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Source: *Justice, Power and Resistance* Volume 1, Number 1 (April 2017) pp. 127-133

Published by EG Press Limited on behalf of the European Group for the Study of Deviancy and Social Control electronically 10 October 2017

URL: <http://www.egpress.org/papers/castle-and-mcdonald-intellectual-activism-public-engagement-strategies-academic-resistance>

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ACTIVIST CONTRIBUTION

Intellectual Activism & Public Engagement: Strategies for Academic Resistance

Tammy Castle and Danielle McDonald¹

The radical intellectual, struggling for her own place in an academy already under siege by market forces and political interference, may lack the stomach for engaging in external conflicts that are deemed 'controversial' by the media projectors of the status quo; for even radical intellectuals must eat; and to eat means to affiliate with aggregates of intellectual organization and power (universities), if one wants to teach...

Mumia Abu-Jamal (2003) *Intellectuals and the Gallows*

Ivory tower activism, as a pejorative term, has been used to denote academics who advise others from a place of privilege without 'getting their hands dirty'. Although activism has a long history in the academy, arguably American academics had more ties to social movements in the 1960s and 70s than today (Collins, 2013). While Black Lives Matter (BLM) events have spread across college campuses in the U.S. in the last couple of years, a perceived disconnect still exists between on-the-ground activists engaging in direct action and self-identified scholar-activists in the academy. Collins writes:

This perspective that sees intellectual work as occurring primarily within academic settings, populated by pampered teachers and scholars, and political or activist work as situated in the so-called real

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world, filled with activists and members of the general public, severs ideas from power relations. This basic binary worldview obscures the complexities of engaging in intellectual activism in both social locations as well as the connections between them...because ideas and politics are everywhere, the potential for intellectual activism is also possible everywhere (2013: xii).

The division between academics and activists, whether real or perceived, serves as a distraction to the ways in which these groups can work together in service to social justice. As James suggested, academics and activists 'are interdependent' and are 'hybrids in effecting peace and social change' (2003: 7). In this essay, we explore activism as a concept and argue for a more inclusive definition that encompasses all of the ways in which academics engage their activism. We also consider strategies for academic resistance in the form of public pedagogy/criminology, and discuss other ways in which academics can support collective movements.

What is an Activist?

A google image search of the word 'activist' produces photos of demonstrations, protests, and marches. Activism is typically conceptualised in this way, as 'direct action', and involves an organised critical mass of people protesting in a public forum. Many academics also engage in direct action, supporting larger social movements as part of the critical mass. Yet common discourse among activists is that academics 'aren't doing anything to change the system!'²

While these critiques are valid, the skills required to engage in academic inquiry may not be that useful to full-time activists and organisers. James (2003) noted that activism requires passion and an 'immediacy or urgency,' which is lacking in the 'dispassionate objectivity' and the 'painstaking rigor of sustained investigation and study' (5). Activists can lay claim to a more direct 'confrontation with domination and control' than academics, given that excelling in the academy often requires submission to the same power structures that activists are organising against (James, 2003: 5).

Often lost in the academic-activist discourse are the ways in which both exist and operate within a neoliberal economy. James argued that because both activist and academic spaces are structured by the market, they share 'careerism, appropriation, and the assertion of "authoritative voices"', as well

² The first author witnessed this outburst directed toward academics presenting research during a panel at a U.S. conference.

as ‘expectations for unquestioning obedience to managerial elites—whether radical instructor or organizer’ (2003: 5-6). Furthermore, a ‘push for productivity’ may lead to ‘more rallies, demos, conferences, meetings,’ while ignoring ‘effective strategies’ or community considerations (James, 2003: 5).

One last point about activism structured by the market focuses on the privileging of direct action to the exclusion of tackling ideology. The argument can be made that by doing so activists are reproducing the outcomes-oriented praxis that is part of a managerialism ideology common in capitalism. Thus, by criticising academics for not doing enough, meaning direct action, they are defining academics solely ‘in instrumental or technical terms’ as teachers/researchers in a market-driven academy (Giroux, 1985: 378). What is lost then in these conversations are the multiple ways in which academics engage their activism at the site of knowledge production.

Intellectual Activism

Collins defines intellectual activism simply as ‘the myriad ways that people place the power of their ideas in service to social justice,’ by speaking truth to the people and to power (2013: x). Intellectual activism is more inclusive of the varied types of intellectual labour through which academics engage their activism, which includes scholarship. Although the intellectual project continues to be worth pursuing, academics also must acknowledge the reality that the impact of their scholarship on larger society is negligible. Even when focused on specific policy or programme evaluations, the likelihood that the recommendations are adopted by politicians must be considered. Social movement scholarship, however, can have a direct influence as academics are better positioned than activists to devote the time and research detail to studies that would improve the efficacy of direct action strategies. Yet activists ‘are forced into generating theory largely outside of academic circles,’ so academics must ensure the findings reach their intended audience (Bevington and Dixon, 2005: 186).

