The activist university: Identities, profiles, conditions

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Abstract
At first sight, the very term ‘the activist university’ may seem strange. Universities have to be active in all manner of ways – insofar as we can attribute actions to large complex institutions – but ‘activist’? An activist is someone who takes up the cudgels in a cause, who contends against an enemy and demonstrates for and even fights for a cause. Students may be activists in movements of radical politics and can be seen resisting and even attacking the forces of the state. But what might it mean for their university, indeed any university, to be an activist university? I argue that the term ‘the activist university’ opens to different meanings. The concept of the activist university is a space in which alternative interpretations jostle with each other. These different readings are expressive of competing senses of the responsibilities of the university and its place in society. Academic activism lends itself to a panoply of stances. Nevertheless, I argue that academic activism is a universal category that gains its fullest realization when it is exhibited in a situation of epistemic injustice and is an expression of epistemic agency.

Keywords
Academic activism, epistemic agency, epistemic injustice, students, academics

Introduction
At first sight, the very term ‘the activist university’ may seem strange. Universities have to be active in all manner of ways – insofar as we can attribute actions to large complex institutions – but ‘activist’? An activist is someone who takes up the cudgels in a cause, who contends against an enemy and demonstrates for and even fights for a cause. Students may be activists in movements of radical politics and can be seen resisting and even attacking the forces of the state. But what might it mean for their university, indeed any university, to be an activist university?
I shall argue that the term ‘the activist university’ legitimately opens to different meanings. The concept of the activist university is a space in which alternative interpretations jostle with each other. These different readings are expressive of competing senses of the responsibilities of the university and its place in society, and of the university being multiply positioned in the world. In turn, the different ideas of the activist university connect directly with practice and policy (as in this volume’s title). I shall contend not for any straightforward alignment either with practice or with policy but for a conception of the activist university that works its activism through a mix of interpretations. Academic activism is a universal category that lends itself to a panoply of legitimate stances.

The activist university: an empty or overfull concept?

Here are ten putative examples of the activist university: students involved on the streets in movements of radical politics, seeking to (i) overturn a particular set of policies (as in Hong Kong) and even to (ii) overthrow a regime (as, recently, in Chile); (iii) student doctors being enlisted to work in hospitals as they increase their capacities to respond to the coronavirus; (iv) a professor with expertise in Greek Civilization presenting a television documentary; students expressing their dissatisfaction with (v) their curriculum (as in protests against a narrow economics curriculum, as in Manchester, England (Inman, 2013)) or with (vi) symbols of oppression with which their university is associated (as in the ‘Rhodes must Fall’ campaigns in Cape Town and Oxford); (vii) an academic seeking to maximize the ‘impact’ of his climate research by projecting its campaigning potential; (viii) the 40-year-long programme of critical pedagogy, led by Henry Giroux; (ix) students being active in the community as part of their programme of study; and (x) a university, intent on an ethical investment policy, deciding to close its investments in certain kinds of private corporations.

Is there any tissue that connects all these examples of academic activism? Is there a universality here that we can identify? Or should we simply say that the idea of university activism offers a discursive umbrella, under which contingent, particular and very disparate claimants to the title can stand, without much if any contact between them? (cf. Butler et al., 2000) Any urge to seek for a common thread is misguided, it might be thought, and betrays an insecurity. Perhaps there are no necessary connections that have to be satisfied in order to count as examples of the activist university.

We are caught in a quandary, it seems. On the one hand, a probably vain search for some essence of the activist university; and, on the other hand, sensing a situation in which there are no connections of any substance between the many ways in which the term ‘the activist university’ might have application; and a sense, too, of there being open borders around the concept with little in the way of conditions of entry or exclusion. ‘The activist university’ seems to be a concept with too many substances or without substance altogether; either an overfull or an empty signifier.

