

We Are All Activists Now

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Introduction

There is a fundamental difficulty with the word 'activism.' This problem exists whether it is used in academic contexts or beyond. The term has been captured by the left. As broadly defined, it generally refers to volunteer and professional campaigners, theorists, and analysts who are dedicated to struggles against racism, misogyny, bigotry, war, economic inequality, and climate change.

From Los Angeles to London, people introduce themselves as 'activists.' Their means of financial support and their socio-cultural theories and practices are left undisclosed by this term. But it is understood automatically that they are not nationalistic, militaristic, sexist, or skeptical about climate change; nor are they fans of objectivity because they believe passionately in social causes that will enlarge personal and collective freedom and equality and social justice. Activists are dubious about knowledge for its own sake, yet dismissive of research undertaken as consultancies for business or with applications to the state or capital. At the same time, they are certain that science is correct on one score at least—perhaps not pharmaceuticals, perhaps not genetics—but climate change.

Their identification as 'activists' is akin to saying 'We are women' or 'We are artists' in that it is a foundational identity. The unspoken assumption is that an activist must 'live the issue', demonstrate relentless dedication, and contribute a sustained effort to duly merit the label. But should we accept this rather touching yet totalizing requirement of a comprehensive "alignment between personal identity and collective identity" (Bobel, 2007)? If personal transformation is a necessary qualification, that transformation and its maintenance may become central struts, which compromises claims to being outwardly rather than inwardly directed or representative of the grass-roots, things that should be central to assertions of 'activism' in the first place.

Activism of this overt kind is common within universities. The Association of Humanist Sociology (<http://www.humanist-sociology.org/>), the World Economics Association (<http://www.worldeconomicsassociation.org/wea/manifesto/>), and the Union for

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Democratic Communications (<http://www.democraticcommunications.org/>) and movements like public sociology (Burawoy, 2005) and critical management studies (<http://www.criticalmanagement.org/node/2>) argue against the claims to objectivity of mainstream social science. So the humanist sociologists wish to “abandon the pretenses of professionalism” *contra* those who seek to preserve “claims to scientific objectivity from being tainted by moral concerns of justice, humanism, or activism” (Adair 2015: 10-11).

I admire the work of all these folks, but I think we need to problematize their other. The assertion of disinterested objectivity by mainstream social scientists, for example, is an entirely mad claim. The most conventional of professors repeatedly work for and in the name of institutions, such as city governments or companies, and concepts, from security to participation.

Criticizing these folks and defining oneself as different, as an activist, cedes two grounds: first, it actually helps ramify the assertion of objectivity, whereas the material grounds of sociology, communications, economics, and management have long rested on an eerie blend of welfare and warfare applications, and secondly, because if the left seeks to keep the notion of activism to itself, the debate about scholarly activism is itself captured, by the right, who merrily point to the absence of inquiry, objectivity, and rationality on the left and identify what should be impartial matters, such as climate science, with socialism.

Needless to say, U.S. scientists are all too happy to communicate directly with the public, and regard this as central to their mission—to transmit the knowledge they have (Pew Research Center, 2015b). Furthermore, they work with citizen scientists all the time, in ways that are crucial to research and are truly grassroots (Johnson *et al.*, 2014). They do not regard these activities as separate from the pursuit of truth, which they always already view as contingent—like the direction of their activism. Both conceptual and empirical research illustrates the inevitable influence of policy and politics on what scientists study and the uptake of their results (Elliott and Resnik, 2014). The Union of Concerned Scientists describes itself as dedicated to ‘Science-based Action’ and ‘science for a healthy planet and safer world’ (http://www.ucsusa.org/about-us#.Vm1zed_hB8U) in just this sense.

I want to reclaim the term ‘activism’ and apply it to academic activity in general and to the right. I now offer some leading questions for readers to consider as they address the notion of the intellectual, and undertake a case study— i.e. climate-change refusal.

The questions are:

- Are film and journalism schools activists? They urge values and practices on their students that both derive from and feed into the media industries
- Are engineering schools activists? They produce value-laden notions of urban and rural life and efficiency and effectiveness about everything from buildings to bridges to dams
- Are business schools activists? They forward ideas about capitalism and entrepreneurship as the core of their mission

- Are biochemistry departments activists? They seek corporate partnerships to develop pharmaceuticals

The ties between research schools and the energy sector, for instance, are manifold, massive—and finally manifest; they are normal (Washburn *et al.*, 2010). These are the lineaments of activism, of faculty driven by a desire to transform the world rather than undertake pure research—just not in the way we might always wish.