The intellectual activist contributes via research, but also does more than excel in the study of their own field. They have a wide knowledge base, which they continuously seek to expand upon through deep study of other subjects (Koln, 1983). They incorporate these ideas into their classrooms as radical pedagogues who critically engage students on ‘relationships among knowledge, authority, and power,’ while also providing ‘opportunities to mobilize instances of moral outrage, social responsibility, and collective action’ (Giroux, 2016: 60-

2). In order to do this, there must be some level of community engagement, or one has not moved beyond ivory tower activism.

However, in moving beyond the circumscribed role, academics are forced to confront the very real possibility of losing their jobs. In the quote that opened this essay, Mumia Abu-Jamal addresses the unique positioning of professors in the academy as critiquing the power structure on one hand, while on the other depending on it for their livelihood. In the U.S., engaging in direct action or simply supporting students who are organising on campus can result in your dismissal, and tenure may not protect you from a university administration or Board of Visitors keen on not having negative press. Furthermore, for untenured faculty members there is little job security if you decide to voice your dissent with a university policy, even one as seemingly innocuous as freshman retention (Svrluga, 2016). Other academics find that rather than being fired, a lack of departmental or university support instead leaves them vulnerable in what may become hostile work spaces.³

Given the possible negative outcomes, each of us choose how, and to what degree, we engage our activism. In using the more inclusive ‘intellectual activism’ as discussed by Collins (2013), we consider activism to be a combination of rather than an either-or (academic-activist). The intellectual activist uses a variety of tools in service to social justice, which include scholarship, teaching, and community/public engagement. In the next section, we discuss the creation of a public engagement project by our social justice collective, and consider some of the challenges in maintaining the project.

Imagining Justice and Public Engagement

‘Imagining Justice’ began as a conversation at a conference. The topic of discussion was the importance of academic publishing for promotion and tenure, while grappling with the reality that this work is rarely, if ever, read by the public. Currently, there are more articles available through open source websites, but they are full of jargon and difficult for non-academics to read and comprehend (Biswas and Kirchherr, 2015). Thus, scholars such as Giroux (2003) have implored academics to embrace new technologies as part of the political project of radical pedagogy—what he termed public pedagogy. He argued that educators need to incorporate ‘other cultural apparatuses such as the media’ in

³ Based on conversations and anecdotes from academics in the U.S.

defining 'higher education as a resource vital to the democratic and civic life of a nation' (Giroux, 2003: 9).

Public pedagogy has come to encapsulate not just writing with an eye to the general public, but also vlogs, blogs, Ted talks, media appearances, etc. or all of the ways in which we are 'doing' our discipline in public. Taking this into consideration, a small group of sociologists and criminologists, including professors and graduate students, gathered to brainstorm how we could use our expertise to impact the larger discussion of social justice in the U.S. Recognising that nearly half of Americans aged 18-49 receive their news from online forums, the decision was made to create a website that included blog posts, critical essays and teaching resources (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel and Shearer, 2015). Thankfully we had the support of a colleague to help with the technical side of this venture, and in November of 2013 the website 'Imagining Justice' was launched, providing a space for public pedagogy on topics related to social justice.

Over the last three years, we have experienced some challenges maintaining 'Imagining Justice'. Our initial vision of exploring more action-oriented relationships has proven difficult. Both full-time academics and activists are busy, and although we have reached out it has been a challenge to get organisers to participate in the project. Some initial ideas about what we would like to include, such as art and visual pieces, have failed to materialise. We've also had to reconsider involving graduate students in this endeavour, given a possible threat to their future employment for participating in a 'radical' project.

Although the project has evolved substantially from our initial vision, we have been successful in writing pieces that members of the community are interested in reading and sharing. For example, one post from the mother of a white child on how to discuss racial issues in the U.S. with her son has been accessed by over 20,000 different IP addresses, and has been extensively re-blogged. One of the keys to the success of 'Imagining Justice' has been the group's ability to be flexible and adapt, while acknowledging the nature of a collective is that people will come and go. Coming up on our three-year anniversary of the launch, we have expanded the scope, yet recognise the limited sphere of influence of the blog itself.

In conclusion, we must consider all of the ways in which intellectuals engage their activism, while being clear that the work must go beyond a website or scholarship. We must continue to hack away at ideology to influence politics. If not, you end up with a situation like the one we recently experienced in the U.S. A bill targeting large-scale criminal justice reform, with support from both

political parties, failed to pass the Senate. So we cannot solely rely on influencing politics to exact change. Academics need to support collective movements as much as possible: show up.

Imagining Justice – www.imaginingjustice.org

We are a critical social justice collective dedicated to fostering an appreciation of the dialectics of crime, justice, and social harm. Our goals are to (1) provide our audience with alternative resources regarding criminalisation, inequality, and social harm as well as (2) encourage more action-oriented relationships with groups or social phenomena of study. We also come together in attempt to foster social change through critical, creative, and productive resistance. We are currently soliciting blogs, critical essays, in the classroom instructional pieces, art, and visual entries. Submissions should tackle subjects of crime, justice, and social harm and be consistent with our mission statement. See more at: <http://imaginingjustice.org/submissions/>

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