There are, however, at least two other options. Firstly, that the different forms of the activist university can be discerned as exhibiting clusters. Perhaps there are dominant regions where the concept can be identified, with specific examples being situated with some precision. The second option is more radical, namely that one or more fault-lines can be detected, with examples of the activist university being separated, while still counting as being examples of activism. I shall keep both options in view as we go forward. After all, neither of these two possibilities has the consequences of our earlier dilemma, of undue cluttering of possibilities or conceptual emptiness. And each of these latter two options – of
clusters and of one or more fault-lines – opens the possibility of some analytical insight. We might end up with a map of the territory; and just like the intrigue of geological maps, we may discern underlying forces as well as formations of visible entities.

Active and passive

In his writings, Antonio Gramsci (2005: 106–114) picked up the already present concept of ‘passive revolution’, and perhaps some of the sentiments of that concept may be helpful here. But how might it be pressed into service here? Retaining a sense of a struggle against the state, it could suggest either a determination to promote counter-values or a steadfast determination to carry on as before. In both cases, there is an alignment to a mode of life held valuable, but the two cases prompt a distinction between two kinds of passivity. The passivity can be especially internal: in an extreme example, the academic who has been incarcerated in solitary confinement by the state as a political prisoner for outspoken views continues to hold illicit values without any further explicit expression of them. Or the passivity can be external. A state forms the view that humanities are surplus to requirement and its Minister of Higher Education makes speeches questioning the value of mediæval history. The humanists, though, do not take to the streets but continue as ever, writing their books and articles, and helping their students in becoming citizens of the world. Their actions are external but passive; they desist from taking up the cudgels.

Note that in neither of these two cases is the outcome clear. The incarcerated academic may die or, as did Gramsci, write even more vigorously. The universities’ humanities departments could be closed. And the incarcerated academic may emerge blinking into the sunlight, resolved to publish the thoughts that had been occurring to him in the darkness of his cell. And the students of the humanities professors could form themselves into activist cells, writing blogs and articles and gaining much exposure in a campaign to save those beleaguered departments. ‘Passive’ and ‘active’ can, therefore, be only temporary markers, gaining their particular meanings in singular circumstances.

But there is yet another cluster of meanings that may be invoked under the heading of ‘passive revolution’. By and large, academics are not willing revolutionaries. And yet their characteristic academic acts may be revolutionary. Again, a distinction may be drawn. There are the intellectual revolutions of which Kuhn spoke (2012/1962), wherein a field is generally quiescent for a long period of time and where, like a dam bursting, it suddenly breaks forth under the pressure of tensions that had built up; and then a new paradigm (Kuhn’s term) is established. It was said of Wittgenstein that he brought about two revolutions in philosophy in his own life-time (Gellner, 1998).

Such revolutions are the result of individual academics and the members of an epistemic community – as a collectivity – going about their business in their customary way. And then, from time to time, intellectual revolutions may occur. And, in turn, those intellectual revolutions may just filter into the public sphere and help to bring about fundamental changes in the general weltanschauung. This is a kind of arm-chair activism but yet with huge possibilities. Consider here, too, the understandings of the ecological crises that have come about much as a result of academic thought from within the universities in the natural sciences, in environmental studies and in social theory and philosophy.

But there is also the potential for pedagogical revolutions. Think of the emergence of problem-based learning, which found its way early on into medical schools (Barrows and Tamblyn, 1980) This represented a fundamental shift not just pedagogically but in what it
was to be a doctor. The doctor’s professionalism was no longer felt to lie in the application
of knowledge to situations that presented themselves. The former knowledge-practice trans-
fer theory of professionalism was put in doubt. Now, the basic model was inverted. It was
practice that came first, giving rise to practical problems, that then required endeavour,
nous, judgement, inquiry, imagination, reflection and attentiveness to furnish some kind of
pragmatic solution. The doctor was seen as a problem-identifier and problem-solver; not as
a translator, carrying knowledge into the field of practice but as a ‘reflective practitioner’,
whose ‘reflection-in-action’ lay at the heart of her professionalism (Schon, 1987). This was a
revolution both in thought about what it was to be a professional and in professional
education, a revolution that continues to be much in dispute decades later.

