

The corporatisation of activism: marketisation, domestication, monetisation

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Social and political activism in academic life is closely and conventionally associated with intellectual positionality whereby individual academics surface their ideological commitments as part of an activist teaching agenda. This approach to university pedagogy is at odds with the Weberian notion of the neutral scholar and the Humboldtian tradition of the university as an independent think tank that does not take 'sides'. However, in this conceptual paper it will be argued that activism has been appropriated as a marketing tool and that a number of radical agendas for social change have been domesticated as a result. Examples from global research universities will illustrate the argument including policies covering climate change, equity and diversity, and decolonisation. A parallel will be drawn between the corporatisation of activism and the evolution of business ethics within commercial organisations where corporate social responsibility (CSR) is now a key element of business strategy.

Full paper

Prevailing analysis of university activism focuses largely on the socio-political motivations of academics and students as individuals and groups set on bringing about change and social reform (eg Khaitan, 2022; Karter *et al*, 2021; Cole & Heinecke, 2020). Such understandings are, in turn, strongly connected with the notion of positionality in social science research as opposed to Weberian notions of the 'neutral' professor (Weber, 2004). In the United States the debate about academic freedom has long been caricatured in these terms with so-called left-leaning or 'liberal' professors demonised as dangerous radicals ever since the McCarthy witch-hunt during the 1950s (Lazarsfeld & Thielens, 1958).

It is clearly important to understand why and how academics engage as individual scholar-activists (or 'scholactivists') based on their personal socio-political beliefs, a commitment to action and a sense of solidarity with other activists. However, this means that the role of the university as a structural agent of change has tended to be overlooked. Global research universities around the world now embrace a strong, espoused agenda centred on social justice including the explicit adoption of UNESCO's sustainability development goals (SDGs). They advocate commitment to climate and environmental leadership principles, decolonisation, indigenisation, and global citizenship among other agendas for social and epistemological reform. The channelling of what might have formerly been considered ideas and principles associated with radicalism and the counterculture have now become a mainstay of university policies. Some universities, such as Bristol in the UK, have chosen to demonstrate their commitment to environmentalism and sustainability by declaring a climate emergency while others in Australia and Canada have issued pledges to indigenous knowledge and concerted efforts to decolonise

the curriculum. Interdisciplinary research centres devoted to addressing the world's most pressing social and economic problems now abound. Universities also promote global citizenship and the concept of student 'voice' and 'engagement'. Student gap years, once an individualised and haphazard feature of youth development in the 1960s and 70s, is widely integrated into the curriculum as part of service learning.

Universities compete to climb the sustainability rankings, such as UGreenMetric, win awards and accolades for the greenest campus, and show that they have made the most significant contribution to or have strategies that are suitably aligned with UNESCO's SDGs. Hence, rather than existing at the fringes of society, activism has now been mainstreamed, corporatized, marketized and monetised. This process of corporatisation may be traced back to the 1970s when business organisations started to appropriate the pro-peace, anti-Vietnam counterculture. Coca-Cola's iconic 'Hilltop' Television advertisement ('I'd like to buy the world a coke') was first aired in 1971 and Pepsi did much the same again with its 'resist' advertisement. The counterculture has become a strategic opportunity and a marketized commodity (Heath and Potter, 2006). This corporatisation of activism is now a mainstream element of all large business organisations.

The entry of corporate activism into the world of higher education has also been influenced in no small measure by the influence of so-called 'hippie capitalists' such as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos (Bousalis, 2021) and the philanthro-activism this generation of billionaires has promoted, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF). In the same way that large business corporations have understood and now leveraged the reputational value of 'shareholder activism' (Gillan & Starks, 2000), universities have embraced the business value of academic activism in parallel. The term 'corporate citizenship' is now a mainstream term in the management literature. This appropriation of the counterculture by universities apes the development of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in business organisations. CSR is a well-established acronym and it is clear that while this language may not be used in the higher education sector, the fundamental ethos is now much the same. This domestication of the activist agenda poses challenges for 'scholactivism' (Khaitan, 2022) and raises questions about the agency of anti-establishmentism.

The corporatisation of activism means that activism is now a competitive or shared space with individuals, activist groups, and universities asserting their identity as change agents dedicated to social reform. One interpretation of this trend is that it has squeezed the space of scholactivists to issues such as precarity and pay and conditions of academic employment. Yet, it is also evident that as certain activist causes have been mainstreamed a new set of issues have emerged, such as the transgender rights movement, which the university is yet to corporatize and domesticate. This indicates that corporatisation can also be understood positively as an indicator that a number of erstwhile activist causes have become policy priorities.

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