



Academic activism

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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 peace with this ambivalence early on is probably 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 activity has 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 decided between the myriad of possible pursuits. ‘I do the talking and the writing parts’, he explained. ‘I’m no good at the other stuff’. The talking and the writing parts include appearing on the radio, the TV, writing opinion pieces, getting involved in policy debates, presenting to politicians, and speaking publicly. These are the kinds of interventions outside the university in which, through my research on whistleblowing in organizations, I have some understanding. I thus write from this position. Just 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 that the day job is incredibly busy: why do it?

Universities tend to like academic activism, most of the time. Activities can be presented to onlookers as evidence of ‘relevance’, particularly desirable in an era in which academic institutions are increasingly accused of the opposite. Universities can package accounts of academic staff being relevant in short stories for inclusion in newsletters and websites, and tweet the stories with a picture attached. Of course, the extent of university approval likely depends on what the activity involves. Being on the evening current affairs TV show is good and to be encouraged. Organizing in direct opposition to the university itself is probably not so favoured. Taking legal challenges against gender discrimination in academic promotions, protesting the mass redundancies of influential scholars because they do critical work: these are recent examples of the kind of activism less likely to appear in the newsletter. If the aim is to struggle toward a better world, we clearly need a broader 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, a group of trade union activists, civil society organization members and campaigners from different countries have been working hard to bring about significant legal change across the European Union. It will offer 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, this group had to agree upon a set of common goals; this was not easy given the mix of ideologies and beliefs inevitably present. They had to do this agreeing despite language differences and geographic dislocation. They each 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, more waiting, rescheduling, travelling again, getting promises to vote a certain way, and hoping they would be kept. But the group succeeded:

a promising new law across all EU Member States is due for December 2021¹. Of course, it will not be perfect, there will be the inevitable flaws in the statutes and flaws in the implementation. But it is a significant start. Other countries including the UK and US are talking about following suit.

This achievement is impressive to say the least. It appeared doubly-so from my perspective as an academic with a permanent job, aware that some of these activists and advocates have had to do their travelling and their waiting, in-between raising funds for their organization's survival next year. So when I am asked, here and there, to be useful to the process, I try to say yes. A talking-head slot on the national radio, a commentator on a TV documentary, providing a quote for the newspaper, or writing up a policy brief: various attempts at usefulness. It all felt uncomfortable at the outset, but I learned two things quite quickly. First, most of this activity requires your usefulness to be demonstrated right now, at once, today. The radio request in the morning is for the evening drive-time show, a mere four hours later. The TV researcher needs information immediately. The article is going to press tomorrow. Any other plans you might have need to be shelved. Someone else must pick up the kids. A critical management academic, who seems to do this kind of thing with ease, shared a tip with me. She pitches to an open publishing forum like *The Conversation* on a Monday. If the piece comes out by Wednesday, it is far more likely to be picked up and run by a mainstream broadsheet newspaper seeking content for the weekend edition. I learned this by accident – chatting as we queued for a conference coffee urn.

The second thing you learn is that, in order to be any use, you must have full command of all the facts you need and know exactly what you want to say. You will need to be sharp. No notes allowed on the TV. No room to waffle on about ambiguities and complexities on the thirty-second radio slot. The

¹ The EU Whistleblower Directive 2021 establishes for the first time a comprehensive legal framework for whistleblower protection across the bloc, aimed at safeguarding the public interest. Changes will include easily-accessible reporting channels, obliging organizations receiving whistleblower disclosures to maintain confidentiality and to act on disclosures, and strengthening protections for whistleblowers against retaliation. There are omissions in the law but it represents a significant step forward in protecting free speech rights for workers.

journalist does not want a citation to support your controversial point, thank you very much. But you get used to the flutter of anxiety that comes with the request to which you reluctantly feel compelled to say yes. You learn to memorize your talking points and not to be swayed by a presenter looking for controversy – although radio and TV presenters have told me that they normally give academics an easier time than other guests, because we are famous for being such poor interviewees. And you learn to be ok with the fact that it never works out exactly as you would like. You stuttered a little, you fluffed the curve-ball question. But mostly there is a vague feeling that you have been somewhat useful, and that is not unpleasant.

