

Being an academic activist in a neoliberal university

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Linda Smith (1999) in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) offers a helpful starting point for me in discussing what being an academic activist means:

... research exists within a system of power. What this means for indigenous researchers as well as indigenous activists and their communities is that indigenous work has to 'talk back to' or 'talk up to' power. There are no neutral spaces for the kind of work required to ensure that traditional indigenous knowledge flourishes; that it remains connected intimately to indigenous people as a way of thinking, knowing and being; that it is sustained and actually grows over future generations.

These are ambitious - and in some sense idealistic - aspirations, but as an employee of a neoliberal institution and structure that historically - and arguably presently - has been instrumental in imperial projects of exploitation, enslavement, death and destruction of peoples, places and the planet, without some sense of rootedness, both special and mental, in other places, then I would find it difficult to see how I might justify my claim of being an activist.

Because of the dynamics of race and class, I am fortunately or unfortunately positioned as 'other', or, if you like, an 'outsider', which has its negative effects but, as a survival strategy, has meant that I have had to engage in what Gramsci terms a 'war of position', which can be best conceived as points on a continuum rather than mutually exclusive options. The key point is the nature of the state and how it exercises power, control and authority. Hence, where the state deploys direct coercive force, perhaps including violence, then a 'war of manoeuvre' is a more appropriate strategy. However, in what we might term 'modern liberal democracies', where power is exercised in increasingly subtle ways, especially in the age of social media manipulation, then a war of position is a more appropriate strategy. As he notes, a 'war of position' is resistance to domination with culture, rather than physical might as its foundation (Gramsci, 2007: 168).

Building on the strategic necessity to claim the considerable resources that the neoliberal university

possesses, but being aware that it remains essentially trapped in a colonial logic geared to serving the interests of white supremacy, following Gramsci's notion of 'war of position', Moten and Harney (p101) conceptualise the academic activist as a 'fugitive' whose primary aim is to appropriate what resources they can. As they note:

... in struggle it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of - this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university.

In the world of academia one of our roles is to carry out research and to generate knowledge. Indeed, it is the quest for originality and new knowledge that forms the essence of a PhD thesis. Historically, as the title suggests, a PhD or Doctor of Philosophy degree was seen as a recognition of an individual's ability to philosophise, to reason on a particular topic, and, as Aristotle noted, there was something inherently virtuous and inescapable about philosophising - that was, as long as those in power did not feel threatened. And it was none other than Socrates who was executed for challenging the received wisdom of the day, for being 'disobedient' and 'provocative'. His crime was that through his philosophical method of dialectics he was allegedly corrupting the minds of Athenian youth. If we fast forward to the European Enlightenment and another 'philosopher' who was also dangerously disobedient, namely Karl Marx, we see that, for Marx, philosophy or thinking was an insufficient basis for human progress. Marx began as a devotee of Hegel's dialectics. Indeed, as a Young Hegelian he did his PhD thesis on Greek philosophy, but failed to secure an academic post which he sought after this - sounds familiar! Anyway, this was probably not a bad thing, as his parting company with the academy also led to a transition in his thought from being a radical-democratic philosopher to being a militant communist

and a historical materialist. This is captured in his 11th 'thesis' on Feuerbach, where he claimed that '[The] philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it'.

I suspect there was a degree of spite here, but after failing to get an academic job Marx moved to become a journalist on a liberal newspaper (1842-43). Drifting leftwards, he moved to Paris, the centre of leftwing politics at that time. His transition towards a materialist view of reality begs the question: how can we transform the world without understanding it first, given that it's only by acting in it that we can generate accurate knowledge of it? And anyhow, who is the 'we'? Is it an exclusive professional class - of philosopher kings, as in the case of ancient Greece, or can anybody engage in understanding and changing the world?

Antonio Gramsci was one of the first people to sense the significance of the problematic nature of this binary opposition between 'intellectuals' and 'non-intellectuals'. He wrote that 'all men [sic] are intellectuals . . . but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals' (Gramsci, 1999, p9). Here Gramsci was seeking to draw attention to the fact that there was far more intellectual activity going on in society than that carried out by the small number of individuals who had the label of 'intellectual' attached to them. He went on to make an influential distinction between those people who had historically had the role of intellectuals, such as priests, university professors and scholars, who he called 'traditional intellectuals', and new emergent strata of intellectuals, who he termed 'organic intellectuals'. Organic intellectuals made no attempt to place themselves outside or above society, as traditional intellectuals were supposed to do. They were, by contrast, people who were strongly and clearly situated in the nexus of their contemporary social and class relations. Their role was 'organic' because of the way they became instrumental in the mechanisms that produced and reproduced these social relations. While traditional intellectuals were historically drawn from the dominant class, for Gramsci organic intellectuals arise within all classes, and were particularly important in the case of emergent class groupings.

