

## *Special Theme Reflections and Comments*

# Scholars and Activism: Can Progressive Scholarship Advance a Left Politics?

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I begin this discussion with a distinction between, on the one hand, the relationship between activism and our role as scholars and, on the other, the relationship between activism and the scholarship we produce. I have been an activist and a scholar for over two decades, and although I find both roles, and the relationship between them, to be immensely frustrating (and rewarding) at times, I would not say being a scholar-activist is inherently problematic.

To be sure, it is frustrating to be an activist in a place and time where there is no effective left. It is also frustrating to be a scholar in the United States, a country that generally disdains intellectuals; in a public university system that is crumbling around us; in a society where more and more people find themselves unable to access higher education; and in a workplace where most of our colleagues are some combination of apathetic and scared.

And yet, bitterness aside (!), we find imperfect ways to do both. We participate in the politics of universities. Like other progressive faculty, I have

been involved in Students Against Sweatshops, on-campus labour unions, university governance, and a state-wide organization to defend higher education against budget cuts. We also engage in politics beyond the university. Our role as intellectuals occasionally allows us to intervene in targeted ways, as “experts” who can serve as legal witnesses, provide a good sound bite, or pen the odd editorial. Over the past two decades, I have participated in anti-war and immigrant rights “movements,” founded and helped run a Workers Center, worked on Latin American solidarity, and contributed to the labour movement’s effort to keep a local shipyard open. In all of these cases, my role as a scholar has contributed to the politics I have engaged in as an activist.

The relationship between activism and the scholarship we produce, however, is much more problematic. For many scholars, it is no longer sufficient to simply publish work that offers a cultural or political critique of the existing world. Championing the downtrodden, analyzing the powerful, and other-

wise producing “emancipatory knowledge” is all well and good, and something many anthropologists now embrace, but on some level it is profoundly unsatisfying. Increasingly nuanced, sophisticated, and radical accounts are not liberating anyone. For the most part, no one is listening to what we have to say, and the relationship between what we have to say and any form of meaningful political change is vague and tenuous at best.

This ivory tower critique of progressive scholarship has led both academics, as well as the subjects of our research, to ask: How can marginalized groups, those we study, benefit more directly from our “progressive” research? Implicit in such a question is the insistence that there should be a much more direct, conscious, and thought-out relationship between our research, the “subjects” of our research, and a progressive politics. This concern, in turn, has contributed to the development of “activist research,” a challenge to conventional scholarship that affirms

a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow[s] dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results. [Hale 2006:97]

Charles Hale pushes this point even further, in effect suggesting that a more overt and active political engagement will not only generate a research product that is more useful to those we study and are aligned with, but will enrich our intellectual contributions as well:

To align oneself with a political struggle while carrying out research on issues related to that struggle is to occupy a space of profoundly generative scholarly understanding. The resulting contradictions make the research more difficult to carry out, but they also generate insight that otherwise would be impossible to achieve. [Hale 2006:98]

There is by now a quite lengthy literature on “activist research,” or what is sometimes called participatory, action, or community-based research.<sup>1</sup> Such

1 Hale (2006 and 2008) is a good place to start. See also Sanford and Angel-Ajani (2006) and Beck and Maida (2013).

discussions, particularly within the last two decades, have offered a powerful *methodological* challenge. The emphasis has been on collaboration between the “expert” and various stakeholders, whereby the researcher is accountable to a particular group, there is a mutual give and take, and knowledge is produced in an “egalitarian” way in which marginalized groups are involved in every step of the research process. This research, in turn, is not only deemed ethically superior, but said to produce (a) better research outcomes and (b) a more effective politics.

Most of the literature has defined “activist research” largely in terms of a more egalitarian and collaborative methodology, focusing overwhelmingly on research outcomes, and how collaboration can produce rigorous and innovative research. Larger political questions tend to get sidelined in such discussions, with the assumption being that research tied to an organized group will serve the community and contribute to the social good in some way. As long as the researcher is addressing a problem defined in conjunction with a marginalized group that possesses decent politics then the political/activist bar has been met. Additional questions become unnecessary, almost inappropriate.