Intellectuals

Many right-wing, left-wing, and mainstream academics, like activists linked to progressive social movements, are organic intellectuals. Antonio Gramsci maintained that each social group creates “organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields” (Gramsci 1978, 5). The “organic’ intellectuals which every new class creates alongside itself and elaborates in the course of its development” (6) assist in the emergence of that class, for example via military expertise. Intellectuals operate in “civil society’ ... the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private,’ that of ‘political society’ or ‘the State’” (12). They comprise the “hegemony’ which the dominant group exercises throughout society” as well as the “direct domination” or command exercised through the State and “juridical’ government.” (12). Ordinary people give “spontaneous’ consent ... to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (12).

In other words, organic intellectuals legitimize socio-economic-political-scientific-environmental arrangements in the public mind. So when the noted sociologist, university bureaucrat, and peer of the realm Anthony Giddens advised British Prime Minister Tony Blair on the idea of a third way between capitalism and socialism, he was being an activist. Similarly, when he wrote these words about an all-expenses-paid trip to Muammar Muhammad Abu Minyar al-Gaddafi’s Libya in 2007, “[i]f Gadafy is sincere about reform, as I think he is, Libya could end up as the Norway of North Africa.” Lord Giddens was operating as an activist, both in visiting the coup-leading dictator and writing an opinion piece for the world’s principal English-language liberal newspaper.

Intellectuals who hold sway over progressive academics and other activists frequently benefit from surprising sites that are all about applying their expertise to the needs of the state and commerce. Noam Chomsky’s core linguistic work (1965) was underwritten by the U.S. military’s Joint Services Electronics Programs. The Pentagon paid for Harold Garfinkel’s foundational research into transgender identity (1967). Britain’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies began with a corporate grant (Hoggart, 1973). There’s no theory of encoding by media producers versus decoding by active audiences without Italian television subsidizing Umberto Eco’s research (1972). And Jean-François Lyotard’s account of postmodernism (1988) emerged courtesy of a consultancy for a Canadian province.

Of course, some research is not simply supported, but entirely animated by paymasters who expect only one outcome that will favor their corporate interests. The pharmaceutical industry's proportion of U.S. health research grew from 13% in 1980 to 52% in 1995. Unsurprisingly, marketing rather than science determines how to develop a new compound. The following questions are typically posed: will a drug be declared a counter to depression or ejaculation; which scholars will be chosen to front it and produce consensus over its benefits; and will it be announced in journal *x* or *y*? Pfizer describes academic publication as a means "to support, directly or indirectly, the marketing of our product" (quoted in Moffatt and Elliott 2007: 18).

Medical education and communications companies provide ghostwriting services, paid for by corporations, which deliver material to academics and pay them for signing it. One in ten papers in leading medical outlets are the work of ghosts, and pharmacorps pressure medical journals to print favorable findings in return for lucrative advertising (Miller, 2008; Fugh-Berman, 2010).

Case Study—Climate Change Denial

Academic climate-change denial is an especially serious business, largely mediated via Think Tanks. Funded by some of the wealthiest U.S. foundations and families, such as Olin, Scaife, Koch, Castle Rock, and Smith Richardson, there are over three hundred right-wing such bodies in Washington, obsessing away at everything from sexuality to foreign policy. They hire ghostwriters to make their resident intellectuals' prose attractive—a project to market opinion, rather than to conduct research. Each "study" they fund is essentially the alibi for an op-ed piece (Kallick, 2002). They also operate across national borders, thanks to their frequently transnational funding and ideological consanguinity (Stone, 2013).

But some of the language speaks of scholarship; they hire people with doctorates; and their affiliates include faculty members. Think tanks' neoliberal and conservative organic intellectuals—their academic activists—work via a blend of grassroots religious superstition and public outreach that stresses column inches and shouted seconds, derived from putative professional expertise.

These think tanks erode the visibility of conventional academia in that they specialize in delivering spokespeople to the media. The corollary numbers for media coverage are striking. Progressive U.S. think tanks had a sixth share of media quotations and appearances compared to reactionary institutions during the 1990s. In the decade prior to 2005, progressives averaged 14% of citations. In 2012, the right and center had 81% of coverage. Media attention does not correlate with scholarly esteem or achievement, and the academics most likely to be interviewed have worked in government or for mammon. These public intellectuals are general rather than specific in their remarks, and disdainful of both theory and fact—an unusual combination (Miller, 2007; <http://fair.org/extra-online-articles/-fair%E2%80%88study-think-tank-spectrum-2012/>).

Think tanks are crucial sources for the articulation of neoliberalism to the denial of climate change with concomitant correlations be-

tween public skepticism about science and enthusiasm for market norms. The same applies to U.S. meteorologists, a vital group because of their unique purchase on daily public exposure to science via weather reports. They are split on climate change in accordance with party politics (Heath and Gifford, 2006; Beder, 2001; Plehwe, 2014; Stenhouse *et al.*, 2014).

