

The Prison Houses of Knowledge: Activist scholarship and revolution in the era of “globalization”

Les prisons de la connaissance : l'activisme étudiant et la révolution à l'ère de la « globalisation »

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Résumé de l'article

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THE PRISON HOUSES OF KNOWLEDGE: ACTIVIST SCHOLARSHIP AND REVOLUTION IN THE ERA OF “GLOBALIZATION”

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ABSTRACT. The rise of new social movements has produced an emerging discourse on activist scholarship. There is considerable ambiguity about what the term means. In this article I draw on my work as a trade unionist, political activist, and activist lawyer in Mumbai, and later as a social justice activist in New Zealand to reflect on the meaning of activist scholarship, interrogate the institutional contexts for knowledge, and the relationship of knowledge to emancipatory structural social transformations. Although based on personal experiences, this article provides a theoretically oriented meta-analysis of activist scholarship.

LES PRISONS DE LA CONNAISSANCE : L'ACTIVISME ÉTUDIANT ET LA RÉVOLUTION
À L'ÈRE DE LA « GLOBALISATION »

RÉSUMÉ. La montée des nouveaux mouvements sociaux a provoqué l'émergence d'un discours novateur sur l'activisme étudiant. Il persiste cependant une grande ambiguïté quand à la signification de ce terme. Dans cet article, je m'inspire de mes travaux comme militante syndicale, activiste politique et avocate engagée à Mumbai, ainsi que de mon expérience en tant que activiste en justice sociale en Nouvelle-Zélande pour réfléchir sur le sens à donner à l'activisme étudiant, m'interroger sur les contextes institutionnels du savoir, et sur la relation existant entre le savoir et les transformations structurelles d'émancipation. Bien que prenant appui sur mes expériences personnelles, cet article étaye une méta-analyse théorique de l'activisme étudiant.

INTRODUCTION

This article attempts to trace activist scholarship as it has evolved over the past twenty-five years or so, and to ask where that trajectory leads us in the future. My point of departure is my own experience as activist, writer, and critic in India since the early 1970s. My reflections will resonate with many in the “Third World” who share comparable experiences of historical colonialism, post-war neo-colonialism, and who are currently grappling with the turmoil of globalization and new forms of imperialism after the end of the Cold War. My reflections crisscross boundaries of personal narratives and social theory

with the hope of drawing out new insights from theories and practices that might help to grasp what is entailed in activist scholarship.

After drawing attention to the institutional dimensions of scholarship, problematize activism and scholarship, I draw out the connections between different types of knowledge/scholarship and the possibilities of revolutionary structural transformations of societies. The article then draws attention to the qualitative leap entailed in action that is required if scholarship is to transform the world in radical ways. At the end of the day, the quality of knowledge produced by scholarship needs to be evaluated on the basis of its transformative potential – i.e. its capacity to transform unjust and inequitable relationships in the world as it is today *as well as* radically transform the structures that generate oppression, inequality and injustice.

INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF SCHOLARSHIP

On a pleasant October morning in Mumbai in 1981, long before the internet era, I received an intriguing mail. I was surprised to find an invitation by the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta (IIM), one of the premier institutions of academic learning in India, to present a paper on the Samant Phenomenon at a conference on the rise of labour militancy in the country. The Samant Phenomenon referred to labour militancy in the Mumbai region under the leadership of Dr. Datta Samant, a militant unionist (later assassinated in January 1997), whom I knew closely.

The IIM would fly me to Calcutta and pay for my stay there in a reasonably comfortable hotel. For an activist, it was early exposure to the luxuries of air travel and hotel accommodation, but more importantly, it was public acknowledgement of my knowledge by what was admittedly a part of the establishment. It signified a marked shift in the prevalent perceptions of boundaries between academic and other types of knowledge within the academe and outside of it. A number of developments in the *real world* contributed to the shift.

The sixties and seventies were important decades in the shaping of contemporary politics in India. While secessionist movements in the North-eastern states continued uninterrupted from the colonial era, the first real salvo in post-independence India was fired by the Naxalbari peasant uprising in a remote part of West Bengal in early 1967 (Banerjee, 1984; Bannerjee, 1980; Ghosh, 1974). It was followed by a series of similar uprisings in other states; a radicalised Maoist youth movement referred to as the Naxalites; challenges to federalism in southern states followed by Jammu & Kashmir and the Punjab; demands for statehood by different nationalities; splits, dissensions and ideological debates on the so-called “ultra-Left”; bloody, armed state repression of the peasant, youth and nationality movements; a nation-wide railway strike, a national emergency; “encounter deaths” – India’s term for Pinochet-style disappearances of opponents on the radical Left, and a lot more.

Unlike the Chilean state under the Pinochet regime which overthrew an elected left wing coalition that had come to power with promises of land reform and pro-poor policies, and which established a bloody and repressive military dictatorship, the Indian state, following in the best of British traditions, turned to governance to face the challenges from the post-independence generation. Poverty and democracy came top on the national rhetoric, followed by democracy and nation-building. The national emergency was a big part of it. Indira Gandhi's slogan to give legitimacy to the national emergency was "Garibi Hatao," (eliminate poverty), which the poor turned on its head by truncating it to "Garib ko hatao," (eliminate the poor). Indira Gandhi was forced to end the emergency and call for general elections. The Shah Commission appointed after the end of the emergency indicted the state for the disappearances of young people, often poor rural youth in staged "encounter deaths" by the police (Shah Commission, 1978). Legal professionals turned to innovative judicial interpretations in an attempt to make the law more responsive to the needs of the poor. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court warned "law itself is on trial" (Bhagwati, 1985, 1986) and in case after case, held the bureaucracy to account for ignoring the law as it was applied to the poorest of the poor, from bonded labourers to child workers. Many youths abandoned ideas about revolution and embraced their role as spokespersons of the poor and took to public interest, social action litigation. The message was clear – if the institutions of governance did not respond suitably, uprisings like the Naxalbari would indeed turn into the "spring thunder," as prophesied by Chairman Mao.

