

## **For the post-seminar joint contribution following the 16 April 2020 PaTHES webinar: “Towards a new Academic Activism”**

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My contribution is inspired by part of the small group discussion section on what defines academic activism, around the question, “1. How and when is activism *academic*?”. It responds to a specific situation narrated by another group member occurring at their institution, but a situation which I am sure we can recognise occurs continuously across the HE sector far and wide.

The situation is one where junior researchers, whether staff or doctoral student/candidate, are discouraged from turning attention to troublesome issues concerning their working environment. The time-honoured hierarchy within higher education and the increasing tendency for exploitation of junior staff in the service of more and better material results and institutional reputation is bringing these junior researchers closer together into a more lumpen form. And the issues in question may well be articulated and discussed formally under the auspices of the union (whether staff or student).

There is a *prima facie* case for claiming that higher education union activity and even relatively informal activity in the service of making a challenge to apparently unsatisfactory working conditions is a clear example of when activism is academic. It may be parochial for that and not doing much to serve the needs of the needy more widely. But, being situated in the academic context, surely it must be ‘academic’ activism?

Yet it is not that simple. The senior manager of the research processes of a department who is browbeating their junior researchers to keep their heads down and nose to the grindstone is implicitly drawing upon one of the traditional theories of definition and applying it to academic work/practice. This is (even if unwitting) a philosophical assumption and demands a philosophical analysis.

The traditional theories comprises three: essentialism, family resemblance, essential contestability. It is not the place here to review them thoroughly, which I have done elsewhere (Gough 2014), albeit not with this scenario in mind. The first two ultimately reinforce a restrictive view on what counts as ‘academic’, which enables the hard-nosed boss/supervisor to claim turning attention away from the ‘academic’ research project and towards the environment is not academic activity and so only for one’s spare time and somewhere else. The third celebrates entrenched opposition and impasse for its own sake, so undermining of collegiality and means to resolve issues. Furthermore, adopting any of these three will also tend to over-restrict degrees of freedom required for academic enquiry (and teaching) in the first place.

Two more theories, generated originally in discussion of defining Art, offer a better foundation for defining academic work. One is Timothy Binkley’s ‘anti-definition’ theory: it celebrates freedom but its arbitrary ‘anything goes’ radical openness would be undermining disciplinary and other continuity too much. The theory which does fit

is George Dickie's institutional theory. Drawing also from Newman, what the general idea of the University (as a 'natural institution') embodies as activities required to make it operate are thereby academic. And care about and maintenance of the working environment is just such an activity.

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