In both cases, intellectual and pedagogical, we have examples of revolutionary activism
arising out of natural activities – of thought and curriculum design – elevated to their
highest levels. To revert to our earlier distinction, is this an active or a passive activism?
Is the prison-bound Gramsci writing his prison note-books active or passive? Is Robert
Hutchins, the young leader of Chicago University in the 1930s, to be seen as active or
passive in inventing a Great Books approach to the curriculum (Hutchins, 1936)?
Probably active, but it was very much an activism within the walls of the academy. It is
far from being an overt on-the-streets form of activism.

Two axes

So far, we have considered numerous contenders that might come under the heading of the
activist university; and we shall encounter yet others in the rest of this essay. But now let us
go further than the tentative distinctions so far proffered.

Here are two such scales that lie to hand in our discussion so far:

A. Intentional activism, the two poles of which would be (i) a strident, vocal, and visible
activism, in which the university becomes an oppositional force in society and, at the
other pole, (ii) a more subtle, quieter form of activism, perhaps taking the longer view of
diplomatically engaging with the main powerful institutions.

B. The other scale is structural activism, in which activities of the university take on forms
of activism by virtue of their simply being part of the structural being of universities. At
one pole are (iii) collective activities such as teaching and research that, by their very
nature, may exert profound effects on society. At the other end of this pole are (iv)
individual activities, in which for example individuals read and think and seek to place
themselves in slow private spaces, providing an interval separate from the main currents
of society.

Binary oppositions can be misjudged. The polarities of the two axes should be under-
stood as sliding scales, and with movement along each of them. With that qualification, let
us form an analytical grid by placing the two scales across each other. The two scales now
yield four quadrants, providing locations for different forms of activism:

a. Oppositional-collective:

Here would be placed the students on the streets in Hong Kong, or Santiago (Chile),
engaged in radical and overt forms of contestation against the state.
b. **Oppositional-individual:**

Here would be found cases of individual academics speaking out against the state, and being oppressed and perhaps even being imprisoned as a result (such cases have recently been reported, for example, in Turkey and China).

c. **Diplomatic-collective:**

Here would be located groups of academics working together to bring about a fundamental reform in higher education. For example, many universities and groups within them are instituting initiatives against the horizons of ecological crisis or, as another example, addressed to one or other of the United Nations’ Sustainability Development Goals. Although some of these efforts are being recognized, for the most part they are undertaken without much public fanfare. Efforts such as these could be said to be revolutionary in that they are implicitly directing the academy away from its internal interests, orienting it towards the world such that the world is taken as a point of departure in framing the activities of the university.

d. **Diplomatic-individual:**

Here could be placed the academic-as-public-intellectual. A prime example would be that of Edward Said, whose demeanour was never threatening or bombastic but measured, and yet much assisted in correcting a dismissive stance of the West towards ‘oriental’ cultures and so assisting a new regard not only for those of the East but for non-Western communities in general.

As stated, these four quadrants should be seen neither as bounded nor as tightly separated from each other for not infrequently instances will straddle the lines. Single instances may contain elements of more than one, and even all four, quadrants. Moreover, they will be in motion, dynamically altering their spread across the grid space.

Consider a leader of a student movement engaged in a programme of public action against a new student fees policy introduced by a government; and imagine that student on the mass media, explaining the students’ position, and working through the deficits of the government’s policy framework. The new system is argued variously to exert a regressive impact on those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, and is liable to deter applications. It may constitute a graduate tax, but it is argued that, nevertheless, the system will constrain those from the poorer socio-economic classes, who are likely to be risk averse, and unwilling to engage in an action, the benefits of which are long term.

