

THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Activism in the Academic Context: Navigating Scholarship, Social Justice, and Institutional Constraints

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This article examines tensions between scholarship and activism, exploring whether scholars have a moral obligation to engage with social justice or maintain scholarly detachment. It analyzes activism's definition within academia, ethical considerations, and institutional constraints shaping public engagement. As universities evolve under neoliberal pressures and polarization, the paper interrogates whether activism enhances or undermines academic missions, offering a framework for scholars navigating dual roles as knowledge producers and public citizens.

The question of whether academics should engage in activism is layered with complexities. For some, the *should* carries a moral imperative, implying a responsibility to contribute actively to social justice. For others, the *should* is more pragmatic, questioning whether academics *can* engage in activism within the constraints of their professional and institutional roles.

Activism itself is a contested term, with varying definitions across disciplines. This article adopts an inclusive, overarching definition of activism as any intentional action aimed at promoting social or political change. While academic activism can encompass both faculty and student engagement, this article focuses specifically on faculty activism. This can encompass a spectrum of activities, ranging from public interventions and involvement in public education to direct advocacy, participation in grassroots movements, and policy-making efforts. Such activities may take place within or outside traditional academic settings and may, but do not necessarily have to, be directly tied to (social) media. What unites these diverse expressions of activism is their orientation toward improving collective conditions and challenging structural inequalities in ways that seek to prevent harm.

The Role of Academic Activism

Academic activism integrates scholarly research with social and political action, challenging the traditional image of academics as neutral observers detached from social engagement. It emphasizes that scholars have the unique ability—and perhaps the responsibility—to leverage their expertise to address pressing societal issues. The rise of academic activism reflects criticisms of academia's detachment from the practical realities of the world and the people being studied.

However, activism in academia raises concerns about the relationship between scholarly objectivity and social

engagement. Some critics argue that activism compromises the intellectual rigor expected of scholars, blurring the lines between knowledge production and advocacy. Nevertheless, proponents of academic activism maintain that moral and ethical commitments do not inherently conflict with scholarly integrity, and that academics can engage with social justice issues without compromising their objectivity.

Academic Freedom and Activism

Academic freedom is central to the debate on activism within academia. Scholars rely on this freedom to explore and express ideas without fear of reprisal, ensuring that their research remains critical and independent. Historically, academic freedom has been associated with protection from governmental and institutional control. Violations of academic freedom, such as the exclusion of marginalized groups, remain a concern.

Activism can challenge the boundaries of academic freedom. Engaging in controversial social issues or criticizing powerful entities can expose scholars to backlash, harassment, and even professional risks. These risks are pronounced in today's politically charged environment, where scholars advocating for particular causes may face attacks from groups or governments on the opposite side of the political spectrum. Thus, the potential for academic activism to flourish depends on the protection and expansion of academic freedom.

Public Engagement and Knowledge Dissemination

Public engagement can take many forms, ranging from active participation in community initiatives to delivering public lectures and contributing to media discussions. Activism often overlaps with movements toward open and public science. These forms of engagement aim to make academic knowledge accessible to nonspecialists, fostering inclusivity and

democratizing knowledge production. Public science serves as a crucial means of involving the public in scientific debates and ensuring that academic research has tangible social benefits.

The Institutional Context: Neoliberalism and the Modern University

The neoliberal transformation of universities complicates the role of academic activism. As universities become increasingly governed by market values, competition, and productivity metrics, the pressure to publish and secure grants can make social engagement seem less valuable or even unattainable. Scholars are often judged by their research output and the “impact” of their work, a double-edged sword that can both incentivize activism and constrain it within frameworks that serve the socioeconomic status quo. While universities may strive to present themselves as neutral institutions, guided by principles of objectivity and balanced inquiry, they are ultimately composed of individuals and groups with values, interests, and positionalities. It becomes nearly impossible for universities to remain consistently detached from controversial issues.

The production and dissemination of knowledge, including teaching and research, can always be perceived as political or contentious, depending on the surrounding cultural, social, or political context. Furthermore, universities’ focus on “valorization”—the process of translating academic work into societal benefits—can sometimes co-opt activism, reducing it to a means of boosting institutional prestige rather than challenging systemic inequities. This raises questions about the extent to which universities truly support academic activism, or whether they exploit it to benefit their own agendas.

Challenges and Critiques of Academic Activism

Despite the growing prominence of faculty activism, there are valid concerns about its practice. Some critics argue that activism introduces biases into research, undermining the objectivity that is central to the academic enterprise. Others warn that activist scholars may face professional risks, such as funding cuts, loss of employment, and damage to their reputations.

Another critique is that activism can detract from the primary academic mission of knowledge production. Activism can be time-consuming, making it difficult for scholars to balance their public engagement with research and teaching responsibilities. Additionally, scholars engaging in activism may be accused of compromising their integrity or credibility, particularly when their activism involves criticizing governments, corporations, or other powerful institutions.

The Ethical Dimension of Academic Activism

While these challenges are significant, many scholars argue that activism is not only compatible with academic work but also a moral imperative. For instance, activism often arises from an ethical commitment to social justice. In such cases, academic activism can be viewed as a form of public service, in which scholars use their expertise to address pressing societal issues.

There are also ways to ensure that academic activism does not come at the expense of methodological rigor or intellectual independence. While neutrality may be an ideal to strive for, it is important to acknowledge that every individual’s perspective is shaped by personal experiences and cognitive frameworks. As a result, assumptions—however subtle or benign—are often present and not necessarily harmful. Disclosure of positionism can be a commitment to intentionality, together with the need for factual accuracy, transparency, and grounding in evidence.

Conclusion: Navigating the Dual Role of Academics

The question of whether academics should engage in activism cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Instead, it requires a nuanced understanding of the dual role of academics as both scholars and public citizens. While activism can enhance the social relevance of academic work, it also carries risks that must be carefully managed.

Faculty activism is both a moral and practical issue. On the one hand, scholars have a responsibility to use their expertise to address social injustices. On the other hand, they must be mindful of the ethical and professional challenges associated with activism, including the potential for bias, backlash, and the co-optation of their work by institutions.

Academic activism could be viewed as a public service that complements, rather than detracts from, the core mission of academia. It offers scholars an opportunity to contribute to societal debates and drive meaningful change, while also upholding the values of intellectual independence and academic freedom. To foster effective and ethical academic activism, universities must play a supportive role, providing the protection and resources necessary for scholars to engage in public debates without fear of retaliation or loss of credibility.

As the landscape of academia continues to evolve, the integration of activism into scholarship will remain a critical issue, one that requires ongoing reflection and dialogue among scholars across disciplines.

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