Matters are both clear and complex in the climate change field. At the same time as organic intellectuals struggle for hegemony, some of these people—many of them hired by think tanks—are specific intellectuals. They are focused on one issue and offer quite technical counsel about it. They are accorded public legitimacy when speaking about it, rather than about wider conceptions of the general good (Foucault 1996: 147).

Climate-change refusers operate as *Merchants of Doubt* (Oreskes and Conway, 2010). Paid to help polluting industries fend off pro-environmental legislation, they “dissipate pressure for progress” (Miller and Dinan 2015: 99), assaulting the character of environmentalists and undermining the legitimacy of independent climate science. Particular targets include the consensus findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (<http://www.ipcc.ch/>).

Graham Readfearn (2015a) details “four main cogs: conservative ‘free market’ think tanks, public relations [PR] groups, fossil fuel organizations and ideologically aligned media.” These think tanks have sponsored the publication of dozens of volumes denying the reality of climate change, virtually none of which are written by qualified authors or have undergone peer review (Dunlap and Jacques, 2013). There is also some interesting evidence that they are disproportionately male, white, and late middle-aged (Anshelm and Hultman, 2014). Deniers tend to follow two strategies, which sometimes intersect. One is to stigmatize the scientific credentials of their opponents. The other is to associate climate science with socialism. In this sense they, too, ignore their own stature as activists, associating the term with the left.

Readfearn identifies lobbyists, think tanks, and PR professionals who conspire with the industry on misinformation projects about climate change. Drawing on the tobacco industry’s campaign against the health effects of smoking—many deniers moved on to the climate project—the aim has been to infect conventional wisdom among the public with uncertainties. Examples include a 1991 campaign funded by coal utilities to “recruit scientists to ... reposition global warming as theory (not fact).” U.S. Republican consultant Frank Luntz directed a notorious 2000 memo to the energy industry: “Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled, their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate” (quoted in Readfearn, 2015a; also see Maxwell and Miller, 2015, on which this section draws).

The entire tale of scholars for hire is deeply disturbing (Mulvey *et al.*, 2015). The Canadian group DeSmog sets itself against “the PR pollution that clouds climate science.” Its *Global Warming Disinformation Database* provides background on climate-change denying activists (<http://www.desmogblog.com/global-warming-denier-database>). Dr. Willie Soon, one of the more notorious figures on the list,

made headlines in 2015 when investigators found that his climate-science research, which he promoted as independent, was paid for with \$1.5 million from fossil-fuel companies (Readfearn, 2015a).

Subterfuge of this kind takes many forms as scholarly activists encounter other servants of industry. One of the world's biggest PR corporations, Edelman, announced in 2014 that it would no longer work for climate-science deniers (Goldenberg, 2014). A year later, word spread that it had advised the American Petroleum Institute through a subsidiary (<http://www.blueadvertising.com/#/american-petroleum-institute/>; Quinn and Young, 2015). Edelman claimed to be misunderstood, sacrificed an executive, announced that it believed in climate change, and divested (Gunther, 2014; Elliott, 2014; Sudhman, 2015).

Edelman is a serial perpetrator of such fraud across many industries via links with activist right-wing scientists. In tobacco, it spent decades encouraging smokers to continue their deluded indulgence (<http://www.corporatewatch.org/company-profiles/edelman>). In pharmaceuticals, it hawked fraudulent research guaranteeing hair regrowth (Moynihan *et al.*, 2002). In chemicals, it set up supposedly grassroots campaigns for Monsanto that attacked critiques of genetically-modified food (Beder, 1998). In retail, it paid operatives masquerading as cross-country campers to blog about helpful Wal-Mart car parks and store managers (Frazier, 2006). And in the extractive sector, its collaboration with Trans Canada sought to discredit anyone questioning the Energy East pipeline (<http://www.greenpeace.org/canada/Global/canada/file/2014/11/Astroturf-background.pdf>). Ironically, the PR industry is forced to resort to PR to cover up such misdeeds, promoting rarely enforced rules against such routine tricks in its so-called code of ethics (Schäfer, 2012; Schlichting, 2013; Burton and Rowell, 2003; <http://www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/ethics/code-english/#.VOrW-VOUf7c>). Throughout, Edelman has maintained close ties with scholarship, and even publishes in academic journals on ethics (Edelman, 1983).

The list of think tanks that target the scientific consensus on climate change is as long as it is undistinguished; prominent U.S. examples include the Competitive Enterprise Institute, the George C Marshall Institute, the Heartland Institute, the Science and Public Policy Institute, and the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow; Canada's Fraser Institute; Britain's Global Warming Policy Foundation; and Australia's Institute of Public Affairs, which urges supporters to enjoy the tax advantages of crowd-funding "a climate book with chapters written by a familiar line-up of climate science denialists—one of which was Dr. Soon" (Readfearn, 2015a).

