



Reflections on Scholarship and Activism

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Nik Heynen, the Interventions editor at *Antipode*, asked me to reflect on how scholars can also be activists. My own work, he said, reflected a dual preoccupation with activism and scholarship, so he thought my comments might be useful to others trying to take this path.

In fact, many people enter the academic world determined to become scholars because they want to be both scholars and activists, a trend that became especially evident in the aftermath of the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s in which many young people had participated. The motivating idea is that academic work can be useful in ameliorating the big problems of our society, problems such as inequality and insecurity, or militarism and imperial overreach, or the corruption of democratic procedures, or ecological degradation. And a good many academics try to use their scholarship to work on these problems and to influence policy solutions. Accordingly, they write reports about social and political problems that can be drawn upon by policy makers, or they provide testimony for city councils or congressional committees, or they may even advise presidents. Or they try to influence public opinion by writing op-eds, or working in sections of academic associations that have a political and an activist bent. Or they write articles and books analyzing the workings of economic or political or military elites at the top end of society, or the dynamics of labor markets and poorer communities at the lower end.

These academics want their work to be politically relevant (“relevant” was the code for scholar-activism in the 1970s.) They see themselves as part of the political left, and they want to make a contribution to left reform efforts. This sort of politically oriented scholarly activity has a long history in an American social science with its roots in the progressive era, and it often has worthwhile consequences. Social scientists have helped us to understand the multifaceted dimensions of inequality, the dynamics of the domestic economy that produces and

sustains poverty, and the workings of the criminal justice system, for example.

Of course, not all academics who want their scholarship to be politically relevant are on the political left. A good many academics work to provide arguments and evidence aimed not at reducing inequality, but rather at legitimating it. They are not concerned with exposing the perverse consequences for humankind of American militarism and imperial overreach, but rather justifying American military and imperial expansion. When they turn their gaze on the poor it is to argue that the poor themselves, whether through their inherited deficiencies or their self-defeating habits of life, are responsible for their own plight. I see these academics as handmaidens to power. Nevertheless, logically perhaps we have to call all of them scholar activists (or “public intellectuals”, the term that has become popular in sociology). However, the point I want to stress is a different one. Whether on the right or the left, politically relevant scholarship that takes the form of testimony and op eds, or properly footnoted articles and books, remains well within the comfort zone of academic life, and is not of itself usually a problem for an academic career. It does not provoke the query I so often hear, how can I be both a scholar and an activist?

Rather the query is more likely to be provoked when academics identify with the trouble-making assertions of power by groups at the bottom of society, or groups at the cultural margins. Only think of the mid-twentieth century US protest movements that mobilized over civil rights, or to end the war in Vietnam, or for equal rights and cultural space for women, gays and lesbians, or over environmental issues. Those movements had a large impact on American society, not because some scholars wrote articles and books that reflected in scholarly terms on the issues the movements raised, but because the movements generated large-scale disruptions, of the southern apartheid system, of civil order in the big cities, of the American military machine, of the universities themselves, and of our basic cultural codes for ordering differences of sex and gender and race. The bitterness and conflict that ensued tend to be forgotten today as we enjoy self-congratulatory celebrations of Martin Luther King’s birthday or Barack Obama’s election. In fact, however, although the movements scored remarkable successes—ending apartheid and winning some civil rights, forcing the rollback of the war in Southeast Asia, expanding the safety net, advancing the rights and cultural standing of women, gays, and lesbians, and forcing environmental regulation—none of these victories came easily. They were fiercely resisted at the time, and once the movements subsided, the movement victories became the target of sustained decades-long business and conservative opposition.

Meanwhile, the movements of the 1960s and 1970s also had an important influence on social science, bringing to light social

processes that were otherwise ignored, broadening the curriculum, and diversifying the pantheon of academic greats. Rigid academic traditions were diversified, critical perspectives found a place, Karl Marx and Michel Foucault were added to social science reading lists. Protest movements themselves became an object of study, often by youthful veterans of these very movements. These changes too were resisted, by the academic establishment, but not for long. As a new generation influenced by the movements entered the academy, resistance faded. The results for the university were all to the good, especially for the social sciences. There was a new critical edge that made us better scholars. However, it is hard for me to see that these developments within the scholarly community had much of an influence on the larger society. The academic study of social movements, or the inclusion in the university of the critical perspectives of dissident social thinkers, none of this seems to have been important in energizing oppositional forces in American society. Indeed, as the academy was reforming and diversifying, and indeed becoming an institutional bastion of left and critical thought, the larger American society was lurching sharply rightward and backward.