The political turbulence of the sixties and seventies was informed by scholarship, although of a very different type. It included philosophy and theory, empirical analysis, debates about agency and intervention. It included scholarly and activist publications. However, the locale of knowledge production was based not within academic institutions but in political organizations with an explicit manifesto of revolutionary social transformation. Consequently, the scholarship that informed radical political change was often wholly or partially underground, fearing state repression. Nonetheless they were read by, and one may add respected by, many academic scholars. The (semi)underground publications engaged with the theoretical orientations of different journals, academic and non-academic, from the standpoint of the oppressed in the country. This knowledge production was not seen as scholarship by universities and academic institutions, largely because the persons producing it were not professionally trained academics. As will become apparent in this article, this perception has less to do with scholarship *per se* and more to do with the types of organizations that espoused the scholarship.

Within the academe, many academics were part of the turbulent times either as students or witnesses to the radical and repressive environment on campuses at the time, or participants at the margins. Their experiences became part of their

research problematic within academic institutions. The new problematic they brought to the academe could not be addressed within the insular boundaries of traditional academe. Since then, and as a result of the turbulence of the times, many academic institutions have established centres for learning that produce knowledge about the causes of social upheavals such as the Naxalbari uprising. Ironically, the non-academic theory and analysis that accompanied Naxalbari articulated unambiguously the causes of social upheavals. What was new was not the knowledge of the causes of injustice but the institutions that produced the knowledge.

There was a new receptivity to activists outside knowledge institutions like the academe and the media. Many sympathetic journalists found work with mainstream newspapers. I started writing a weekly column on labour for the *Business Standard* as a way of earning my living without getting too embroiled in a regular job. The point here is that such options, unthinkable just a few years earlier, became possible for the first time. The academic scholars and the sympathetic journalists all wrote and reported on similar sorts of things as the radical political movements. In another organizational context, the *same knowledge* appeared to have a different type of *effect* on society. Within one organizational setting, the knowledge challenged liberal spaces; in another, liberal spaces came to be reclaimed.

The above story may be interpreted in different ways. It is possible to argue that India's experience shows the need to claim liberal spaces through activist scholarship; that the Indian way is better than the Chilean way, with its militarism, torture, and pain. Equally it is possible to argue that India too had its own Chilean-style dictatorship; notwithstanding the legal activism, sympathetic journalism, and academic spaces, the extra-judicial killings, the armed suppression of dissent, the normalization of routine repression of the poor, the eviction of the poor from their hearth and homes to make way for an elitist development, also happened in India. Indeed even today, custodial deaths, suppression of political dissent, and eviction of the poor to make way for elitist development continue. The political turmoil in Chile roughly parallels the turmoil in India. Yet, in the eyes of progressive solidarity movements then, and "global civil society" now, Chile is the quintessential Third World dictatorship, and India, the incomprehensible aberration of a Third World democracy, the world's largest one at that! This paradox is at the heart of the problematic of activist scholarship – the paradox of how similar realities come to be represented and envisioned in different ways; and how comparable values, for example, justice for the poor, the conditions of the peasantry, empowerment, struggles, equality, non-discrimination, democracy as freedom from state repression and so on, come to mean different things at different times and places.

There could be another way of reading the story. Why did an elitist institution like the IIM want to invite input from admittedly political activists; and why

did they recruit Left intellectuals on their staff to contribute to programs on management? The IIM Calcutta was established as the first national institute for post-graduate studies and research in management by the Government of India in November 1961 in collaboration with the Alfred P. Sloan School of Management (MIT), the Government of West Bengal, the Ford Foundation, and Indian industry.¹ During its initial years, several prominent faculty formed part of its nucleus including Paul Samuelson and Jagdish Sheth, among others. The question becomes even more pertinent today, when everywhere universities are being restructured, inspired by neo-liberal values and policies; at a time when the World Bank, OECD and other national and international organizations, public and private, have generated a new discourse around the “knowledge economy.” Not surprisingly, embracing activist scholars has not kept elite Indian academic institutions away from neo-liberal policies and restructuring. The story invites us to examine the institutional contexts in which activist scholarship becomes relevant to academic institutions. How should we see the knowledge produced by progressive academics working within institutions set up for governance of society such as universities, whether in the old economy or the new knowledge economy?

There is a third way of reading the story. The academics who invited the activists may certainly have learned something about the real world and the real causes of labour unrest in the country at the time. For activists like me who went to the conferences, what did we take back to activism? What difference did it make to the workers, the peasants, the rural poor, the *dalits*² and Indigenous Peoples, on whose behalf we, the activists, spoke? This question becomes more significant today when increasingly academics from influential universities and think tank organizations arrogate to themselves the right to speak for the world’s poor and dispossessed through their participation in events such as the World Social Forum (D’Souza, 2004).