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. But now he was being punished and excluded by management, driven to publicize his story in the news media. As often happens, he was finding it difficult to conceive of a career outside this industry, even though his claims had been fully vindicated by an independent inquiry. ‘Your articles and books were very helpful’, he told me. I thanked him and asked which bits particularly. ‘Oh, I didn’t read them, it was my wife. But she told me what they said’. It turns out that this man’s wife, who herself had studied social sciences in her youth, found the parts that attempted to explain what happens when organizations use their resources to retaliate against individuals useful. The theories had been helpful for this couple making sense of what they were going through. They normalized – or at least explained – something about this 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 helped to understand how, contrary to appearance, organizations do not always act rationally, and that the legal system can be inherently unfair. Academics often downplay this aspect but 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 in a new light. Theory is not the preserve of academics, it’s just that we go on about it more.

Chatting to others who have spoken out, it is clear that stories of the many other people who have been through similar situations, across the world, are a source of comfort. Other whistleblowers have kids 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 identity'. More than once, when the tape recorder was shut off at the end of the discussion, my interlocutor would ask softly whether I had come across examples of others who had spoken out, lost their job and managed to create a new career. 'How had they managed it?' they wanted to know. These moments rendered my investigation into subjectivities in a different light. Frankly it felt a bit obtuse. This spurred colleagues and I to carry out survey research into the financial and material costs of speaking up, which attracted funding in 2016. We get news sometimes of how the resulting report is being used. We heard from the lawyers of Dawn Wooten, a US immigration services nurse and whistleblower who spoke up about detained immigrants' repeated exposure to COVID-19, the carrying out of hysterectomies and other procedures without consent, and other abuses. Dawn's supporters have used the report in drawing support for her ongoing case, and we learn about other instances too. The research in question is based on relatively rudimentary quants: descriptive statistics. The simple points we are making – 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 has been found to be useful. I do not mention these examples to promote the study but rather to highlight another example where the activism bit 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 ambivalences and challenges we encounter within the walls of these places, how to those outside, universities still represent – more or less – solidity, longevity and trustworthiness. People tend to trust authorities, and academic experts appear near the top of the list when people are asked which professions are the most credible: significantly higher than journalists, government representatives and CEOs. Controversies and ambivalences notwithstanding, credibility is a currency in which academia remains rich. The academic is - not only – but in a large part, a conduit of this credibility. Her activities and artefacts can enable symbolic support to flow from an institution in which these are in plentiful supply, to individuals and small groups who struggle alone and who could use the help. Working with colleagues in my area, we try where possible to share the platform, inviting whistleblowers as guest lecturers (paid), as honorary academics, co-authors and researchers, offering a forum to speak where possible. More 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 exactly is it that makes the work compelling enough to want to do, 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 mutual 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 need you later'. But there is a mealy-mouthedness to this idea, an aura of the transactional. More

compelling for me is a psychosocial understanding that foregrounds the mutual constitution of subjects who come into being as inseparable from the other. Such approaches highlight our intertwining even before birth through matrixial connection inspired by Bracha Ettinger and many others, and through language as highlighted by poststructural feminist theorists from Judith Butler to Jessica Benjamin. Drawing on these ideas, organization scholars problematize – at a fundamental level – the self-other boundary and the elevation of individualism that marks today’s academic work. As academics we are human, that is, we are embodied, intersubjective beings despite the fact that we often pretend we are not. Our embodied academic selves are thus ‘infinitely extended’ through relations with those others that read what we write and by extension those others we encounter in our work. The extending exists because, simply put, without those others, we cannot be. The academic writes ‘within a relational, ethical, matrixial 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 Harding, 2018: 174).

This helps to make sense of academic activism, at least my limited experience of it. It seems that the joy – partial and temporary as it most certainly is – comes from a little bit of relinquishing the self. It comes from a sense of boundaries dissolving: boundaries learned and internalized 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 professor gets the grant, and if others are involved in bidding she is asked to quantify the specific value of her contribution. The lecturer holds forth in the theatre, a singular focus of attention. Academia can seem so totally set up for individual attainment, for competition, for self-aggrandizement. Its structures and cultures shape the subjectivities and not in a very nice way. Even critical management studies, an area focused on resistance that is often collective, often feels contentious and aggressive, despite that it would surely make sense to stick together given the role of capitalism in driving us to global catastrophe, and all that. The pleasure of activism work is partly to do with how cold 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 joyous parts – removes the actor from the spotlight, and the subject from the sentence. The author fades into a blur of activity. Her value now stands in direct proportion to the extent to which the artefact she has made can be used by others.