In this example, *all four quadrants are in play*: the student leader is explicitly taking an oppositional stance and does so with the collective and interactive forces of the national students’ union (quadrant (a)); the student is there in the television studio responding by herself to the interviewer’s questioning (quadrant (b)); the student works interactively, both with the students across the country and in promoting the students’ position in public fora (quadrant (c)); and does so diplomatically, our individual student revealing uncanny abilities as a diplomat, manoeuvring among the relevant policy and political networks (quadrant (d)). Moreover, on one occasion, the student will act more as a lone individual; on other occasions, will act in concert with other students; on other occasions, will be seen in street protests; and on yet other occasions, will be seen diplomatically speaking truth to power.
The field of the activist university, therefore, is an open space with different positions within it but where the bearers of those positions are in motion. They stand in networks – of conventions, regulations, traditions and values – that are themselves in motion. There is no stable state for any stance or action that might bear the banner of the activist university. This instability brings in its wake a number of awkward issues.

**The hubris of activism**

One awkward issue is this: are there points at which activism threatens to defeat itself, with its own inner contradictions? Consider the case of no-platforming. The case for no-platforming is that a university is a space of respect for persons and, indeed, for life itself. Guided by such considerations, activism within a university could lead to an invited speaker being obliged to withdraw an invitation to participate in a public event, it being anticipated that the speaker’s words will conflict with such values. (Perhaps the speaker is an anti-abortionist, or is a representative of the agri-food industry and is seen as an apologist for animal slaughter, or is a representative of a government seen as unfairly treating an ethnic group, or has been casting doubt on the extent of the Holocaust.) However, such activism – in no-platforming a possible speaker – would run against John Stuart Mill’s dictum that ‘the peculiar evil of silencing … an opinion is that it is robbing the human race of an opinion . . . [to] those who dissent from the opinion still more than those who hold it.’ (Mill, 1969: 142)

Activism would claim to be acting in the interests of fairness, respect for person and truthfulness, but, if it is conducted without due care, it runs the risk of undermining those interests. A debate on a university campus between an apologist for the Apartheid regime and critic of the regime (an event encountered by the present author) would probably not be permitted today, the Apartheid apologist being likely to be deprived of a university platform. In that case, activism undermines itself. It does not just shut out the debate but diminishes the university. If viewpoints are excluded a priori, the raison d’être of the university is negated.

Mill’s reasoning is worth recording: ‘If the opinion (of the person being excluded) is right, [one is] deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, [one still] lose[s] what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.’ (Mill, 1969: 142) However, in the context of the university, there is more to be said; and I offer four points (although they can be set down only cursorily here).

The first is that the university is a space of reasons, argument, claims and counter-claims (cf. Bakhurst, 2011) and anything that prevents or jeopardises that process undermines the university. Teaching and research only have point if they are conducted in a spirit of contentiousness. Secondly, argument has pedagogical qualities of the most general sort. To be in the presence of – and even more to contribute to – argument is to open oneself up to being taught, to advance one’s thinking and, thereby, to move one’s being into a slightly different position. Thirdly, the prior exclusion of a voice is a form of dictatorship and assumes a position of truth. It not only denies others the right to hear a point of view but, in its closure, takes on the form of an ideology. Lastly, the university as a space of argument is an exemplar in society of critical reason and serves as a bulwark of democracy. It follows that, in the setting of the university, *a legitimate academic activism has to heed certain conditions and hold in view certain responsibilities.*
An additional distinction is opening here as between contending for a point of view within a discursive space and contending for a discursive space as such. Chomsky (1994) contends for democracy, albeit a much wider conception of democracy than that that is dominant, and this is an example of contending for a cause within a discursive space, albeit a narrowing discursive space; Habermas (1989; 1991) – especially in his theory of validity claims inherent in rational speech situations – contends for a rationalized life-world. Both are active. Chomsky, in contending for a point of view, is an activist; he takes sides within the discursive space that is available to him. Habermas is meta-active, in pressing for a rational discursive space in society as such. Habermas is, in effect, seeking to widen the discursive space within which the voice of a Chomsky can be heard.