This lack of attention to more political questions is no doubt due to a variety of factors, including: the reluctance to judge or evaluate the politics of marginalized groups and/or our colleagues; the difficulty of defining, let alone determining, what is politically effective or meaningful; an inferiority complex about the “rigour” of activist scholarship that has led proponents to focus more on the quality of research outcomes than the quality of political outcomes; the powerful desire to “give back” means researchers are inclined to jump on almost any request made by communities (i.e. thank goodness I can help in some way!), which in turn discourages critical thinking about political strategy or effectiveness (and encourages “activism” that more resembles social work or small-scale development aid than a left politics); and the fact that the methodological requirements of activist research are set so high. This last point is not inconsequential. It is hard enough to conceptualize, carry out, produce, and utilize research in collaboration with an organized group of people (even harder

when they are marginalized, have no resources, etc.). To then require that this research not only benefits a particular group, but advances a struggle that at least has the possibility of altering the political landscape in some meaningful way is setting the bar quite high.<sup>2</sup>

The danger, however, of avoiding these types of political questions is that we potentially put a lot of effort towards political causes that are going nowhere and do little more than make us feel good that we tried to help those we work with. This lack of political reflection also contributes to the tendency for activist researchers to attach themselves to well-meaning NGOs, or other minimally resourced organizations, that are best situated to collaborate and utilize the expertise of an academic, but are not necessarily in a position to advance a left politics.<sup>3</sup>

The following attempts to address these questions through examples from my own work. How does one produce collaborative research that advances a meaningful political struggle and is academically rigorous/satisfying? Does a close, thought-out, relationship between scholarly production and political struggle enhance both ends of the relationship? Based on my own experience, this answer is far from clear. It may even be that in many cases it makes sense to keep some distance between one's scholarship and one's activism.

## Workers Center

In the early 2000s, myself, at the time an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Arkansas, along with a law professor, were approached by Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) out of Chicago about the possibility of establishing a Workers Center in Northwest Arkansas. IWJ was looking to establish Centers in regions of the United States that had little

union presence and a glaring need for both progressive organizing and outside help. Home to Tyson Foods, the largest poultry industry in the country, a large and relatively new immigrant population, as well as the headquarters of Wal-Mart, Northwest Arkansas seemed ideal. The presence of a large university gave an otherwise conservative region a (tiny) bit of a progressive edge, which meant the Center had a slim chance of becoming self-sustaining once it was off the ground. For most of the next decade, then, I helped establish the Northwest Arkansas Workers Justice Center, including grant writing and fundraising, building an advisory board, hiring staff, directing the Center, finding lawyers, etc.

At roughly the same time, but with no direct or active connection to the Workers Center, I began scholarly research on the poultry industry, a process that would lead me to work for two summers in Tyson poultry plants, investigate the history of the industry, interview poultry farmers and processing plant workers, travel to Mexico, and eventually produce a book, *Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America's Favorite Food* (Yale University Press 2005). In the process, I became something of an "expert" on the poultry industry and immigration into the US South.

Here, the relationship between scholarship and activism is what I would call "informed." The two endeavours informed each other, but were never conceptualized or carried out with the other in mind. My research, and particularly my ethnographic work in poultry plants, immigrant communities in Arkansas, and in Mexico, clearly informed efforts to establish a Workers Center, but it was not conceptualized or carried out in collaboration with any organization (in part because the Center itself was just getting off the ground and in part because the research was not about a particular group). Likewise, my activism with the Workers Center educated me about immigrant life and thus facilitated my research in some general way.

Yet, the connections were quite loose. The scholarship certainly established me as "expert" and put me in a position to intervene within national debates about the meat industries. And I like to think the book, in some vague and limited way, con-

<sup>2</sup> This is particularly true because most anthropologists find themselves aligned with groups who are not involved, and do not have the capacity to engage in, political struggles that are even remotely designed to produce significant changes to the social order. Few anthropologists work with progressive movements that are in a position to advance a left politics in a substantial way. More typically, we are aligned with groups who are looking to survive a bit better under difficult conditions. They often want and need concrete things – like economic development – within a timeframe that most academic scholarship is not capable of delivering.

<sup>3</sup> It strikes me that when many scholars say they are working with a social movement they are really working for an NGO, and often seem to conflate the two without much critical reflection.

tributed to public debates about food, agriculture, labour, and the like. In this sense, I would describe the research as “activist” in its critique of industrial agriculture, and what it says about workers, farmers, and the need to organize, but not at a methodological level in terms of the relationship between the research process and the people who appear in the pages of the book.<sup>4</sup>

The research was not conceptualized in relation to, or with the idea of advancing, the cause of the Workers Center or organizing local workers (though one of the messages of the book is that meaningful reform of the poultry industry would have to include and be driven by an organized labour force). To be sure, the skills I developed as a scholar were crucial in developing pamphlets, press releases, and grants, in building the Workers Center, but this activism was independent from any scholarship.