Of course, as anyone familiar with a psychosocial approach will note, it is not all sweetness, light and celebration of connection. Somewhat awkwardly, academics are always engaged in the everyday narcissism that accompanies human existence. We go around upholding, buttressing 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 often drawn to research topics that – somehow – do something for us, that give us something we don't have. Personally, I sometimes struggle to find my own voice, finding it easier to stay silent. I am not proud of displays of cowardice in situations where speaking up is clearly the thing to do. I am in awe of those who actually display a backbone, who always act on their principles. Is it desirable for me to be around people like this, I wonder? Does it, and I can feel how pathetic this sounds as I write, do something for me; to hang on the margins - looking on, writing, talking and not doing? Probably. Is throwing out an op-ed or two 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 smattering of guilt, a desire for elusive solidarity, a glow of second-hand bravery, all colour this kind of endeavor. But if it gets a job done, 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 especially going on the radio or television, are activities that put your name 'out there', even a little. They effectively signal – in public – that you exist and that you work in this area. Most people don't pay any attention whatsoever. Many others are supportive, creating connections on social media, sharing useful information and generally emanating goodwill. And there are always some people who find what you are doing and saying highly

offensive, and feel that your sharing of your views simply cannot be tolerated. 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 sadomasochism website, to which he (I presumed it was he) helpfully provided a link. It was quite difficult to figure out whether in fact this was ‘trolling’ because as an act of online violence it was rather incoherent. But I like to think it was trolling. If you haven’t been trolled, you are not working hard enough. I have been asked to explain my ‘profiting from research into whistleblowers’, presumably by someone unfamiliar with the mass exploitation in the service of arms industries that is academic publishing. And defending oneself on Twitter sometimes feels like shouting in a crowded bar, in which everyone is drunk and also shouting. Others experience this kind of thing to a much greater degree, but any amount of online escalation can feel overwhelming. When criticism is shared on Twitter it can multiply exponentially – each click causing notification numbers to rise and the atmosphere to sharpen. It is worth learning about Twitter’s block function. I think it would feel less overwhelming if I knew of others in this situation.

Because I write about corruption and have hosted speakers at my university who talk about corruption, it is often necessary to mention who is doing the corruption. To do this without losing multiple nights’ sleep worrying about the consequences, you need to swot up on the libel laws. These can be complicated. Did you know that in the UK you can be sued for defamation one year to the day after your book has been published, but not after that? Even if it is an e-book. Except, that is, in Northern Ireland. Here the law deems an e-book to be published anew every time someone opens the file, which, I am told, means you can be sued into infinity or however long your e-book remains in existence. That’s just the technical side of the law, which has some relation to – but is quite different from – the actual practice of the law. The latter involves estimating the likelihood of being sued, a mystical formula depending upon people’s tolerance for risk, the potential claimant’s own career plans, and the news cycle. There are other requirements; you become on first-name terms with the university’s lawyer. You learn how to distance yourself from statements: when to smile and say ‘XX’s views are not the views of the university!’. You wake up at 2am to print out the 1997 Academic

Freedom in the Universities Act, just to remind yourself of what it says. It cheerfully advises that Irish academics are safe to ‘question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions’, without detriment, although again the practice is likely a little different. None of this lends itself to peaceful existence. Nostalgia for the boundaries grows.

Another radio interview. The presenter wants you to explain, briefly, why retaliation against whistleblowers occurs, when they have clearly done the right thing. You pause. ‘Well, it’s complex’, you begin to say, ‘there are lots of different factors at play’. She pushes you to get off the fence and make an unambiguous, single-sentence statement. This goes against everything you have ever done in academia. Bring back my boundaries please.

As is probably clear by now, the desire to bring back the boundary, to concentrate only on the day job, relates to how isolating it can sometimes feel as you learn each of these lessons by yourself. Maybe others have had different experiences, but I have yet to work at a university that prioritizes the things that seem to be needed. On the contrary much of what makes an academic useful in the activism space is not taught, rather is sometimes in direct contradiction to what you learn in the day job. To be useful in moments like this, it is necessary that you formulate specific and unambiguous claims with which you can live, that you know how to look after yourself on social media, and – if your work involves critique – that you have some skills in negotiating that fine line between what can and cannot be said in public, in order to prevent dreaded Friday-afternoon solicitor letters arriving to you or your colleagues. These are the things you will need: standard media training only goes so far. Perhaps the reasons for this are obvious, but in this era where other sources of critique fall away, maybe we should indeed be taught how to approach the line, to learn how far the 1997 Academic Freedom in the Universities Act can be pushed in the service of the public good. I am not always courageous and often afraid to take chances. But I believe that I might be better at it, if there were more people around doing it too.

