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Janet R. Jakobsen

Most academic conversations about the relationship between scholarship and activism begin with the assumption that connections between the two are good. This assumption is particularly prevalent in fields of study formed by social movements of the 1960s and 1970s—race and ethnic studies; women’s, gender, and sexuality studies; and migration and diaspora studies. But this assumption can lead one to overlook how connection to action outside the academy has also gained the status of common sense in an array of academic fields and even among university administrators. Although progressives, including progressive students, are often concerned about a potential “gap” between academic and activist work, we also need to take into account the ways in which the university makes use of certain forms of “real world” activity—for example, through rubrics of civic engagement and service-learning. Particularly in the contemporary university, with increasing bureaucratic concern for accountability, building links between academic and real-world undertakings is not only possible, it is made imperative by administrators, trustees, and regents.

In the contemporary academy, where the connections between the university and governance are being tightened through imperatives like “effectiveness,” academic institutions may well seek out connections to activist practice that is similarly focused on governance.¹ In the name of community service, for example, students participate in programs where they learn to manage the lives of those without access to college education. The connections between academia and governance are relatively direct in fields like policy studies or economics, but fields associated with social movements may face conundrums in the current climate. If academics focus on critique as a form of knowledge or make connections to activists who are critical of governance, they may be accused of failing to be effective. Yet, as this forum makes clear, collaboration with the university can incorporate activist-intellectual projects into “the governance structures of a settler academy” (Scott Lauria Morgensen) and/or have a “depoliticizing effect” (Mara Kaufman), and/or enmesh activist projects within “the mighty forces of academia’s individualism and its participation in

ongoing imperialism, neoliberalism, and genocide” (Aimee Carrillo Rowe).

How to avoid these traps is a particularly acute question for fields of study (whether disciplinary or interdisciplinary) grounded in the humanities and humanistic social sciences where critique can be a primary focus. Sometimes the choices seem particularly stark—either the distortion of both academic and activist pursuits by the imperatives of governmentality, on one side, or utter irrelevance, on the other.

There are potential ways to navigate this dilemma. Here I propose an approach that can preserve and build on the power of critique valued in humanistic circles, even as activist-academic collaborations contribute to both knowledge and action. The Barnard Center for Research on Women (BCRW) has worked for the past several years on collaborative projects with community-based activist organizations in New York City. Some of the leaders of these projects had a chance to reflect on activist and academic work in a recent panel discussion at Barnard, including Ai-jen Poo of the National Domestic Workers’ Association; the activist dancer and choreographer Sydnie Mosley, who created the Harlem-based “Window Sex Project”; Amber Hollibaugh of Queers for Economic Justice; and Ana Oliveira of the New York Women’s Foundation, which provided grants to seventeen community-based organizations for a citywide project on reproductive justice.

As Sydnie says in the discussion, academic research and resources can provide helpful supports to developing activist and artistic work, providing materials necessary to “create the new” as Ana puts it. The resultant projects avoid certain dangers (while doubtless encountering others) by moving across various boundaries: intermixing advocacy and critique, the empirical and the humanistic, as well as academic and activist knowledge production—sometimes “using” academic knowledge in activist pursuits and sometimes synthesizing knowledge produced in activist settings.

For example, Amber spoke of the “Desiring Change” project, which started with a problem in organizing: why does desire keep dropping out of organizing projects, even projects that explicitly intend to connect desire to multiple issues? Amber’s point here is not about LGBTIQ people per se but about desire, including both erotic desire(s) and desire for another, more just, world. “How,” Amber asks, “do you build a movement that expresses hope for a different world, if you don’t claim one of the possibilities for where that hope might reside?” (Embed Amber 44:46-49:15) She is particularly concerned about how clear articulations of desire—along with joy, pleasure, and erotics—can incite people to join movements and build possibilities. Yet if desire

repeatedly drops off the horizon as organizing progresses, could a problem lie within the model of organizing itself? The “Desiring Change” project brought together people from across organizations to ask these questions and produce new knowledge together. In other words, critique, including Amber’s critique of the state of contemporary organizing, opened new possibilities for both knowledge and action.