Likewise, my political work did not shape the research in a particularly direct way, either at the level of conceptualization or in the course of conducting the research. People I worked with through the Center played no role in the research I was doing on the industry. If they thought or knew about it at all, most probably wished I had been a lawyer instead of an anthropologist. In short, the book would not have looked fundamentally different had I never been politically engaged; and the political engagement would not have changed dramatically had I not done research on the industry.

In other words, the activism and the scholarship were largely distinct commitments. Such compartmentalization is not necessarily a bad thing. In this case, I would argue that it made both the scholarship and the activism better than had the relationship between the two been more intimately connected. My activism was never driven by any scholarly commitments, but instead flowed from the needs of the Workers Center. Likewise, the scholarship was not beholden to the immediate needs of a particular group, but was driven by a commitment to write a critical history of the poultry industry that was

accessible to a public audience.<sup>5</sup> One caveat: A more critical, scholarly, examination of Workers Centers might have strengthened our political efforts, and forced us to think more about the place of Workers Centers in advancing a left politics.

### Latin American Solidarity

From the mid-2000s until the present I have been working around the coal industry in Colombia, a project in which political concerns more directly drove the scholarly research. Northern Colombia is home to the two largest coal mines in the world, both of which were started by US companies, have interesting labour histories, and have displaced indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. I came to the project through a solidarity campaign involving Colombians, Europeans, Canadians, and other Americans. The campaign has been multifaceted, including annual delegations to the region, facilitating negotiations between communities and one of the mines, and putting public pressure on mining companies in the United States.

In the course of the campaign, we produced a book that local communities in Colombia requested. Published in English and Spanish, *The People Behind Colombian Coal: Mining, Multinationals, and Human Rights* (Chomsky, Leech, and Striffler 2007) contains reports, analyses, and commentary by scholars, activists, doctors, union leaders, and community leaders about the Cerrejon mine. The book was not scholarly in the traditional sense, and was not “activist research” in the sense of a collaborative research project conceptualized and carried out with local communities. It was an edited collection, requested by the communities, and produced with the express purpose of advancing the larger campaign. In part because the focus has been on developing the solidarity campaign, scholarly research has taken somewhat of a backseat, emerging out of political needs, or as a reflection about the process and politics of solidarity itself (Chomsky and Striffler 2009, 2014a, 2014b).

4 Which is partially an argument for a traditional notion of activist-scholars that emphasizes political critique and the absolutely vital task of finding ways to bring left scholarship to larger publics.

5 In some of the literature on activist research there seems to be the assumption that scholars have commitments to either the local communities they work with or the disciplines/universities they work for, and that these commitments come into tension with one another. I get this, but certainly some of us write less for our discipline/employer, and more because of a political commitment to influence public debates.

In this case, then, the scholarship was not simply informed by an organized struggle, but was driven by it. Upon the request of communities in Colombia, and as part of a campaign, we produced a book that advanced the struggle to improve conditions around the mine by putting it under an international microscope (something our status as scholars facilitated). Skills and resources we had as academics clearly made this possible, and were put to use throughout a campaign that required reports, emails, letters of protest, speakers tours, and the like. We took action based on directives from locals, but for the most part they did not directly participate in the production of materials that were intended for international audiences. Yet, in part because the scholarship was largely determined by political needs, and not conceptualized or carried out independently of it, or even made a priority, the research outcomes have been slightly more sporadic because the research agenda did not drive the project from the outset.

Moreover, although the book played its part in the larger campaign, and was certainly appreciated by the communities, its place is not uncomplicated. First, more often than not, it has been our status as foreign scholars who possess the ability to publicize conditions at the mine (rather than the scholarship itself) that has been key to any pressure we have been able to put on the companies. Second, there is a temptation for at least some community members, as well as others, to conclude: if only a foreigner produces a study about x, y, or z, and gets the word out about the horrible situation, then surely our problem would be addressed. Put another way, there is a tendency to overestimate the impact that “reports” and “studies” can have on a situation, especially one where the balance of power is so skewed.<sup>6</sup> Third, for every report we are asked to produce – most of which we cannot possibly do because we lack the expertise and resources to document the impact of mining on the region – there are a dozen requests for what would fall under the broad category of economic development. In other words, the impact of our “scholarship” is limited, it is often not the type of scholarship most

needed, and what communities really want is something our research cannot deliver in any immediate way: economic development and political influence.