Concluding thoughts

In conclusion, I have not found a simple way to make sense of this kind of activity. In the best-case scenario, you will be rendered useful. And that is fine, it feels nice to surrender the self a little bit. You will also at times regret that you ever bothered. If you are honest you will acknowledge your own ego in all of this, and that is also fine because that is the way we are. Hopefully something good will come out of it all.

Academic activism is both enjoyable and uncomfortable. Making peace with this ambivalence is a useful thing to do. Because it is important to keep trying. As readers of *ephemera* know well, organizations are marvelous entities that can get things done, and they can also cause horrific pain and suffering to many. In disputes the balance of power is often with large organizations; what experts call 'equality of arms' in such legal cases is a fantasy. Organizations with deeper pockets can out-spend most challengers. The traditional sources of support for those who expose abuses of power – independent investigative journalism and well-funded unions among others – are in rapid decline. Without deluding ourselves about the extent to which we can effect change, perhaps making it a little more difficult for organizations to wield this power is a reasonable aim. When we find ourselves pinned to a statement on the radio, what we can do is speak from a position that is based on some knowledge and understanding of a topic that we have done our best to examine in some depth. This understanding is always partial but it is what we can offer. And in some cases, it can help.

references

Fotaki, M. and N. Harding, N. (2018) *Gender and the organization: Women at work in the 21st century*. London: Routledge.

author note

I am very grateful to two reviewers and two activist-academic friends, who commented on an earlier draft of this piece. They offered critical additions and counterpoints to some of the issues raised. I include them here:

- I recognized much of what you said. I found techniques for managing stress when doing live tv/radio around being pre-prepared (3 mins of tv can be/should be a few hours of gamed-out practices on the 1st outing), working out zinger lines (it is cognitively hard to think on live radio), and de-risking (clothes, voice warming, knowing the format, arriving early etc).
- I think working out what type of academic activist are you is important – should I shut up about things outside my expertise (unlike others on the media scene)? Am I speaking as a researcher about my expertise, or, am I speaking as a smarty-pants from the university who knows a lot about stuff (knowing it can be hard to change register from expert to rent-an-opinion, and that experts are more than media content-providers)?
- I empathize with your sentiments on the limits of our impact at the end, but also disagree with them. I feel people need to be warned as to how serious activism can become. Sometimes, and often in unpredictable and unusual ways things happen because of academic activism - we need to own the implications of what interventions we make... This is the counterbalance to the vanity endorphins that come with media-work. It is so important to have thought through strategically what you would like to happen, and what might happen from activism.
- I would say that universities are rather ambivalent about academic activism – not only when it concerns union activism – e.g. EP Thompson's account in 'Warwick University Ltd', but also issues such as Occupy, anti-war activism (Chomsky vs MIT), and many forms of political activism, e.g. Yale vs D. Graeber, Harvard vs Cornel West.
- My impressions are that most activists work in solidarity as anonymous collectives engaged in many mundane support activities and that except in a few cases academics (e.g. De Beauvoir, Greer, Chomsky, Said, Graeber), they are relatively marginal to activist movements - in some sense there may be parallels with lawyers as professional advocates, e.g. Hollander, Tibbo, Donziger, Melzer.
- In the introduction, you provide a definition of activism as a set of practices by differentiating between 'the talking & writing parts' and the 'participating in rallies, marches, strikes'. While you define your own activist activities as belonging to the first, I read this differentiation between 'discursive' vs. more 'embodied' forms of interventions as something you seem to want to overcome in favor of interrogating the very usefulness of our research for those concerned by it. In this sense, academic activism can be appreciated not only by 'what we do' (either speaking/writing or marching/sitting-in) but rather 'what we do and what our research does to/for/with others'. As such,

your account provides various examples of not only what you did but most importantly, the performative effects of your activist activities. The above comment connects in a way with the psychosocial perspective you develop in the section 'Dissolve the boundaries' around ideas of relationality, reciprocity and mutual constitution. But the second point I want to make here is that it brings in, albeit implicitly, the question of ethics or of ethical responsibility we hold toward each other.

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