These readings of the story invite us to interrogate the institutional boundaries of knowledge production, in the one case academe, and in the other the political organizations, and ask what the blurring of those boundaries means for social change. Activist scholarship is, in the final analysis, about those boundaries and how and for what they are negotiated. What exactly do we mean by activist scholarship? Interrogating those boundaries requires problematizing both “activism” and “scholarship.”

ACTIVIST SCHOLARSHIP? ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARS? OR ACTIVISM IN SCHOLARSHIP?

Much later in life I enrolled in a western university to do a Ph.D. By then the boundaries between activism and scholarship had blurred and it was easier to cross activist and academic boundaries. Indeed the domains often overlapped. Universities designed special bridging courses to enable those who left academe to pursue activism to return to the academic fold. Social science faculties

developed new programs on social movements. Management schools started courses on non-profit organizations. Academic institutions acknowledged the publications of activists written in non-academic contexts. Against this backdrop, my dissertation had to do with imperialism.

I was dismayed when I was advised strongly not to use the term “imperialism” because it sounded like something from the sixties. The dissertation had to demonstrate I had moved on intellectually, I was told. Surely, I argued, imperialism was not a matter of academic fashions. For me it was a reality that informed our lives as I knew it and understood it. During the final stages of my thesis submission, Hardt and Negri’s book *Empire* (2000) was published and became what Passavant and Dean call “academia’s version of a blockbuster” (2004, p. 2). Since then, and especially after 9/11, imperialism has become a “cool” word and an “in thing” judging by the number of books on imperialism in the bookstores these days. It made me wonder what makes a political terminology come and go out of fashion. Why does a political term sound threatening in some contexts and not in others? In order to answer the question it is necessary to differentiate between the *social spaces where knowledge is produced* and the *effect that knowledge produces on social reality*.

The end of the Cold War has seen the rise of new political language. Prominent in the new political vocabulary are terms like “activism” (was there passivity before?), “global social movements” (as opposed to national!), “new social movements” (as opposed to old!), “anti-capitalism” (and pro-what?), and some with a more distinct flavour of classical liberalism, like “civil society.”

What does activism mean? Most will argue against a binary or literal view and say that they mean “progressive” action that advances social justice and equity. Nevertheless, progressive action could encompass an array of diverse political standpoints. Activism could be a moral ideal, a superior ethic antithetical to the market ethic, something that one engages in, ideally, over and above, or outside of the things we do in our market-life as workers, employees, professionals, etc. In that sense, it could include any philanthropic activity, any form of altruism. Activism could challenge capitalism and the social order from a range of standpoints, from anarchism and armed insurrection, to narrow constitutionalism and parliamentary politics. It could entail reform of capitalism by reconciling market values to egalitarian values; or simply changes in the regime of formal and enabling rights entailed in law reform. It could include a range of views about environment, labour, the “Third World” and Indigenous Peoples. Activism could mean the opposite of passivity, meaning a person participates in the world of the market but nothing outside it. In this sense, activism invokes duties of citizenship which includes living within a market context but contributing something towards maintaining the general conditions required for the smooth functioning of the social order founded on market relations. Activism becomes an omnibus political terminology with a negative meaning in that it does not refer to any specific content or substance.

It may be argued that multiple meanings need to be contested, such contestation is permissible, or at least must be permitted and valued, and it is in such contestation that activist scholarship acquires meaning and relevance. This idea of permissibility itself needs to be interrogated before we can speak of “activist scholarship” in any real sense.

The “Old Left” infused political terms with specific meanings. Terms like imperialism, working class, bourgeoisie, nation, capital, markets, colonies, explained the reality of the lived world. Terms like petit bourgeois politics, syndicalists, socialists, communists, anarchists, revisionists, reformists, liberals, social-democrats, and nihilists denoted the philosophical and theoretical orientations of different groups in society vis-à-vis the lived world. By doing so the Old Left developed *concepts* that explained reality and *analytical tools* that pointed to ways of dealing with reality. No doubt, the explicit articulation of positions invited intense debates and arguments, factionalism and splits, sometimes bloody, but at least people knew what they were arguing about, most of the time anyway. Equally, they were conscious of the *real stakes* entailed in their arguments. The awareness of stakes opened up the spaces for political alliances as exemplified in the politics of united fronts which involved bringing diverse interests together for specific programmatic goals.

The result was structural change. One sixth of the world opted out of the capitalist system, another one-sixth opted out of the colonial system, and the remaining rumpus of capitalism was forced to resort to drastic institutional and ideological innovations to restructure capitalism. The *success* of the post-war program of ideological and institutional innovation to restructure capitalism is at the heart of the problematic of activist scholarship. Somewhere along the ideological road, *successful restructuring* of the capitalist/colonialist project for most people in most parts of the world has become conflated with *valid knowledge* about the world everywhere. This is notwithstanding the fact that there appears to be, in the words of Rajni Kothari, “an inverse correlation between the expansion of human knowledge and decline in our capacity to deal with the real problems [of humanity]” (1988, p. 23).