Is it more virtuous to be active in seeking to widen the discursive space in society, in seeking to advance public understanding as to what it is to be rational and/or as to what it is to enjoy liberty; or is it to be an activist, on display in public explicitly and deliberately contending directly and overtly against the power of the state? The answer is a matter of temperament. What is evident is that quieter forms of activism can be enormously powerful. One does not have directly to take on the state or any other source of great power to be effective. Coolly articulating ideas in the public sphere and in defence of the public sphere may ultimately prove to be just as effective.

Two points may be made here. Activism can easily overreach itself. Hubris is too often its companion. It can assume that it has truth on its side when that has always to be established. And it can assume, too, that it alone is in possession of virtue, even when there are other parties in the arena. One thinks of Adorno, whose intellectual sympathies were with the student radicalism of the late 1960s but who was disconcerted by their violence, although Marcuse took an opposite line (Adorno and Marcuse, 1969). There are, therefore, limits to academic activism, and the limits here are those of a dotted-line, so to speak: activism has to see the world from other points of view. There just may be some right on the other side. Activism should be conducted only with a sense that the civil liberties, or the democracy or the rights that it is pressing for may not lie only on its side of the argument.

**Fluid borders around and fluid spaces within**

The sense of a dotted-line activism just identified carries over directly to our earlier grid. Two of our quadrants were those of (b) oppositional-individual and (d) diplomatic-individual, but individuals are not fixed in their activism. Their activism profiles can move from one quadrant to another. Bertrand Russell was certainly to be seen, at times, as an oppositional activist (a), being imprisoned by the British state on two occasions for his political activism (Russell, 1968: 34; 1969: 116), but, at other times, he was a much more benign public intellectual, writing books for wide audiences (if only to secure an income) – and winning a Nobel prize for literature – and appearing in the radio and television studies. He was, at those times, the consummate diplomatic activist (d).

Reversing the pattern, Habermas is perhaps the prime exponent of the diplomatic activist, having done so much to elucidate the conditions of a communicative action characteristic of the public sphere. He is the arch diplomatic activist (d). But he has also often taken up causes and promoted them within the public sphere, for example, in relation to the European Union, ecological matters and the particular value of religion in a secular society. He has often travelled in the direction of oppositional activism (d). So individuals’ profiles will be fluid. There may be a quadrant in which they are most comfortable, but they will
often be spreading into other quadrants: they will have their *profiles of activism* across our grid space.

This fluidity can be seen across other boundaries in our grid. It can be seen across the *oppositional* boundary, that between interactive forms (quadrant (a)) and individual forms (quadrant (b)), a fluidity that we can observe in teaching. The programme of critical pedagogy mounted by Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and others over the past 40 years sits along the oppositional axis. It is primarily an attempt to develop at least a national higher education programme that opposes the main planks of a post-capitalist society dominated by the contemporary manifestations of corporate interests, and the incorporation of education into the service of those interests (Giroux and Myrsiades, 2001). Its dominant position, therefore, lies in the interactive quadrant (a). The material that has emanated from those in this camp is pitched at a high level of abstraction and rarely gives explicit examples as to how a radical pedagogy is to be brought off. But, nevertheless, it has a concern for the education of individuals and so it can be said to stray also into that quadrant (b).

The point is that this grid is open, and it lacks definite boundaries. Candidates for the title of university activism may have their being largely in one quadrant, but they are liable to spread into other quadrants. All is in motion, both the location and identity of any action that might be felt to be an example of university activism; and the entities themselves that can be situated in this total territory. And these locations can change very quickly for any one entity.

