

Academic Activism and Intellectual Leadership

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Should academic activism be seen as tightly coupled with the extent to which members of the professoriate are intellectual leaders in their individual fields (as suggested by Macfarlane 2013; Oleksiyenko and Ruan 2019)? Is it important that professors measure their intellectual capacity against the legitimacy and urgency with which they are able to influence policy-making and problem solving? For instance, in times of constitutional crisis, should the contributions of a professor of law to public discourse be regarded as more intellectually powerful or legitimate than those of a professor of music?. Why or why not?

The professor's outreach and efforts to problem-solve ongoing issues are shaped by a range of not only epistemological, but also contextual, factors. Legal professionals, upon analysing their particular circumstances in view of complex law codes, may reach the conclusion that expressing their stance has no real power to advance positive change, and instead merely gives their opponents ammunition to justify actions that lead to the suppression of academic freedom and citizenship rights. This particular kind of conundrum appears most evident in countries where politics and punditry are primarily dominated by apologists, fascists, and self-righteous types (Giroux, 2018; Peters, 2020). Torn between personal duties of citizenship and running the risk of becoming a punchbag for the opposition in their struggle to shape and maintain power relations, professors may find themselves in a (proverbial) hell of sorts, agonizing over those tensions between good intentions, and the probable consequences of acting on those good intentions. Certainly, the professor may feel like she or he has no choice but to engage in social struggles, when democratic movements often struggle to cohere around an intellectually powerful, organized and communicable message.

However, ethical decisions do not necessarily directly correlate with an activist's epistemological capacities. Did not, for example, Martin Heidegger's dual position as a devout Nazi party member as well as rector of a powerful German university, contribute to the legitimization and strengthening of one of the world's most despotic regimes? While it remains difficult to find the wisdom to determine the relative benevolence or malignance of competing social forces, the question lingers: isn't the creation of an ethically-oriented epistemological discourse a better option, compared to starting a street fight? The tools of research and critical inquiry we already have at our disposal may be useful in informing approaches to dealing with the controversies of social change. We might argue that academic activism achieves its superior purpose when it specifically allows for, indeed, encourages, criticism of all forces, debates on most controversial scenarios, and prognostication of various impacts. Meanwhile, silence and withdrawal is out of the question when certain social forces seek to enhance their power, legitimacy and urgency in order to devastate the foundations of civil society: i.e., democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech – on the premise that the flaws of some existing policies necessitate the destruction of the whole system.

When Ronald Barnett bemoans the loss of traditions of intellectual dispute in academia, which once defined the designation of a "good" university, and urges us to rethink our approaches to the philosophy of activism (Barnett, 2020), it is important to also think about why the specific forms of engagement he references were considered the most valid

means of shaping intellectual power, legitimacy and urgency. Dispute of this variety is arguably the most important method of academic activism, both reinforcing the political power of intellectuals and diffusing the aggression of non-academic opponents. The disputations that take place in academic communities are similarly a resource for intellectual engagement to be utilized by new learners and students aiming to challenge their assumptions and develop their understanding of the disparate premises and positions proffered by various strains of intellectual inquiry. They can also provide guidance and inspiration to these students (such as future or re-trained professionals across academia, governments, industry and civil society), act as forums for discussion-based learning, and facilitate conversations about the evolving procedures of empowering, legitimate and urgent problem-solving. Meanwhile, if we choose to remain quiet, cryptic, and/or confined within our niches - as has become the norm in the performativity- and prestige-obsessed spaces found in neoliberal and undemocratic societies – then such learning cannot take place. The academia which fails to recognize this is thus unable to nourish continuous and powerful social healing, thereby making intelligentsia “dead and obsolete” (Gessen, 1997). Only in coming to terms with this truth can we arrive at more meaningful concepts and practices of academic activism.

References

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