In sharp contrast to the Old Left, development of progressive vocabulary has tended to lean towards omnibus political terminology that can accommodate a range of concepts and meanings, often contradictory, and philosophically and theoretically incompatible. Much of this has been in the name of inclusiveness and broad-based unity. For example, anti-globalization is a term that can accommodate a range of contradictory concepts from economic nationalism to revolutionary internationalism. The omnibus term “poor,” used instead of terms like workers, peasants, or untouchable castes says little about the relationships between the poor *inter se*, between the poor in the First and Third Worlds, between the rich in the First and Third Worlds, differences in the ways in which the rich come to be rich and poor come to be poor in the First and Third Worlds. All of those differences can be subsumed in the inclusive word

“poor” to accommodate a range of meanings. Likewise “empire” can mean “network capitalism,” “imperialism,” “imperialist globalization,” or simply the changes in the forms of governance such as the United States’ experience at the present moment in its history. It is not surprising that both the Left and the Right in the US talk about Empire; and it is possible to argue that Hardt and Negri’s work became academe’s version of a blockbuster precisely because their language of discourse can mean many things to many people.

The point here is that such omnibus and conceptually ambiguous language prevents *concept formation* and development of *analytical tools* that are so essential for *structural social change*. The philosopher Roy Bhaskar emphasizes the concept-dependent nature of human and social life (1989). Concepts are inherited historically and developed through engagement within socio-temporal-spatial contexts. Neutral omnibus language de-historicizes, de-politicizes and de-contextualizes concepts, and undermines the importance of concept-formation for social change. In the case of human societies, history is the laboratory where social experiences are examined, analyzed and reformulated for further use. The politics of inclusion holds up the ideal of including everyone in supposedly neutral democratic spaces. In reality, the language of inclusiveness disarms politics from building *real unity* and *real alliances* for structural change based on programmatic goals. It does this by de-linking ideas from history and context and thereby stunting the development of conceptual categories and analytical tools so essential for structural change. Without an inclusive politics in *reality*, the revolutions of the early twentieth century could never have occurred. Yet it is to the credit of the inclusive language that the reality of inclusive politics comes to be represented as *non-inclusive*, based on their discourses.

By accommodating multiple meanings, radical concepts like revolutionary structural transformation can *co-exist* in society as part of an omnibus anti-systemic movement (Wallerstein, 2002), at least theoretically, together with reformist, evolutionary and other forms of social change without explicitly and openly negotiating programmatic alliances. In this, inclusive language resonates with the ideas of liberty and freedom in classical liberal theory. Latter-day Marxist revolutionaries assessed those ideas as “bourgeois democracy” to delineate the scope of freedom and possibilities of engagement for those who envisioned change in more radical ways. “Socialist revolutionaries,” a term used by the Old Left, meant people with a specific philosophical orientation engaged in action with certain stated political goals. In contrast “activism” and “activists” does not necessarily mean structural change, yet it does not exclude it. Universities, because of the very nature of their organizations as sites of knowledge production, must prefer the development of such omnibus language to more specific ones. It becomes possible for a range of views to *co-exist* within the *same* institutional framework. The significance of this for activist scholarship may be expanded by considering through analogy the place of freedom, justice and dissent in liberal theory.

Presenting a synchronic account of the changes in the ethics of capitalism, Jiwei Ci argues “freedom” and “justice” in liberal theory are negative freedoms and negative justice in as much as “conformity to formally universal rules [...] marks the limits of moral obligation [...]” (1999, p. 414). Freedom and justice are conceptualized as absence of restraint, formal rules of procedure, possibility of choices, etc. Consequently from the fact that “something is allowed to happen,” liberal theory invites us to conclude that “it is likely to happen or even cause it to happen”, and:

In this way, [...] manage[s] to impart a moral halo to capitalism by inviting us to evaluate capitalism not in terms of what it requires but in terms of what it permits, and by subtly leading us to ignore the distinction between the necessary and the enabling or sufficient conditions of virtue. (Ci, 1999, p. 416)

The moralization of freedom is “the representation of negative freedom as something of moral value in its own right,” (Ci, 1999, p. 413) and “the maximization of choices is a morally worthwhile project that requires no further justification in terms of the content of the choices” (p. 430).

... the power of the myth of freedom depends on the degree to which negative freedom can, short of merging into positive freedom, be made to take on intrinsic as opposed to merely instrumental value [in other words] can be “moralised.” (Ci, 1999, p. 426)

The innovation of language that echoes a positive sentiment but does not necessarily carry a definite conceptual meaning enables negative ideals such as freedom, justice and liberty to be moralized as an absolute virtue, without infusing it with specific political meaning. No one can seriously argue that freedom and justice are bad things, but what exactly do we mean by those words, and how do they fit with the larger market structures under which we live? Contrast *bourgeois democracy*, a term that qualifies democracy, acknowledges its positive aspects and signals its limitations and retains and expands the sentiment expressed in the word “democracy.”

The politics of inclusion and the inclusive language of politics it has generated expanded the negative spaces of freedom and choice in traditional liberalism, understood *without* reference to their substance/content. It concealed the reality that the new politics of inclusion, a product of the ideological and political movements of the sixties and seventies in the West, was about *excluding* the Old Left and the structural transformations their actions had succeeded in bringing about. It concealed the reality that the expansion of negative spaces itself was made possible by the centralized, and oligopolistic character of post-war imperialism underpinned by technological developments and legal innovations, in other words, the “positive” content of capitalism in the post-war era.

Meanwhile, implicit in the idea of activist scholarship is a dichotomous conceptualization of theory and practice that activist scholarship presumably seeks

to overcome. The mainstream, non-engaged, non-activist, professional academic is the dichotomous “Other” of the concerned, activist, and engaged scholar. Such a conceptualization is open to challenge on a number of grounds.