Many fossil-fuel industrialists backing the "merchants of doubt" (ExxonMobil and Koch Industries among them) also funnel money through organizations like the Donors Trust, which obscures the source of such riches (Miller and Dinan 2015: 104). Some are more overt: in 2009, Heartland offered \$1,000 to any climate researcher who could "help generate international media attention to the fact that many scientists believe forecasts of rapid warming and catastrophic events are not supported by sound science" (quoted in Anderregg 2010: 656-57).

Toward the end of the last century, a new strategy emerged. Worried about impending environmental legislation, the extractive industries decided to construct themselves as environmentally-friendly corporations—a move aimed at getting them to the table as stakeholders in the green economy so they could advance policy agendas favorable to their core business (companies like BP and Shell, which operated in much more restrictive regulatory regimes in Europe, followed this strategy). Out of these greenwashing activities arose such oxymoronic ideas as sustainable development, sustainable markets, sustainable capitalism, clear skies, and healthy forests. A key element has been the shift from assaulting environmentalism as a good and towards discrediting its scientific foundation and fueling conspiracy theories (McCright and Dunlap, 2010; Lewandosky *et al.*, 2013). Groups that promote these schemes include the Business Environmental Leadership Council and the World Business Council on Sustainable Development—umbrella organizations representing fossil-fuel businesses—that relied on academics prepared to endorse their claims.

Deniers seek to influence elite and policy-maker opinion, with the added effect of confusing the public through media coverage, via “corporate capture of environmental policy” (Miller and Dinan 2015: 95). They were using “policy-based evidence” while claiming to be animated by a desire for “evidence-based policy” (Marmot, 2004). This was an instance of “activism-led science,” not “science-led activism” (Martínez-Alier *et al.*, 2011).

In terms of major disciplines, schools, associations, conferences, and publications, the scientific consensus acknowledging the reality of anthropocentric climate change is clear and getting more so (Cook *et al.*, 2013).

Conclusion

Terminology matters. I can well appreciate leftist social movements reacting negatively to being collocated with the right and center in terms of the idea of activism. After all, this is “our” term. But I think it is vital to recognize that academic activism is an ordinary part of management, engineering, medicine, and public policy, just as much as sociology or gender studies.

In other words, the notion of addressing social problems through a mixture of technical and popular appeals is an ordinary part of university life. The sooner we acknowledge the fact, the easier it will be to justify progressive work by pointing to its mirror on the other side. But that will still leave another issue that we must address.

Climate change provides a great test for progressives, who have steered an uncertain course for the last three decades over the question of science, reason, and truth. Marx and Freud alike saw themselves as figures of modernity and had great faith in rationality—they regarded what they did as science.

Much of the investment the left made in the working class as the next great agent of history after the *bourgeoisie* assumed that the science of change made their uprising and hegemony inevitable. But the break-up of the notion of a united agent of change, the discrediting of scientific socialism, the horrors of much Cold War science,

and the problematic identification of rationality with particular human subjects and not others militated against our support of “Big Science,” and with reason, if I may use that expression. This also encouraged the fundamental skepticism of post-structuralism and social movements alike—a splitting away from the certainties of a united oppositional front and form of thought (Miller, 1993 and 1997).

But now we face—and largely embrace—both a united front—the need to diminish damage to the planet—and a unified truth—science. In this instance, we are on the side of reason—so when very conventional entities such as the United Nations, refereed journals, and the professoriate at fancy schools say something that proves human-generated climate change is authentic, we applaud and deride the skeptical mystics or coin-operated deniers within universities, think tanks, and the *bourgeois* media.

Quite right, too; but this means joining science’s world as one of knowledge and activism combined, rather than separated, as in a fantasy where we had social change on our side and occasionally worried that they might have objectivity on theirs.

That complicates matters further, as it takes us into a realm where we must value such problematic transcendental signifiers as “excellence;” where we think people with high qualifications from Research-One schools and publications in professionally-ranked journals matter more than second-rate reactionaries (Anderegg, 2010). It is equally uncomfortable when we like the idea of grassroots activism and abjure notions of false consciousness—but must recognise that half the U.S. public is deluded about climate change, and elite scientists are not (Pew Research Centre, 2015a).

That does not mean we should be true believers ourselves and fail to scrutinise the workings of climate scientists (Lahsen, 2013). It does mean we should investigate the dubious counter-claims made by deniers and the disproportionate coverage they are accorded in the U.S. *bourgeois* media (Freudenberg and Muselli, 2013). The vast majority of academic criticism of these deniers comes from science. Across the social sciences there has been an extraordinary silence—just look at leading journals (Goodall, 2008).

Truth is on our side, quality is real, and both we and the right are vying for social change. We are all activists now. The difference is that we are working in support of a scientific worldview. Personal transformation and definition should be entirely secondary.

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