensive, and they will make sure you know about it, and you can be targeted. Even benign articles on new laws can yield interesting responses. One message on Twitter informed me that my recent book was less useful than a taxidermous website, to which he'd presumed it was my helpfully provided a link. It was quite difficult to figure out whether he was being sarcastic or not, but I felt quite sure that he was not. Sometimes, I feel like I'm cheek is not rolling. If you have been voted, you are not working hard enough. I feel like I'm cheek is not rolling. Sometimes, I feel like I'm cheek is not rolling. Academic activism is a complex phenomenon. It can be a source of delight, it can be a source of misery, it can be a source of delight, it can be a source of misery. It can be a source of delight, it can be a source of misery. It can be a source of delight, it can be a source of misery. It