An individual academic, fired up by concerns over ecological crises, may devote herself to a painstaking academic life of intellectual and scholarly endeavour, not only writing academic papers and conducting research but also entering the lists in social media, in a quest of influencing the public understanding of the issues. All of this would fall into the diplomatic-individual quadrant (d). But it may happen that that very same individual may suddenly opt to join a public demonstration by eco-warriors that she stumbles across by chance, and even find herself engaged in physical encounters with the state police; and without having had any premonition that that is what she might do (quadrant (b)). The one kind of act can easily tip over into the other. Being deliberately active can easily become being activist, whether deliberately or not. So there is ferment across the whole grid; there is incessant movement, and each section of the territory is unstable, with movements in and out continuously.

**Mind and structure**

We have seen that there are many different kinds of candidates that can fill in the idea of the activist university, and we may identify clusterings of activism. But it is a fluid territory and the clusterings overlap, such that individual entities – acts, persons, identities, collectivities, institutions, ideologies – can be seen as standing in different groupings all at once.

The group of students can be seen in their street fights with the police; but, more hidden, their leaders can carry their radical politics into the rooms of quiet negotiation with the authorities in a careful and thoughtful diplomacy. In the same day, they slide effortlessly from our quadrant (a) to quadrant (c). A university quietly resolves to withdraw from dubious investments, having adopted an ethical investment policy. It will do it diplomatically and even surreptitiously, not wanting to draw attention to itself and raise the ire of would-be donors (quadrant (c)), but it may feel that it may gain more kudos by being up-front, with the Rector going public on the matter, appearing on and writing articles in the
media (quadrant (a)). And, just like the child’s kaleidoscope, the pieces of activism can easily be shaken and assume another pattern. A chief of police or a TV studio producer takes up office and the spaces for violent activism or peaceful negotiations are formed anew, either now more spacious or more constrained.

The territory of academic activism is, then, itself uncertain, always in ferment, with spaces and actions taking new shapes incessantly; and with different formations being espied. I have suggested two axes and have tried to show how different forms of activism can be located in the quadrants of that grid space, even if, as observed, those locations are neither precise – actions may seep across the borders – nor fixed in time (as collectives and individuals move over time from one point to another). But other clusterings of academic activism, other axes indeed, can be discerned among the surface formlessness of the territory. Global–local; intentionality–serendipity; visible–hidden; institutional–individual: these and yet other lines of differentiation lie there, and allow different clusters to be picked out. The circles can be drawn in different ways and their relationships and overlappings seen afresh.

But let us, then, go even deeper. Let us look not so much at an axis, or line of differentiation, but at two readings of the territory. The geologist discerns the structures under events, while the aerial geographer maps the surface movements, trying to fathom the intentions at work. To a large extent, this is the structure–agency division. Activism can be analysed for what it tells us about the underlying structures at work, and it can be interrogated to try to get at the expressions of agency that it contains. I say ‘to a large extent’ because there is sometimes a tendency to characterise the relationship between structure and agency as a zero-sum matter: the more of one, the less of the other and vice versa. Moreover, structure is seen as oppressive; agency is seen as an expression of freedom. Both of these predispositions have to be avoided, here at least.

Structures can open spaces and activist minds can open structures. A new learned society is formed and, aided by on-line opportunities, it reaches out into the public sphere. Perhaps some of its members participate in community groups and public assemblies being formed, as part of efforts to widen democratic structures. Or perhaps it participates in discussions and ventures associated with the establishment of cooperative universities. Activist minds can assist in forming activist structures; and enable linkages to form across structures into new assemblages. And these assemblages can well link different layers of structures, at global, national and local levels (DeLanda, 2013). Minds can find emerging spaces in these unfolding assemblages, and new possibilities for academic activism.