There are two key points which come out of Gramsci's insights into the nature of modern intellectuals. Firstly, he sees their social position and social definition not as a given, but rather as something in a constant process of flux. This flux is the direct outcome of ongoing struggles taking place in society: between classes, social movements, genders, nations and empires. Intellectuals have historically tended to play an extremely important role in these sorts of struggles. As Edward Said (2005) has suggested, intellectuals are the guardians of social and political movements. The second key point of Gramsci's

conceptualisation of the role of intellectuals is that it was strongly egalitarian. For him, organic intellectuals were not necessarily people who were formally educated. Rather, what was crucial was their capacity to theorise and make sense of their situation from their particular standpoint. Gramsci felt that this was a potentiality that all human beings were capable of developing, given a context in which this was allowed. This anti-elitist and egalitarian legacy has been very important in a diverse range of contexts where prevailing notions of who is and who is not allowed to speak, and whose experiences and understandings 'count' as worth listening to, are being challenged.

An important tool for my activism is Michel Foucault's conception of 'discourse', which he saw as referring to an implicit set of rules which determine who is and is not 'allowed to speak' in the public domain (1977, pp139-141). One of my aims has been to help curate what Foucault terms 'subjugated discourses' or knowledges of struggles that were historically disqualified as inadequate (1980, p83). Indeed, one of the challenges precisely raised there and in other movements has been the question of what actually counts as knowledge: What is knowledge? Who is allowed to claim knowledge? What is the relationship between knowledge and truth? Knowledge and values? And knowledge and politics?

All of these questions have been explored at some length within the philosophical literature and debates between positivism and anti-positivism. But from the perspective of somebody who has positioned himself - or has been positioned - as an outsider, as subaltern, as other, as Linda Smith (1999) in her discussion of decolonising methodologies suggests: 'the term "research" is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism'. Indeed, she goes on to note that:

. . . the word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary - it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful'.

For this reason, especially during the past 150 years or so, through the emergence of powerful social movements, we have seen a gradual questioning both of the ways in which research has been utilised by powerful interests, but also of its philosophical underpinning, particularly so in relation to its claims to objectivity. Despite good intentions, we need to be aware of the near impossibility of equalising the power relationship in research. Even in qualitative research, Michelle Fine (1994) draws attention to the potential for self-deception, in suggesting that qualitative researchers often reproduce a 'colonising discourse' of the 'other' whilst maintaining a self-delusion that they have given voice to the oppressed.

It is important to provide textual accounts of the lived experience of the oppressed (in the case of phenomenology) and statistical accounts of the material determinants of inequality, exclusion and oppression. However, we also need to move from an epistemological standpoint focused on research only as a means of understanding the world towards an emancipatory approach that, as the disability activist Mike Oliver has argued, 'produces the world' (Oliver, 2002: 14). Though Marx's overall orientation was towards a positivistic materialist understanding of history - and in particular of the capitalist mode of production - he was also acutely critical of the vested interest of the ruling class and the power of ideas in shaping materialist research. For Marx, the truth isn't simply out there waiting to be discovered, but rather it is ideas that shape our understanding of the world and our position in it. Though he is clear that the shaping of ideas can never escape material and concrete experiences, this is evident in the importance he allocates to philosophy in the emancipation of the proletariat: 'the head of this emancipation is philosophy' its heart is the proletariat' (Marx, 1844, 266).

What I do know is that it is not acceptable for me to be confined to the academy while trying to solve the problems of the world, not only because I need to be 'out there' to get a sense of the 'real problems', but also because solutions will not come out of our academic publications but through engagement with publics. In her book *The Banality of Evil*, which is based on the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, Hannah Arendt noted the dangers of abstract and insular intellectuality, which paradoxically induces a form of 'stupidity'. In a follow-up to this book, *The Human Condition*, Arendt makes a powerful case for philosophers to engage in everyday political action or praxis, which she sees as the true realisation of human freedom. Indeed for her, nurturing 'our capacity to analyse ideas, wrestle with them, and engage in active praxis is what makes us uniquely human'. The 'us' for Arendt is not an exclusive club of professional philosophers, but the innate novelty represented by each birth to herald a new beginning. She called this phase of life 'natality'. For Arendt, freedom is not merely the ability to choose but the capacity 'to begin, to start something new, to do the unexpected, with which all humans are endowed by virtue of being born' (d'Entreves, 2019).

Michael Burawoy and his conception of 'public sociology' captures the essence of the kind of activist research discussed above, namely one that has a moral purpose whilst still remaining committed to critical thinking and the pursuit of 'situated understanding'. This, in contrast to the positivistic approaches that seek to create distance between the researcher and what is being researched, offers a more

holistic and dynamic understanding of the particular issue being researched. But most critically, the motivation for engagement is not the mere pursuit of knowledge but the building of what de Sousa Santos (2015) terms 'ecologies of knowledge':

. . . when sociologists recognize public sociology as important in its own right with its own rewards, and when sociologists then carry it forward as a social movement beyond the academy . . . I envision myriads of nodes, each forging collaborations of sociologists with their publics, flowing together into a single current. They will draw on a century of extensive research, elaborate theories, practical interventions, and critical thinking, reaching common understandings across multiple boundaries, not least but not only across national boundaries, and in so doing shedding insularities of old . . . (26).

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