

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0603

Scholars in the Streets: Portraits of Disruptive Faculty Activism in 20th Century Social Movements

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Research Domain: Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract: This research uses portraiture to chronicle four powerful examples of faculty activism. The study asks: how have postsecondary educators collectively engaged in a diverse range of disruptive activism within 20th Century social movements? Data comes from oral history interviews with faculty activists and archival materials. Data are analyzed using narrative and ethnographic tools to create portraits of faculty groups who mobilized their disruptive power. Findings reveal that faculty have four primary types of interdependent power: power as employees, accreditors, recognized knowledge producers and authorities, and as bodies/people who can block or take up space. These forms of power are explained and illustrated through historical stories of their usage within 20th Century social movements. This research fills a gap in the historical record of postsecondary faculty activism and expands definitions of scholar activism, allowing today's postsecondary educators to imagine and enact a wider array of possibilities.

Paper: History is replete with instances of postsecondary educators engaging in struggles for justice. However, these histories are too often hidden and over-simplified (Chatterton, Hodkinson & Pickerill, 2010; Engler & Engler, 2016; Piven, 2006). This research tells their stories and expands notions of faculty activism. It asks: how have postsecondary educators collectively engaged in a diverse range of disruptive activism within 20th Century United States' social movements?

Many faculty activists are accused of being "too liberal" and are told to disassociate their professional work from their political selves (Boyte, 2014; Giroux, 2017; Pellow, 2012; Young, Battaglia & Cloud, 2010). Research on public scholarship and scholar activism legitimates how faculty have a rightful role in addressing social and ecological injustices (Catone, 2017; Checker, 2014; Colbeck & Wharton-Michael, 2006; Connery, 2011). However, this literature often positions scholars as individual actors who make change through institutionally sanctioned channels (Casey, 1993; Franklin, 2015; Hart, 2005; Kezar, 2010; Marshall & Anderson, 2009). This individualistic and institutional thinking is a (neo)liberal maneuver that weakens faculty capacity to act in solidarity (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005). Seeking other possibilities, this study turns faculty activism that uses interdependent power.

Everyday people have access to interdependent power; it comes from leveraging one's non-cooperation upon the institutions and norms that *depend* on that cooperation (Engler & Engler, 2016; Piven, 2006; 2017; Sharp, 2007). Examples of interdependent power range from strikes, to boycotts, to "women... who refused their role as sexual partners," or "riots, where crowds break with the compact that usually governs civic life" (Piven, 2006, p. 21). Historians assert that the activation

of interdependent power is at the heart of major instances of social change, from overthrowing dictators (Sharp, 2007) to “great moments of equalizing reform” (Piven, 2006, p. 21).

This research used portraiture (a combination of ethnography and narrative inquiry) to study five historical cases of postsecondary faculty activism (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997). Criteria for cases included: United States geography; 20th Century timeframe; collaborative use of interdependent power; and diverse coalition configurations, tactics, and social movement affiliations. Data included oral history interviews with faculty activists and archival materials (e.g. meeting minutes, photographs, flyers, and media coverage).

Primary findings for this research are portraits (literary stories of each case), which I will share excerpts from during my presentation. Portraits cover:

1. Anti-Vietnam and anti-military research actions at the University of Michigan (1965-1967), including the first-ever teach-in, faculty withholding of grades, and sit-ins;
2. Five-month-long student and faculty strikes at San Francisco State University (1968-1969) for Black Power and Third-World-Liberation;
3. The anti-colonial movement for Indigenous land protection at the University of Hawaii, Manoa (1970) that included faculty, student, and community occupation of colonized lands and the blockading of bulldozers;
4. Coordinated faculty and student actions (1973-1978) at Hostos Community College to save the free, bilingual, and 98% Black and Latinx-serving school from closure, including lock-outs, sit-ins, coordinated strikes with local unions, TV take-overs, and hunger strikes.
5. Columbia University student and faculty hunger strikes and lock-outs (1985) to pressure divestment from apartheid South Africa.

Across the portraits, I identify four primary forms of interdependent power. First, faculty have power as employees. Students, administrators, and (for public universities) the state are dependent upon faculty labor. This power is activated primarily through striking. Second, faculty have power as accreditors. Students, students’ parents, administrators, the business economy, and the state are dependent upon faculty accrediting students. This power is activated primarily through the withholding of grades. Third, faculty have power as recognized knowledge producers and authorities. The government, media, and administrators are dependent upon faculty research to produce knowledge. This power is activated primarily through refusing research grants, releasing otherwise classified research, or changing research procedures. Fourth, faculty have power as bodies. Private industries, government organizations, university populations, and everyday people depend on faculty to keep their bodies healthy and clear of thoroughfares to maintain day-to-day business. This power is activated in many ways, including sit-ins, hunger strikes, blocking streets, placing one’s body between students and police or between a bulldozer and a house, etc.

Our capacity to respond to today’s injustices with creativity and vision is strengthened by the knowledge of how faculty before us have used their work as a site for political struggle. As historian Howard Zinn (2010) says, “If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction” (p. 279).

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