All theories ramify practices of one kind or another, implicitly or explicitly; and conversely all practices are informed by some theory, either explicit or implicit.³ The challenge for activists and scholars alike is to make explicit that which is implicit in their theories and in their practices. Meeting that challenge invites our attention to a different kind of engagement altogether. It invites us to engage with the co-relation between theory and practice regardless of whether such theories and practices originate within academe or outside it; and investigate instead the ways in which the institutional contexts impinge upon the larger goals of political action.

Scholarship then turns its focus away from the *role* of academics in universities and societies, away from idealizing *all* activism as morally desirable, and turns instead to the *objectives* that the academic *qua* citizen wishes to achieve through the scholarship; and to the practices that are ramified in the theories they produce. The foci then shift to knowledge for what, for whom, for what kind of activism, and the ways in which institutional constraints colour our knowledge of the world.

Is activist scholarship about activists *and* scholars or about activism *in* scholarship, or scholarship *about* activism? The first denotes a relationship based on shared values working towards common goals in different institutional settings. The latter two involve knowledge production within universities and research institutions. The apparently neutral spaces of academe need to be interrogated to be able to speak in any meaningful way about activist scholarship.

The problem of activist scholarship then can be rephrased in the the following way: what are the relations between citizens, human agents, who share common philosophical orientations and programmatic goals and who work within and outside academic/research institutions? Seen in that way, activist scholarship cannot be reduced to yet another type of liberal space; to a negative and permissive freedom, where the permissiveness itself becomes more valuable for its own sake than what is permitted, i.e. the content of social practices ramified in the research. Reformulated in this way, both activism and scholarship, within and outside the universities must return the focus to the substance of activism and scholarship *regardless* of the professional spaces where it is produced. In doing so, the activist and scholar alike are bound to confront the limitations of their respective institutional settings.

The immediate programmatic goals of the party or organisation will constrain the activist from pursuing the theoretical and conceptual aspects of practices; and the institutional settings of universities and research institutions will constrain the academic in providing the type of theoretical and conceptual

knowledge needed to pursue their desired goals as citizens. As Marx said, knowledge of necessity gives freedom of action. Understanding the institutional constraints on knowledge production is a necessary condition for an emancipatory epistemology. The emphasis here is not merely on what we know but *how* we know what we know.

Stanley Tambiah (1990) refers to two axes around which knowledge is produced, vertical and horizontal. The vertical axis consists of theories, the problematic addressed in the scholarship, the types of issues scholars engage with. The horizontal axis represents the institutional dimensions of knowledge production. In social sciences, the permissive spaces provided by the liberal ideals of academic institutions are *offset* by a range of professional norms and practices. The way research funding is allocated, the ways in which funding policies influence the choice of research problematic, the politics of peer review that ensures scholarship remains within acceptable bounds, the means by which journals are set up and promoted, the “publish or perish” imperative that guides academic work, the performance appraisals, all of these internal norms colour the way reality is understood. Above all, knowledge produced within academic spaces is coloured by the disciplinary lens through which a problem is viewed; the ways in which technologies and databases atomize knowledge by making them “programmable” in definite ways, the codification of knowledge and its long hand in the history of colonization more generally. The point here is to understand the ways in which reality is *coloured* by those constraints and the ways in which the knowledge produced in certain contexts limits the wider aspirations we have for the societies we live in as citizens. The problem for philosophers, as Marx argued, is not only to interpret the world but to change it, and in order to change it, understanding the constraints imposed on the philosophers and their philosophies itself becomes an important question for reflection.

The problem of activist scholarship thus entails a tension between two types of norms – the norms of citizenship and of professional institutions. The tension calls into question the very permissiveness and the politics of the liberal spaces in sustaining the paradox of knowledge in contemporary times to which Rajni Kothari alludes. It is therefore not possible to speak of activist scholarship in any meaningful way without clarifying the orientation of both types of activities, activism and scholarship, to structural and revolutionary versus constitutional and reformist changes.

MOBILIZING FROM THE “TOP”

In the movie *Viva Zapata*,⁴ Emiliano Zapata, the Mexican peasant fighting to keep the land from which he and others were evicted, joins forces with Francisco Madera⁵ fighting for constitutional reform. After the initial victory, there is a scene in the film where Zapata goes to meet Madera to ask for the

return of their land. Madera replies that the matter was not quite so simple, and they would have to legislate for constitutional reforms before the land could be returned. Madera is overthrown and Zapata is killed. The scene in some way captures the problematic of activist scholarship. For Madera, the meaning of the revolution was a constitutional order. For Zapata, the meaning of the revolution was return of land to his people.

For the intellectuals, the peasants and their problems derive meaning from the constitutional political order. For peasants themselves, the constitution derives its meaning from return of their land. Both however, need alliances with the other to articulate their aspirations. It is important to recognize this tension in activist scholarship to appreciate the scope and the limitations afforded for such scholarship within the institutional spaces of universities and research organizations. For academic scholars the starting point is the world "out there" and the problems therein that need fixing through their research. For the people out there, the problem is "our land" and "our people."

Summarizing broadly, activism includes two types of mobilization that may be characterized as "proactive mobilization," which occurs from the "top," in that it aims to defend the ideals of the existing order often expressed as constitutional values, and reactive mobilization, which is articulated from below in that it seeks challenge the ideals and values of the existing order and replace them with something new and better. The starting point for proactive mobilization is an ideal and how that ideal is envisioned. The starting point for reactive mobilization is the real existing conditions of life perceived as intolerable and oppressive. The orientation of mobilization from the top is to achieve certain ideals; the orientation of mobilization from below is to transcend certain oppressive states of being as a real lived experience. The distinction, though often blurred in *realpolitik*, is conceptually important for a number of reasons.

