

Academic activism: justifying the unjustifiable

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Academic life is guided by a life of truthfulness. Truthfulness entails values such as integrity, steadfastness, diligence, resilience, rigour, carefulness and courage. These values have point in their being *internally* connected to truth-oriented efforts. They constitute epistemic virtues and are part of the internal goods of efforts concerned to understand and to illuminate the world.

Efforts conducted against a horizon of truth are, therefore, necessarily *actions* that fulfill certain conditions. Habermas' phrase of 'validity claims' (1989) - integral as he saw it to a rational discourse - has particular point here. In order to possess validity as part of academic life, that life should redeem the claims that are inherent in a rational discourse. Academic life is not just active but calls for actions of a particularly demanding form.

Given such considerations, the phrase 'academic activism' becomes problematic. For whereas the values characteristic of academic life are internal to a truth-oriented life, academic activism is an orientation to life *beyond* the academic world. But on what basis could such an orientation be justified?

The 'ism' is key. *Activism* suggests contending for a cause, even against some entity felt to be injurious. It suggests taking up the cudgels, perhaps even literally. If this is what is meant by academic activism, can it be justified? Could there be an in-principle justification, having a universal application, or would it apply to particular contexts?

The problem is severe. In activism, one becomes active for a cause *beyond* one's understandings. One's knowledge furthers an *extra-mural* cause. Interests and values external to the pursuit of knowledge come into play; for example, of social justice, or democracy or liberty. This says nothing about the form that academic activism might play - whether overt, an on-the-streets form of activism or more discreet, played out in the television interview, or somewhere between those examples in social media.

The public intellectual is a justifiably hallowed form of such activism. For decades, intellectuals have spoken truth to power and sometimes with terrible consequences, being incarcerated in prison or worse. But are their actions forms of *academic* activism? Might they not be construed as forms of *civil* actions: the public intellectual is not so much an academic activist but a *citizen* activist bringing the resources of her/ his intellect into the

public arena. The public intellectual *justifiably* crosses the dotted-line border between the academic life and the wider society.

Why does this matter? Because the rules of this game, now public, multiply: it contains even more constituent parts and players and, therefore, risks. And the arts of surviving and doing well in this game multiply. Reaching out to multiple audiences simultaneously and being sensitive to the forms of sanctions that they might impose - if dissatisfied - is demanding.

Not surprisingly, then, many academics shrink from academic activism. If being active within the academic profession is fraught with difficulty, how much more so is academic activism! But it remains, nevertheless, a responsibility that hovers continuously, beckoning forward the publicly-spirited academic.

Reference:

Habermas, J. (1989) *The Theory of Communicative Action: The Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Cambridge: Polity.