The “Desiring Change” project was developed, in part, by activists who wanted to step back from the intensities of organizing and focus on the intellectual aspects of their projects. The academy can provide space and time for such reflection (albeit with increasing limitations); it can also provide support for the intellectual work required to develop organizing projects. In 2008 BCRW hosted the first national congress of domestic workers’ organizations, sponsored by the National Domestic Workers’ Alliance (NDWA), along with a follow-up northeast regional Congress in 2009. These groups worked with BCRW to develop a report, “Valuing Domestic Work,” that outlines the framework for their organizing along with a video highlighting their efforts. This organizing has been incredibly successful, culminating in 2010 with the New York State Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights, the first legislation passed in the United States to offer basic workplace protections to domestic workers.

The bill’s passage was based on NDWA’s and DWU’s analysis of domestic workers’ status as part of a group of workers excluded from the category of labor. Through histories that deny the personhood of some workers, in the United States workers in fields like domestic work, farmwork, and various forms of piece work that are associated with slavery or immigration have also been excluded from basic labor protections, including the right to time off and basic compensation for severance of employment. In addressing this problem, the bill of rights was a major victory for domestic workers, as well as a shift in labor law in the United States.

Because of its argument for legislative expansion of the category “protected workers,” at one level this organizing is basic liberal humanist advocacy. At another level, however, this organizing includes a critique of precisely the autonomous individual who is the subject of modern freedom and wage labor. First, of course, the movement shows that the effects of chattel slavery are not over when labor associated with slavery is not as “free” as other forms of work. Nor is the free market actually free. It does not allow for the free movement of individuals to sell their labor but uses national boundaries to devalue and coerce the labor of immigrants. Even more profoundly, however, the work undertaken by domestic workers challenges the liberal humanist concept of

the autonomous individual at its core.

“Doing the Work That Makes All Work Possible” is the title of a report by the Filipino migrant workers organization, DAMAYAN, and this phrase clarifies that the people usually recognized as autonomous individuals are not, in fact, autonomous. Rather, those who historically have been able to sell their labor through protected freedoms are dependent on forms of domestic labor provided by others, including family members and paid domestic laborers. The report goes on to detail the working conditions experienced by members of DAMAYAN and how the free market and the liberal myth of autonomy enforce global labor migration and exploitation. In other words, taking seriously the claims of those who do “the work that makes all work possible” requires more than an expansion of the liberal humanist social contract. The domestic and excluded workers’ movements refuse to give up either a deep critique of the conditions of contemporary capitalism or much-needed advocacy focused on legislative change.

In light of the complex combination of critique and advocacy across these movements, how might we (both activists and academics) pursue such boundary-crossing combinations? As all of the activists on the Barnard panel argued, collaborations of various kinds are much needed. Ai-jen put the point succinctly: “If we continue to organize in silos, we will never have the power . . . to achieve even the demands that exist inside of those silos.” (Embed Ai-jen 1:20:53-1:22:26) Yet, like Amber’s point about desire, such collaboration is often precisely what drops out of theory and practice. The invocation of a “movement of movements” may be common enough,² but do we really know what is required to hold such metamovement possibilities together? One reason to pursue activist-academic collaborations may be precisely because “we” (activists and academics alike) *don’t* know. Rather, there is a need for knowledge production from multiple sites; a need that is at once urgent at the most practical levels and that also requires what might seem to be the most impractical forms of critique.

Notes

1. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, ed., *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End, 2007); Janet Halley, Prabha Kotiswaran, Hila Shamir, and Chantal Thomas, “From the International to the Local in Feminist Legal Responses to Rape, Prostitution/Sex Work, and Sex Trafficking: Four Studies in Contemporary Governance Feminism,” *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender* 29 (Summer 2006): 335–423. For an interesting

exploration of how to negotiate between activist commitments and the demands of governance, see Sonia E. Alvarez, "The Latin American Feminist NGO 'Boom,'" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1.2 (1999): 181–209.

2. This slogan developed in relation to organizing that brought together various movements against corporate globalization, particularly the World Social Forum. See Tom Mertes, ed., *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (London: Verso, 2004).