First, both types of mobilization involve scholarship *and* activism. The function of scholarship and activism is however different in the two types of mobilization. In the one case, scholarship points to the disparities and the gaps between the ideal and the reality, and action is oriented towards bridging that gap. Much of the scholarship and activism emerging from the new global movements, inspired or based in the West, the anti-globalization movements for example, are based on critical scholarship combined with activism. Necessarily generalizing, it would be fair to say that mostly the scholarship focuses on the gaps between what ought to be and what is, on double standards and hypocrisy on the part of governments, corporations, and political parties/leaders, for example. From this, it follows logically, that action must attempt to bridge the gap by approximating the ideal. Much of the critique is therefore empirically grounded. The critique clings on to empiricism *philosophically* even when the scholarship emphasizes qualitative research methodology against quantitative

ones, and acknowledges the importance of engagement with the wider society. Such scholarship translates into action that is premised on voluntarism, free will, and the primacy of moral action unconstrained by context, and on the understanding that individuals can achieve the ideals if only they will morally transform themselves, in other words, have political will.

Reactive mobilization on the other hand requires knowledge of *how* oppression occurs, the sources of the power of the oppressors, what sustains them, who else feels constrained by them and to what extent, and their limitations. Such a critique *explains* the social order, the causes and modalities of oppression, so that the oppressed can *identify* the actors and institutions involved, and assess possibilities of political alliances to greater or lesser extent. Such explanatory critique has the *potential* to become empowering in certain organizational contexts where emancipatory knowledge is transformed into *instrumentalist* knowledge oriented towards action. Scholarship supportive of reactive mobilization points to the possibilities and constraints imposed by the context so that activist scholarship can *assess* the relative strengths and weaknesses in a given context and judge the scope and the freedom for action that exists within it.

Thus, Marx's analysis of capitalism, by showing the nature of the actors involved in capitalist production, and the necessary yet asymmetrical relationship of the workers to capital, pointed to a manifesto of action that informed the socialist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and changed the architecture of the world *in actual fact*. The scholarship contributed to ways of understanding the world that helped change it in radical ways. In stabilizing the upheavals of the early twentieth century, the knowledge produced by Marx and Marxists had to be recognized, accepted and given credibility. The recognition came at a price, in that Marxism itself became the object of scholarship, producing an immanent discourse of Marxism that disengaged scholarship from activism, meaning the murky business of actually changing the world. The accommodation of explanatory critique as one of the many types of possible critiques within liberal institutional spaces has the effect of idealizing the liberal space rather than mobilizing people for social change. It is important to recognize that the accommodation occurs only in certain historical contexts. To idealize that space without pointing to its limitations, and to refrain from analyzing the *effect* of radical scholarship within conservative institutional boundaries, is to concede that the space is more important than what we do within it.

Second, the tension/affinity between activism and scholarship is often presented as a methodological problem in social science pointing to the need to involve the subjects in the research so as to bring about a better co-relation between scholarship and reality. Since the early sixties, methodologies such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) have argued for the participation of subjects in the research about them. The proponents of these new research methodolo-

gies were seen as dissident voices in scholarship at one time. Debates over methodologies such as PAR derive meaning from their juxtaposition against dominant methodologies in social science research. Measured against dominant methodologies, the claims for PAR can only be limited ones: that they produce better scholarship. It says little about the effectiveness of the scholarship in bringing about the types of social changes that drove the research, let alone structural social change.

On the contrary, there is some evidence that knowledge produced using better research methodologies has contributed to improved corporate governance. Increasingly international organizations such as the World Bank and other development agencies are using the knowledge gained through activist scholarship for purposes that are the very opposite of the inspiration for the research – to improve governance in the wake of rising discontent against their policies (Jordan, 2003). Activist scholarship, by pointing to the gap between reality and socially accepted ideals, can and does provide knowledge useful for proactive mobilization. Apparently, international organizations, development agencies, and other neo-liberal reformers have appropriated better quality scholarship for neo-liberal restructuring.

Cooptation is an inadequate concept to explain the process by which radical scholarship becomes instrumental in bringing about an effect that is opposite of what it laboured for. To call it cooptation says little about the *type* of knowledge that was produced in the first place, or the context that allows its production. Conversely, within the spaces of academe, radical knowledge production takes on a tint that changes its *effect* on the wider society. For example, a radical academic like Slavoj Žižek who reclaims Lenin, (2002b) calls for “Leninist intolerance” (2002a) and exposes the hypocrisy of Western liberalism in its critique of totalitarianism (2001), undertakes the scholarship within the disciplinary orientations of cultural studies and discourses about popular culture combined with social psychology. When critiqued from those disciplinary grounds, far from bringing Lenin back to “the gates” or spurring popular mobilization against the tyranny of Western liberalism, the scholar is himself transformed into a popular cult figure for the liberal academia.⁶