In this sense, although this struggle is clearly a class struggle, it is very much a defensive one that is less about altering power relations in some fundamental way than it is about negotiating the best possible terms of a difficult existence. Regardless, one of the liberating, and I think effective, aspects of the political work is that it has been largely divorced from the pressures of academic publishing; scholarship has largely been produced as demanded by the politics.<sup>7</sup>

### Save Our Shipyard!

In 2010 Huntington Ingalls announced that it would be closing the Avondale Shipyard and laying off some 5000 workers. Avondale, which had once employed close to 20,000 workers during the 1970s, had long been an important backbone of the middle class in the New Orleans region.<sup>8</sup> It was, in a sense, one of the last vestiges of the region’s disappearing manufacturing base, a place where the working poor could achieve middle class stability without a college education. Avondale had also, during the 1990s, been home to one of the longest and most expensive union struggles in the history of the AFL-CIO. With declining demand from the US Navy, however, Huntington Ingalls determined that it would soon shutter the storied facility.

In response, the AFL-CIO decided – after considerable internal debate – to put up a fight and sent Nick Unger from the Strategic Campaign Center to organize the “Save Avondale” campaign. Part of the campaign involved a research component, which as Unger had conceptualized it, would involve about ten academics doing virtually any type of research on the Avondale shipyard. The AFL-CIO would facilitate the research in the sense of encouraging workers to participate and making documents available, but scholars would be free to investigate Avondale from any angle. There were two conditions: the research had to be done quickly and presented to a public audience (i.e. not published two years later in an

6 Academics are seduced as much as anyone by the notion that all politics are informational politics because it is what we do – produce information.

7 This, of course, is much easier to do when one is tenured and not at an elite research university.

8 I moved to the University of New Orleans in 2008.

academic journal). The AFL-CIO's reasoning was that any research would be good for the campaign in that it would put Avondale into the news and create a public debate about the shipyard's closing.

In this sense, the research was collaborative in that scholars were being asked by the AFL-CIO, and supported by rank and file workers, to conduct research that would hopefully advance the cause. As it turns out, a deeper collaboration made no sense strategically because more direct participation from the AFL-CIO in conceptualizing or carrying out the research would have tainted it as "union-driven" in the eyes of the media. The research had to be produced by "independent" scholars.

We, the scholars, produced a series of reports within three to six months about the history of the shipyard, the motives for closing the yard, and the potential impact of its closing on workers and the larger community. Our scholarship served its political purpose. Along with other aspects of the campaign, it helped garner media attention, generated a public debate about Avondale, and advanced the cause of keeping the yard open. The campaign made the proposed closing a debate as opposed to an inevitability.

From a scholarly perspective, the reports were not without issues. First, the activist research model adopted here required that ten or so scholars, from four different universities, put their own research projects on hold. The fact that Nick Unger was able to pull the group together is a testament to his organizing skills, but it is not an easily reproducible model. Second, we were asked to develop and carry out research projects on a topic very few of us knew anything about in a span of about six months. For the purposes of the campaign, and the local media who were more than willing to anoint a group of professors as "experts," this more or less worked. We came up with earth-shattering conclusions along the lines of: losing 5000 well-paid jobs will have a series of negative effects on the workers and the region! As scholars this may have been less than satisfying, and I suspect few of us would put the reports in the category of "scholarship" in the traditional sense. Finally, for better or worse, once the campaign was over so was the research. This was not a long-term commitment.

None of the above cases were originally conceptualized as "activist research," or even serve as particularly exemplary examples, especially in a methodological sense. In fact, what I think they suggest is that it may be useful to think about and define "activist research" (a bit) less in terms of methodology, less in terms of the power relations between a researcher and the "subjects" of study (and less in terms of the quality of the scholarship being produced), and more in terms of the broader politics being advanced, and how scholarship, produced through a range of different methodologies, can or cannot advance those projects (in part by reaching broader publics).

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