

Afterword

Activist Scholars or Radical Subjects?

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In the introduction, Charles Hale discusses the prickly issue of “shared political sensibilities” among scholars involved in activist research, claiming “a shared commitment to basic principles of social justice that is attentive to the inequalities of race, gender, class and sexuality and aligned with struggles to confront and eliminate them.” He further posits a strong, necessary connection between the authors’ progressive politics and their chosen activist methodologies. Authors in this volume also reference the contradictions of “institutionalizing” activist research within academic institutions that situate and discipline.

Clearly, contributors have a shared desire to translate academic skills and positions into vehicles of passion for transformative social change and human liberation. However, the tentativeness that runs through the collection regarding this desire stems in part from the self-policing (against [nonelite] radicalism) that results from our participation in corporate academe. Such sites are at best liberal-reformist in their institutional politics and at worst complicit with the global military-industrial, and consumer-commercial, complex that enforces and/or regulates the marginalization and impoverishment of the majority of the world.

Reform might be the best that some can realistically hope to accomplish through engaged scholarship (of course, some engaged scholarship is explicitly reformist). Yet most of the authors here would agree that as world citizens and as activist scholars who work as academics we search for a transformative political agenda.

Shared desire for change is likely to be shaped by some affinity (no matter how tepid) for revolutionary struggle. Seeking *collectivities*—that is, communities shaped by egalitarian sociality that reject dominance and concentrations of power—a revolutionary is guided by love (as Ché Guevara famously stated). Love and outrage over injustices are motiva-

tions and sustaining emotions in revolutionary collectivities. The *guerre-ro del amor* becomes a warrior lover who understands struggle and battle as expressions of commitment, loyalty, sharing of self—a selflessness that is not sacrifice but fulfillment through collectivity. The unfolding of self within the collective, just as the self develops in its individuality, is likely to be the foundation for radical subjectivity.

Love functions as a counternarrative and alternate reality to narcissism. By *narcissism* we mean the self-absorption, competitiveness, and careerism characteristic of the “normal” academic. We are arguing for activist scholarship not as therapeutic but rather as a radical, potentially revolutionary, alternative to the corporate university. Thus, in considering an alternative, we have to examine three issues for struggle raised by Hale and volume contributors. First, is it possible to open up our institutions in order to create “more supportive space for the particular kind of research that we do”? Second, do the rewards and operating principles of these institutions force us into “elitism and hierarchy” expressed as narcissism and conformity? Third, will our mere presence and participation within elitist institutions make us complicit in the subjugation of subaltern communities? Concerning “supportive space” in the academy, higher education depends upon the continued support of elites, given that it is a leading sector of the global North whose governing principles include the management and control of disenfranchised communities. Institutions of higher education have a vested interest in keeping scholarship “objective” (mystifying), “nonpolitical” (nonsubversive), and “academic” (elitist)” and in continuing to reserve the most advanced technical training for that small portion of the world’s population who will manage the rest, as well as consume or control its resources and political economies. Unless elite educational institutions are transformed, activist research will never reside within the academic mainstream as an entity that produces a revolutionary, or even radical, counternarrative and practice.

Antonio Gramsci writes that academics are the organic intellectuals of the bourgeoisie. As noted in many of the preceding chapters, incentives offered by the academy reward those whose knowledge production contributes to elite power. This plays to our narcissistic conformity. That same system diminishes the production of potentially transgressive political knowledge by questioning its “objective” status or “scientific” value. (Dis)incentives channel the dissemination of potentially radical knowledge into journals and books where its usefulness to the dominated becomes increasingly marginal and its commodification creates currency for antiradicals. Our continued participation in these institutions

strengthens them by allowing them to make hegemonic claims to fostering “academic freedom,” a “marketplace of ideas,” and rational neutrality, but we are not inherently handmaidens to the reproduction of control.