The significance of scholarship then cannot be divorced from the *effect* it has in informing social action. Necessarily generalizing, it is possible to argue that in the present times activist scholarship has been successful in defending social democratic spaces in action and in theory against the challenges of neo-liberalism in as much as it has succeeded in generating what is described as “global movements” that seek to “change the world without taking power” (Holloway, 2002). Such a mobilization for the renewal of social democracy and its adaptation to the changes in capitalism at the end of the Cold War is mobilization of a proactive kind, mobilization from the top, within liberal institutional spaces for realizing certain constitutional values that were devalued

by neo-liberalism. It shuts out the possibility of activist scholarship turning its attention to the ideological, political and institutional role of social democracy *itself* in the demise of socialism and in the growth of neo-liberalism. Equally, it shuts out scholarship that interrogates the ways in which both Left and Right politics, liberalism and social democracy combined and played complementary roles in the expropriation and exploitation of colonial populations. Extending it to the present, it shuts out inquiry about the possible effect of a truncated and reformed social democracy on the Third World. Such a line of inquiry calls for a very different kind of activist scholarship, one that constantly reassesses the actual *effect* of its scholarship on wider society, on the oppressed and marginalized in whose name it speaks.

Third, both types of mobilizations stand to gain to different degrees from constitutional change; both involve negotiations and making temporary and long-term alliances, and concessions that may be required without compromising core interests and aspirations. Scholarship becomes meaningful for reactive mobilization for structural change when the interests and concessions at issue are openly articulated, discussed and debated. When analysis articulates the differences and interests that inform the scholarship, it opens up the possibilities for forging *real* alliances and making *informed* compromises for action leading to social change. Scholarship that blurs the interests that inform different standpoints in activism, forge unity at the analytical level and does not correspond to reality. Analytical unity fetishizes the *real* goals of mobilization. Proactive mobilization often involves scholarship that analytically conflates groups and interests in society, or blurs the boundaries between what is desirable and what is possible in ways that obfuscate the real possibilities for emancipatory action. As a corollary, proactive mobilization from the top must idealize negative spaces for action as a goal worthy for its own sake. The ideal in turn hides the reality that activism within the constitutional order has boundaries and those boundaries may not be sufficient to fulfil the aspirations of the oppressed and the expropriated in whose names all activism rationalizes its existence.

Fourth, activist scholarship and PAR methods call for active involvement of the scholar in social issues at an individual and personal level, as if that alone guarantees good theory and good practice. The dichotomy of the activist as the engaged scholar, and the dispassionate, ivory tower academic is a problematic one. The dichotomous categorization conceals the fact that the ivory tower scholar is *also* as socially engaged as the activist one. It is the institutional context that makes her appear dispassionate and disengaged, and the very appearance fetishizes the inter-institutional linkages, the conduits, by which knowledge is transferred into policy and governance. By focusing on the marginalization of certain research methods and types of research questions within academe, the discourses obscure the real role of universities and scholarship in capitalist societies. This issue has returned with urgency in the wake of the discourses

about the “knowledge economy” and the restructuring of universities along neo-liberal lines.

While active engagement of scholars with social issues cannot be underestimated by any means, it does not follow logically that participation will automatically lead to good theory, understood as radical explanatory critique of the type required to bring about structural change in society. Conversely, scholarship cannot be judged primarily from the degree or extent of involvement of the scholar in social struggles. To argue that is to conflate the individual with the social, and the psychological with the sociological aspects of life.

In the theory-practice-theory dialectic, individuals engage in social practices including actions for social change from their pre-existing understanding of theory which they possess either explicitly or implicitly. The problem of interpreting the world, of engaging with the worldviews that inform the interpretations of the real world is not redundant because the scholar is engaged in progressive action. If acknowledging the institutional dimensions of scholarship invites us to interrogate the effect of scholarship on the wider world, acknowledging the psychological/emotional dimensions of scholarship invites us to reformulate the problem of subjectivity in scholarship as something that is more than a matter of research methodology. It invites us to pay attention to the *relationship* that exists between social action and social knowledge that is entailed in proactive and reactive mobilization.

PRISON HOUSES OF KNOWLEDGE?

In the mid-1990s, a seminar was organized for the benefit of a number of trade union organizers at the Maniben Kara Institute, a research organization for labour and trade unions in Mumbai, on the usefulness of computers for unions and union activists. The speaker had worked with trade unions in Mumbai previously, but had for over a decade lived and worked in North and South America. At the end of a brilliant presentation of the many ways in which workers could use computers to advance their causes and common interests, one of the workers asked if anyone present there were considering buying a computer. Asked to explain his reasons for the question, the worker replied that their union did not have a typewriter, and hoped a donation of a second-hand typewriter might come their way should someone decide to buy a computer. This was in a country where the software industry is one of the largest export-earners.

The response of a number of activist scholars to the story is to say that it shows the importance for researchers of being involved at the grassroots. In their view that is how *reality* is fed into the formulation of a research problematic, and research agendas can be made more relevant by doing so. The unionists in India, to the contrary, saw the purpose of the seminar as a means of network-

ing with the activist himself in person in the hope that they might contact him if needed in the future. For them, the seminar was not so much about knowledge of computers for union organizers, or about any hopes that they might be able to acquire one for their unions. The substance of the seminar had very different meanings for the different interest groups at the meeting, who had nevertheless participated in it and supported similar events for the future. Neither of those objectives was objectionable *per se*. The story however exemplifies a number of ironies: about communication technologies; about the fact that the speaker was from India; that he was an activist in India and abroad; and that it was software development that had put India on the globalization discourse and the promises it held out for the Third World.