These days, attention often alights on the strident, the radical and the outspoken. But much may be accomplished under the radar. Sticking to the last of her or his daily routines – in the laboratory, the clinical setting or the word-processor – ultimately may constitute the most effective form of university activism. And this slow activism is explicable. In Oakeshott’s memorable phrasing (1989: 101), its effectiveness lies in the university offering ‘the gift of the interval’. Zizek offers a more analytical insight. Summarising Hegel in approval, he remarks that ‘in my greatest passivity, I am already active – that is to say, the very passive “withdrawal” by means of which the thought “secedes”, “splits off” from its object, acquires a distance, ... assuming the stance of an “external observer”; this non-act is its highest act ...’ (Zizek, 2008: 113). Consequently, the ear of the powerful may be more susceptible to diplomatic forms of activism than might be presumed.

The identification of academic activism with an undue outspokenness has its pathology in a cul-de-sac of critique for its own sake. In a recent article, Lennard Davis (2019) – who is
professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago – observes how academic activism has prided itself on its credentials of opposition, under the banners of ‘transgression’, ‘subversion’ and ‘critique’. Much has been gained by an activism drawing on Freire, Foucault, and the Frankfurt School and postmodernism. Too often, however, academic activism has failed to identify how matters might be taken forward and has ended up by enabling the dominant power structures further to entrench themselves. Students have been taught to deconstruct concepts rather than creating them, which is understandable if ‘many leftist academics have a special spot in their hearts for activists without actually specifying what active act they are … praising’ (Davis, 2019: 43). Davis notes that ‘effective activism may involve the many tedious actions involved in getting a law written and passed’; a role, we may observe, that many academics have played, as various countries have emerged from dictatorships and have turned to academics to assist in the framing of their new constitutions.

The force of quietness

I want now to make two further moves in my argument, and to do so by returning once more to our grid. My first move is to suggest that, of the two axes, it is the horizontal axis that is the more important, that dividing oppositional and diplomatic forms of academic activism; between activism that is explicit and in the public sphere and activism that is under the radar, quiet and relatively unobtrusive. My other move is to observe a distinction between epistemic activism and non-epistemic activism.

Academic work is not in itself a form of activism. The concept of activism gains traction where academic work is intentionally contending against an unfair or unjust situation. It has its place within a space that is contoured by what is seen as an illegitimate use of power of some kind. The activism has an effect of some kind in the public sphere. The diplomatic form of activism (d) is exhibited largely within the academic life as such. It is an organic kind of activism, but it may still lead to an effect in the public sphere. The texts that issue here – written or in speech – reflect a ‘scholastic epistemoocentricism’ (Bourdieu, 2000) that lies deeply within the academic life and is offered largely to an academic audience. Over time, it may seep out into the public sphere and may have a profound effect there, but the text plays perhaps for some time in the academic sphere. The oppositional form of activism (c) plays out in the public realm as a deliberate form of activism. This is the kind of action in the public realm that Hannah Arendt looked to see (Arendt, 1958). Here, is a major distinction in academic activism, as to whether it is largely contained within the academic life or is intentionally projected into the public sphere.

Implicit here is a sense that academic activism contends for a purpose and against some kind of injustice. It contains both a positive and a negative aspect. It sees some kind of injustice and uses the space extended to academics as part of academic freedom not only to critique the injustice in question but also, in its fullest form, to propose an alternative course of action, arrangement or institution. The question that arises here is whether there is a universal setting or principle involved. In her recent book The Force of Non-Violence, Judith Butler (2020: 104), suggests that ‘a political defense of nonviolence does not make sense outside of a commitment to equality’. The analysis here suggests that academic activism requires a political defence and that it rests on a commitment to the eradication of a situation of injustice.
However, the question arises as to whether any such academic activism can claim legitimacy as academic activism rather than as activism per se. My thesis is that activism can claim legitimacy as academic activism only in a situation of epistemic injustice; that is to say, where the academic function is imperilled on account of a knowledge claim being arbitrarily suppressed by a force beyond the academy. Miranda Fricker (2010) distinguishes two forms of epistemic injustice, in effect one that is direct (a ‘testimonial’ form) and another that is indirect (a ‘hermeneutic’ form, arising as a result of inadequate discursive resources). That is a helpful distinction, but it needs to be widened to include a cultural form of epistemic injustice, of the kind that de Sousa Santos (2016) identifies in a situation of coloniality. We are entitled to say, therefore, that academic activism secures its legitimacy under conditions of epistemic injustice.