THE ACADEMIC ARENA: APPEARANCE, DISCOURSE, PERFORMANCE

We insert into the academy at three points: appearance, communication or discourse, and performance on the staged arena of academic life. Progressives maintain the continuity of systems of dominance at the first two points of entry and have the potential for disrupting them at the third point: that is, we can exit the staged arena. We can be organic intellectuals of formations other than the academy—that is, relevant radical subjects—if, and only if, we reject the sites of entry and performance as *final destination points for activist politics* for social justice.

Let us consider the implications of the three points of our entry (and the possible point for our departure). First, there is physical entry into the academy itself. The notion that mere appearance of progressives in institutionalized learning constitutes a disruption of the normative reproduction or the continuity of repression seems shortsighted. Just to have women, queers, and people of color in academe is insufficient, in and of itself, for social change. Second, there is the entry point of communication and political rhetoric through academic discourse. The view that writing or teaching in a “radical” vein, or building progressive units within the academy, transforms educational institutions also seems myopic. Neither entry nor communication is sufficient to incite transformation. Radical ideas can easily be commodified to accommodate hegemonic institutions in their claims of impartiality that mask their facility to reproduce or enable dominant social structures.

But the third entry point, of the staged arena, can actually function as an exit point from the academic machinery. Our work with marginalized communities as a destination point for our intellectual and political selves requires that we connect to radical collectives embedded in communities struggling for social justice. They exist identifiably as marginalized minority formations seeking radical change in ways similar and dissimilar to the formations of radical academics. As does the larger society, the academy functions as an identifiable aggregate that harbors collectives that are conservative, liberal, or radical (the last being marginal). Radical-minded groups are not trapped in their respective spheres if they seek like

groups in other sites. We are handmaidens to the bourgeoisie until we exit the academic arena in search of these radical collectivities.

All of those who define work as academics by progressive agendas will not necessarily exit. Those who define their teaching and publications of critical thinking (antiracist, feminist, queer, Marxist, anti-imperialist) as inherently radical are likely not to exit. The predictable stressors of the "safe" environment of conservative-liberal academe foster less aversion than radical praxes emanating from sites that elites do not control.

Skepticism regarding the intellectual powers and leadership of radical sectors within nonacademic communities is an equal-opportunity affair among ideologically embattled academics. Progressive academics while besieged in the institution may also fight against radicals linked to collectivities. Dialogic warfare waged by progressives to control political discourse and meaning suggests that radicals loyal to the academy are not necessarily radical subjects.

Radical academics may point to the hegemony of the institution, and its dominant intellectuals, without challenging their own power and investment in these structures. Their "outsider" status mystifies the power and privileges of progressive activist scholars. Once truly outside the academy, academic-bound radicals may be unmasked as "insiders" aligned with institutional power. Stable identity constructs as "transformative" or "activist" scholars crumble—except for those who can reconstitute themselves as practitioners outside the academic arena. Those who can do so are no longer merely "outsiders" belonging to or within the academy. In the shell game that is academe, they are able to break a losing streak in a rigged game by locating the mark: the mark only materializes outside. Leaving the academy and embedding ourselves in collectivities, we act beyond conventional society. This is one of the true hallmarks of the radical subject, a sign that distinguishes him or her from the activist scholar.

With the academy as stage or arena, academics politically perform themselves. Even given the power differentials within the academy, we all share some of the spoils of war. Alexander Kojeve's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (1980) posits a master-slave dynamic in which the slave is actually the more powerful, since the master is dependent on his or her labor. Academic-bound radicals, as slaves, despite their marginalization engender new thinking and analyses and through their very criticisms of the prevailing order function to revitalize that order. Some may recognize this "power" and become loath to relinquish the prerogative of a "slave."

The performative shapes the interdependency of academic radicals, liberals, and conservatives. One performs an ideological subject position. In

the academy, conservatives and liberals dominate the contextual arena and the material ability to stage performance, providing structure to both props and script. Radical subjects, to construct and control the presentation of their own politics, need a departure, an exit from the arena. If they refuse to exit, academic-bound radicals reject radical subjectivity and validate the reproduction of hierarchies in which we function as powerful "outsiders." Consequently, academic-bound radicals more easily share the arena with liberals and conservatives than with radical subjects as activists.

