

“Higher education is activist or nothing at all!”: The Rationale for Epistemic Rebellion and Anti-Colonial Praxis

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Research Domains

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of activism within the context of higher education (HE). It challenges the Aristotelian dichotomy of theory and practice that has perpetuated intellectual ideas validating, creating and developing global systems of structural violence. It critiques the academy’s role in normalising oppressive systems like patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy, arguing for all hypotheses to be tested through experiential and, where necessary, transgressive means to assess their veracity and morality.

The paper also suggests that right-wing conservatism in higher education should fall under the rubric of activism and face the criticism of subjective bias endured by countercultural scholars and accusations that they undermine the university’s reputation through fermenting intellectual and social dissent. It advocates for a radical overhaul of HE’s epistemological and pedagogical frameworks to protect vulnerable populations from unethical praxis. Moreover, it draws upon philosophy and anthropology to envision an anti-colonial university model transcending traditional academic boundaries.

Full paper

‘The value of an education... is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks’
(Albert Einstein in Frank 1947)

On 2nd May 2024, US police officers used rubber bullets and tear gas to remove activist encampments erected by nonviolent protestors on university campuses across America. The students involved were calling for their institutions to either boycott, divest, or sanction organisations involved in the killing of innocent Palestinian civilians by Israel’s military in Gaza. At the same time, across the Atlantic, an open conference on *Gaza and Anthropology* was held at the London School of Economics (LSE). Scholars from LSE, Goldsmiths University, and University College London reflected on what meaningful role existed for the discipline and higher education overall when established conventions on academic freedom and human rights had given way to institutional silencing and complicity in acts of infanticide, ecocide and educide (ReliefWeb 2024; Alousi 2022).

Taken separately, these two examples of scholars as activists and vice-versa with students could erroneously be interpreted as different competing forms of public and academic rituals for securing social change or justice. Yet, together, they make visible the university's role as both a space and forum to address politically contentious issues of life and death, both on and off campus. Indeed, Foucault may very well have defined these matters as both being public representations of biopower; the regulation of life through an array of institutions, including the academy, with the ability to determine which populations, indeed which individuals 'to make live and [who] to let die' (1995). However, understanding how Foucault's model applies to today's universities requires considering Plato and Aristotle's original philosophical vision for the academy.

Plato argued that poets, the closest to what we could today term public intellectuals and activists, should be excluded from HE to prevent them from spreading misinformation that led young learners away from pursuing 'true' knowledge (Plato 2013). Aristotle's position on the issue was less critical and recognised that literature with aspirational, aesthetic qualities has an educative role in society, capable of imparting moral and intellectual ideas (1999). This is not to suggest that Aristotle regarded poetry as a vehicle to advocate for social change, he did not. Both philosophers held the view that one could not engage in the intellectual pursuit of higher education and simultaneously place theory in service to the activities of practice.

Today, being labelled an activist in a university setting still has pejorative connotations, just as the concept of irrationality remains an expletive across science. Indeed, such biases emerge from a common falsehood in society, which asserts that we can explain the mysteries and challenges faced by humanity affecting our planet, indeed the universe, through dispassionate modes of rational thought. However, excluding public intellectuals, artists and activists from contributing to and shaping debates that affect us all is an arrogant act which Thompson, Frank and Gleisar (2024) label as enabling 'The Blind Spot'; an artefact of triumphalism in science. It is a puzzling argument, considering higher education has always been home to transgressive thinking and countercultural movements opposing institutional forms of violence enabled through the power of academic discourse. Perhaps our problem with recognising this as fact stems from an atavistic belief that the university exists not as a moral necessity to enrich all of humanity but as an eternal struggle between elites that advocate and oppose ideas based on their political aesthetics, even if this means violently displacing logic and human-centred ethics for a reparative, pedagogy of hope (2021; Sriprakash 2022).

As a decolonial anthropologist, I believe the academy is torn between adherents advocating for the radical conservation of racial capitalism, and others, like myself, seeking the abolition of carceral societies (Toraif and Mueller 2023). However, I hope we can all agree that universities must work hard to remain relevant to the social and metaphysical worlds in which they exist to avoid intellectual stagnation and the decline of HE's moral authority. With hindsight, we can now appreciate that Einstein's riposte about imagination being more important than intelligence equally applies to the indisputable role and value of activist thinking in higher education. My preferred method of doing this relies on the HE sector utilising epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2010), institutional activism (Agbetu 2021) and organic intellectuals (Crehan 2002) able to disrupt cognitive economies of ignorance (Rice et al. 2022) for a critical, ethical, transformative form of knowledge production dedicated to serving all of humanity (Macdonald 2021; Harrison 1997).

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