### Knowledge excitation

These reflections on globalized knowledge and knowledge activism serve only to embellish and dramatize the points already made. In a world of globalized knowledge (Kennedy, 2015), knowledge is in a state of excitement; but in a particular sense. It is a state of epistemic excitation. The genie is out of the bottle and cannot be put back. The computers of the world, with their big data generating capacities, interact with each other; and knowledge flows across spaces and seeps into strange territories, even into the humanities and the wider society. The vocabulary of the world changes. Commentators, reporters, politicians and engaged citizens see the world anew. To practise one’s trade as an academic now is, inevitably, to be involved in knowledge activism.

To press an earlier point, this knowledge activism may be more or less agentic, more or less intentional, more or less disruptive, and more or less overt. The scientist in the television studio or call-in programme may be quite deliberately deploying her or his epistemic and discursive resources to unsettle those in positions of political and economic power. There lie the audiences that our scientist is really addressing. This is knowledge activism. But our scientist may be limiting their identity to that of their peer group and will be trying desperately to ‘stick to the science’. This is itself a valuable form of academic activism.

The idea of knowledge excitation, therefore, cuts in several ways. Knowledge itself is in a state of excitation, and the level of excitation may be generally heightened but will also vary considerably at the local level. One sub-sub-discipline may suddenly be called forward. And epistemic acts may exert their influence narrowly or, as observed, very widely across ecosystems (of the kind picked out); and at various levels. These epistemic acts send out ripples, which may go far; and may also have hidden perturbations at deep levels of ideology, and among forces in the social and natural worlds.

In a world of globalized knowledge, then, the university is a knowledge actor. Its knowledge systems and institutions and activities are inevitably active, caught amid excited knowledge. But its knowledges can also be activist, helping literally to change the world. And, ultimately, all knowledges are implicated here. In the end, a role opens for knowledge ethicists, who can lay out the ethical space in which difficult judgements are made, or to advise on ways of coping with isolation and to offer suggestions for wellbeing. All knowledge is active; the only question is the extent it is also to be activist.
Conclusions
In unravelling the idea of the activist university, it might be tempting to distinguish between being activist and being active. The idea of the activist university, after all, suggests a general situation which is adrift or falling short in some ways, and a university – in its representatives and its actions – that is visibly active in contending against that situation. Such a situation, such overt acts of contention for a cause, should be sharply distinguished from merely being active. Indeed, some might say that this is where the true business of universities lies, that of getting on, under the radar, patiently being active as purveyors of knowledge in epistemic communities.

The argument here has been that that distinction, between overt activism and diplomatic knowledge action, is helpful but should be taken further. The boundary that such a distinction implies is porous, and there is seepage in both directions; many other boundaries – all of which are porous – can be spotted; and the whole territory of university and knowledge activism and knowledge action is in a state of perennial excitation. And that excitation has to be understood as a surface feature of underlying and of deep structures at work, across global and societal ecosystems. As a matter of structure, therefore, academic knowledge activism is an unavoidable reflection of the way the world is (in its ‘real’ presences). What is much more open is the extent to which and the ways in which it might be open to forms of intentional epistemic agency.

Since we started with Gramsci, let us return there and observe that the analysis here, in effect, has ‘pose[d] the problem of the relations between the objective conditions and the subjective conditions of . . . historical events[s]’ (Gramsci, 2005: 113). The analysis here has also, in effect, posed the question as to whether the activist university merely seeks to maintain a balance ‘between practice and policy’ (as in this volume’s title) or rather works in outflanking manoeuvres, so as to work its activism through categories – of excitation, epistemic activism and knowledge agency – which are alternative to those mainly on offer.

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