The story invites attention to the larger problematic of the relationship of the knower to that which is known, a question that transcends the problematic of activist scholarship. For, generating good scholarship still leaves the question of good actions an open one. Discursive accounts of activist scholarship often commit a logical fallacy in that from the fact that good theories are *needed* for good practices they jump to the conclusion that good theories *will result* in good practices. The jump in the logic underscores another problematic altogether. It concerns the ways in which the relationship of the knower to the knowledge is mediated by psychological and emotional dimensions of human life, a dimension that becomes especially significant for distinguishing proactive from reactive mobilization.

All scholarship entails distancing the self from the objects of knowledge, which in the case of the activist scholar is the unjust world that exists “out there” as a reality of which the scholar can only be a minuscule part. It involves contemplation and reflexivity in that it transcends the realm of the self narrowly defined, and grapples with explanation, why things are the way they are; with causation and the relative merits of different theories; with reasoning and the relative merits of different types of reasoning; with analysis, theoretical and programmatic. All action is based on some form of understanding that exists about the world, and scholarship engages with the pre-existing knowledge. Production of knowledge requires the acknowledgment of and distinguishing between the subject *and* the object.

Activism, to the contrary, is about transcendence. Activism involves transcending the subject-object divide, crossing the boundaries between the self as the knower and the knowledge of the world, about a state of being when the knower identifies with the knowledge so completely, where the distinction between the knower and the knowledge is so blurred, that the knower is able to make a qualitative leap into the unknown. From thought to action there is a qualitative leap. The leap must necessarily be into the unknown in as much as the effect of the actions cannot be known or predicted definitively in advance.

“Just do it” the Nike ad tells us. “Just doing it” for Nike emphasizes an attitude, a state of being. In a “posted” world – post-modernist, post-colonial, post-structuralist, post-industrial, post-human, post-Marxist world, post-socialist, post-social democratic, post-social – “just doing it” transforms the mundaneness of wearing shoes to an exotic if ephemeral consumer experience. Forget unpleasant truths about sweatshops and child labour, Nike seems to tell us, and experience the moment that is here and now, always exotic and ephemeral. Nonetheless, it captures the transcendence entailed in action, and the psychological state, an attitude, that it refers to. While good scholarship of the explanatory kind has synergies with good action, the “just doing it” state of mind is informed by factors that go beyond scholarship alone.

Action is a moment of convergence when the social, the political and the psychological/emotional/spiritual (call it what you will) dimensions of the “self” come together.⁷ It entails freeing oneself from *institutional straitjackets* that impose constraints on human life that people experience as oppressive or exploitative, and is entailed in human suffering in a given context. The nature and extent of social change, and the *type* of social changes action can bring about depends on the *nature* of the scholarship, but *equally* on the social relationships and experiences of the scholar as a human subject, and the extent to which the scholar identifies with the knowledge.

People act with or without good scholarship to break away from the conditions of their oppression as exemplified by spontaneous rebellions, or by riots. For good scholarship to inform action, it needs to be made praxiologically relevant by translating it into programmatic goals. Praxiology therefore may be seen as another *type* of knowledge, another step between scholarship and action, where scholarship is transformed into programmatic goals; where knowledge acquires an instrumentalist character; and where activism undertakes organizational innovations facilitative of the convergences in the social self required to change the world.

In 1967, Charu Mazumdar, the inspiration behind what came to be called the Naxalite movement, referred to universities as “prison houses” of knowledge, and exhorted young people to leave the universities to engage in, and learn from class struggle. His own writing, most of it on revisionism in the Indian context, and none of it professional from an academic standpoint, pointed to the ways in which the Indian Left had compromised the peasantry, the bulwark of Indian society, and the poorest of the poor. The moot point from the point of view of activist scholarship is that tens of thousands of university students actually “just did it.” It had a profound influence on contemporary Indian society and consciousness. Forty years later, many rounds of state repression notwithstanding, and despite vitriolic criticism of scholars and contemptuous dismissal by the global social movements, the peasantry continue to pose a challenge, and the cycles of repression and stabilization continue to inform the limits of politics in the subcontinent unseen by the cyber-world.

Activist scholars in the subcontinent attempt to freeze *one* moment, the moment of the uprising and its repression, and theorize *retrospectively* on the theoretical and programmatic shortcomings of the movement. Perhaps it is time for activist scholars to pause and reflect on why the proliferation of activist scholarship in recent times has not inspired the students and youth, and the poorest of the poor in the subcontinent, and in the “Third World” generally, to “just do it.”

NOTES

1. See Indian Institute of Management Calcutta website at <http://www.iimcal.ac.in/index.asp>
2. Dalits, literally means the oppressed, is a term used to refer to people from the “lower” castes in India.
3. For philosophical underpinnings of the theory-practice dialectic see Bhaskar, R., *Dialectic: The pulse of freedom*. 1993, London, New York: Verso. 419.
4. Directed by Elia Kazan and made in 1952 in which Emiliano Zapata is played by Marlon Brando.
5. Played by Harold Gordon.
6. See Mead, R., *Life and Letters: The Marx Brother: How a philosopher from Slovenia became an international star*, in *The New Yorker*. 2003. To read about the documentary film “Zizek” see The Documentary Campaign at <http://www.documentarycampaign.org>. Indeed it would be fair to say most celebrity academics are often “activist scholars.”
7. For the conceptual and philosophical dimensions in this connection see Uberoi, J.P.S., *Religion, civil society and state: A study of Sikhism*. 1996, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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