THE RADICAL SUBJECT

Perhaps only the academic-bound radical or activist researcher possesses a coherent public persona in the academy. In contradistinction, radical subjects may have little or no coherence in the academic arena, and this encourages their search for an exit. Inside the arena, such subjects operate not from a stance of political or moral superiority but from the position of a fractured self. While academic-bound radicals posit a coherence that is intelligible (only?) in the academic arena, fractured subjects suggest a coherence shaped by political literacy emanating from communities confronting crisis and conflict. Both the academic-bound radical as "coherent" subject and the radical subject as the fractured self share similar fears and weaknesses: loss of status and respectability, diminishment of social stability and material resources. The fractured self can guard against its potential losses by entering on levels one and two mentioned above, appearance and communication: show up to work, teach class, publish, convene conferences, build programs. But entry will not protect it from other fears: those of irrelevancy and bad faith. *Furthermore, the radical subject is not a revolutionary subject given his refusal to accept the losses from nonparticipation in repressive institutions.*

Despite its political limitations, the fractured self of the radical subject desires what the academy cannot provide: relevancy and accountability to collectivities resisting domination. The radical subject rejects the arena provided by the academy to perform as center-stage spectacle or sideshow attraction. The desire for recognition and legitimization in a context other than that built by the academy is what fractures and pushes the radical subject outside, off stage. Radical subjects seeking activism outside the academy do not try to create a space inside as a final destination point or as an identity marker for radicalism.

We have argued that whereas the academic-bound radical enters the stage of performance and public recognition as another destination (after appearance and labor), the fractured self as radical subject exits. Therefore, we contest the viability of elite structures to reproduce themselves while reproducing repression and claiming our allegiance *in performance*. We do not contest our obligations (contractual agreements for material and emotional remuneration) to appear and communicate—to show up, teach, write, conference, workshop, build programs. We contest only the performance of the loyal outsider in Kojeve's master-slave dynamic.

Earlier we stated that our mere presence allowed elite institutions to make claims for themselves as encompassing diversity (of gender, color, ideology, sexuality) and therefore as being comprehensive and liberal in scope. We identified three categories in order not to conflate them, so that presence and communication are not inherently synonymous with performance. We have little control over the meanings given to our appearances or our words within the academy; we have agency only over our departure from the academic staging of our radicalisms.

The institution has the power to fix us in ways that valorize it. Still, to appear is not necessarily the same as to conform. To practice a radical activism, we seek an appropriate staging ground unavailable within the academy. The fractured subject is mobile, not stationary or stagnant.

Exploring political action unauthorized by the institution, we may find a level of "performance" that institutions will be forced to ignore because they cannot interpret activism within a totalizing, assimilating narrative. Imagine transport as mobility, mobility as potentiality. To be able to walk in and walk out, and to return, is a freedom wielded by the radical subject (to be able to act freely is an agency wielded by the revolutionary subject). There is likely to be a price to pay for this exercise of agency and independence. While most enter the staged arena, the radical subject may depart. It is in the departure from managed performance that fractured subjects—and their present and future collaborations with collectives of affinity, shared passions, revolutionary aspirations—can be located.

We seek spaces that constitute their own sites of struggle. So we leave academia to make connections with collectivities within which our very elitism is challenged and devalued. As radical rather than revolutionary subjects, we accept our engagement with academic institutions while asserting our responsibility to be more than mere performers. Hence we offer ourselves, and encourage our students, to labor for justice.

The meaning of our productivity cannot be determined by academia alone. Seeking the exit door, we search for meaning, value, and political relevance given that our institutions are incapable of providing the conditions for radicalism as anything other than performance. Resistance to violent and premature social and biological death requires that we as activist researchers change into radical subjects.

REFERENCE

Kojeve, Alexander. 1980. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.