In other words, scholarship of itself, even critical scholarship, even reform-oriented scholarship, is not a problem in an academic career, at least not any longer. The tension between scholarship and activism is likely to arise not when we reflect in scholarly terms about social and political problems, but when we commit ourselves to the more troubling sorts of demands that advance the interests and ideas of groups that are at the margins of public life, the people who are voiceless, degraded and exploited. And the tension is particularly acute when we commit ourselves to the often disorderly movements that try to advance the political causes of these groups, when we join our critiques of the institutional arrangements that the movements are trying to change to commitment to the movement itself. Some scholars have done just this. They have found a role for themselves working with protest movements in the past, and some are likely to do so again in the almost certainly turbulent future that we face in the near term. It is this sort of divided commitment, between an academic career and dissident activism, that provokes reflection on how to do both.

My answer is in two parts. First, I think that in the contest between scholarship and activism, the personal commitment to activism must be passionate and paramount if it is to survive the tension created by the dual path. After all, we are constantly confronted in our daily routines with the rewards and punishments doled out by our colleagues and our larger scholarly reference groups. We want to be promoted, or perhaps only rehired, and the path to promotion or failure is clearly laid out for us. We need to present conference papers, to publish, to have our work cited by other scholars. And to do that, we need to immerse ourselves in the debates of our discipline, to follow the methodological strictures

and the language conventions of the academic disciplines. And every day we are surrounded by the people who will reward or punish us, and we can read in their manner the signs of their approval or disapproval. Our academic environment becomes a Skinnerian box.

Not so with our commitment to activism. We do not interact with the movement every day, and it has little in the way of status or economic incentives to reward us. In fact, other movement activists are likely to treat our claims to academic authority with a good deal of skepticism. They are not going to turn to us for strategic direction, but rather call on us for the grunt work of substantiating their claims, for example. And because we are self-evidently not one of them, we may feel recurrently on the defensive. At best, the movement offers uncertain rewards. And compared to the strictures of the academy, it remains a kind of hobby, something we do on the side, and only so long as it remains relatively easy and fun. Under these conditions when activism remains without immediate rewards and something we do on the side, our activist work can easily give way to the pressure to publish another article in time for a tenure review, and an article squarely within the parameters of the latest most fashionable academic debates.

The intensity of our political commitment can matter in tempering these constraints, and for some people it actually can be determining. There are certainly examples of scholars who have invested themselves in the movements with which they are affiliated, for whom the movement and its mission are its own reward. Most of us are mere humans, however, we have only so much time and energy to do our work as scholars or as activists, and we can withstand only so much insult. So, I have a second recommendation.

We should work to fashion the environment that will nourish our activist commitments. At first glance that injunction may sound illogical, or at least impractical. After all, our environment, in this case our colleagues and reference groups, the scholarly associations and journals they sustain, are outside of us. But we also to varying degrees choose our colleagues and reference groups, and select our associations and journals. There is a lot to be said for thinking carefully about where we place ourselves in a complex and variegated academic world, and choosing where we place ourselves with a mind not only to the prestige of the institution, but to how it will affect our ability to do the political work to which we are committed. A small college, a state-supported institution, may not have the reputational gloss that most academics covet, but it may provide the space and the support that a genuine scholar activist requires. Moreover, we can also contribute to the diversity that foils the Skinnerian box of the academy by associating with the caucuses and networks and periodicals that nourish critical perspectives within the discipline. These caucuses also offer recognition and rewards, journals in which to publish, and friends with whom to hang out at academic

meetings. If nothing else, we can cultivate the scholar comrades who share our activist commitments and can come to our defense if the occasion arises. None of this may have the cache that the leaders of the discipline can confer, but it can make survival in the academy possible.

Finally, scholar activists should stop regarding themselves as martyrs. We are activists because of the joy political work gives us, because even when we fail, working to make our society kinder, fairer, more just, gives a satisfaction like no other, because the comrades we find in the effort are friends like no other, and also because our activist efforts illuminate our social and political world in ways that scholarship alone never can.