the changing profession

Academic Activism

RANDY MARTIN

Academic. Not leading to a decision; unpractical; theoretical, formal, or conventional.

Active. Opposed to contemplative *or* speculative*: Given to outward action rather than inward contemplation or speculation; practical; esp. with "life."*
—Oxford English Dictionary

TENDENTIOUS AS THESE DEFINITIONS ARE, THEY REFER TO THE COLLIDING CONCEPTIONS FROM WHICH ACADEMIC ACTIVISM ISSUES. THE often reductive contrast between theory and practice, thinking and doing, has been used to regulate what is admissible as campus politics as if it were apparent in advance which actions were insufficiently imbued with reflection and which worldly commitments compromised disciplinary or institutional loyalty. Suffice it to say that drawing the boundary between activity appropriately inside and outside the academy has always been anxiously freighted. The pursuit of practically engaged knowledge has been constituted in a taut exchange with the very powers it has been called on to serve—persistently but not exclusively those of the state, of industry, and of professional associations (Newfield, *Ivy*; Readings; Chomsky; Starr). In the lineage of the Western university, degrees of critical separation from these authorities were hard-won and were conceived of as autonomy or academic freedom (Kant). The emergent disciplinary formations of the late nineteenth century made activist claims for equality in a self-designated professional cohort under the rubric of peer review. This compact, advanced by the American Association of University Professors, ceded institutional control to administrators in exchange for noninterference with the pursuit of specialized knowledge (even if manifest as political speech), which was apportioned to those elevated to the peerage through conferral of tenure (O'Neil; Thelin).

In considerations of the professions, higher education, and the professoriat, there has been widespread concern that the historic project of autonomy generated by previous manifestations of activism and self-organization is now extinguished (Burgan; Plater; Derber,

RANDY MARTIN is a professor in and the chair of the Department of Art and Public Policy at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, and the president of the Cultural Studies Association (US). He is author, most recently, of *An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management* (Duke UP, 2007).

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Schwartz, and Magrass; Freidson). There has also been considerable effort dedicated to reversing the erosion of these freedoms (Nelson and Watt; Bérubé; Schueller and Dawson). Certainly much is to be gained by doing so. But another palette of academic activism responds to the different forces of worldliness apparent in higher education today (*Edufactory.org*; *Workplace*; Featherstone; Groeneveld et al.; Naples). These forces recast what counts as activism, where it issues from, and how we might pursue its trajectories. In turn, mapping the potentialities of activism in our midst requires some rethinking of the current conjuncture of government authority, industrial interest, and professional formation.

Conventional reports of campus political life shuttle between hyperbolic claims of activist takeovers and tranquil assertions that outward action among faculty members has run its course and that we can now count on moderate, balanced, and circumspect conduct from the denizens of higher education. A recent *New York Times* headline proclaimed, "The '60s Begin to Fade As Liberal Professors Retire," and the article surmised that "[w]ith previous battles already settled, like the creation of women's and ethnic studies departments, moderation can be found at both ends of the political spectrum" (Cohen). This declaration would certainly come as news to Ward Churchill and Norman Finkelstein, whose writings and utterances thoroughly unsettled those around them and led to dismissals (Abraham; Leupp). While the expressions and occasions of radicalism continue to change, what is more likely to be retiring is the primacy of faculty interests that held sway during the 1960s—what the sociologists Christopher Jencks and David Riesman called an "academic revolution." Faculty influence was of a piece with the purported rise to power of a professional-managerial class (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich). Alas, developments were not so one-sided. During the 1970s, cascades of militancy—from labor unions (whose strike activity was peaking), an expanding range of social movements advancing equality and difference (whose university front promulgated women's and ethnic studies departments), and decolonization movements resulting in Third World revolutions—met a potent reaction formation that would rework the social compact in the United States and unleash aggressive proxy wars abroad (Harvey; Klein; Mamdani). The enclosure of professional autonomy, in concert with knowledge making that assumed the scale of an economy, shared with its industrial antecedents a rapid loss of old ways as professional expertise and pervasive managerialism were pressed together in service—ministering each other as they might tend themselves.

Higher education itself was defunded in a self-fulfilling prophecy that turned it from a public to a private good, from an investment in citizenship to a calculation of private gain that was said to add value in the form of lifetime earnings (Newfield, *Unmaking*). As tax-based monies to schools fell along with government grants to students, costs had to be covered through other means. Today three-quarters of the five hundred billion dollars in revenue generated by colleges and universities comes from sources other than tuition (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, and Whitmore). Through such legislative initiatives as the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, schools were unleashed from the singular focus on education to find their own revenue streams through patent-generating research and private contracts. Intellectual property was deregulated from post-World-War-II-era science policy that partitioned pure and applied research. Reagan administration initiatives freed the university to pursue the knowledge gold rush. The drive for such revenue would indeed make schools businesses like any other and therefore at risk of losing further claim to uniqueness (to say nothing of their tax-exempt status [Aronowitz; Bok; Etzkowitz; Giroux; Kirp; Slaughter and Leslie; Slaughter and Rhoades]). While research universities did increase the number of their patent applications sevenfold

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between 1980 and 2000, theirs remained but five percent of all patents filed. Gross revenues from these products grew dramatically from under two hundred million dollars to nearly two billion dollars, but the later figure ignores the priority-setting institutional costs, and it pales in comparison with the thirty-three billion dollars in net revenues that United States companies receive from their intellectual properties (US, Patent and Trademark Office). Universities are swimming in a vast sea where market-oriented, knowledge-intensive industries globally generate sales of some twelve trillion dollars (National Science Foundation). Simultaneously, proprietary schools offered the shortest distance to requisite technical skills and claimed their share of federal financial-aid monies. Much had been altered to make campuses competitive, but they had joined a world they could not master.

Those who had forecast growing ranks of professionals turned out to be correct, and by the new millennium most in the workforce were classified thus (US, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Table 627"). But these knowledge workers were losing their grip on their conditions of employment and on their authority in the public eye as the culture of experts was subject to the managerial discretions of productivity-minded superiors and to an indiscriminately discerning public (Rhoades). The term *postmodernism*, hurled as an invective against radical critics on the left, also manifested right-wing populism as skepticism toward specialized knowledge, and accordingly the *petit récit* of the experts made the university a likely target of security-depriving cultural warfare (Bolton). Academics would join a long line of professionals—doctors, lawyers, politicians—whose technical self-interest meant that their authority could not be trusted, while the conditions of maintaining that interest (whether private practice or tenure) were being eroded. In forty years' time tenured appointments have gone from being a majority of all teaching positions to losing their predominance even among full-time jobs (US, Dept. of Educ., "Table 177").

As higher education has expanded, it has lost control over the professionalization of its labor even as it has focused on educating professionals. Enrollment in professional fields from business to the arts has grown, reducing the proportion of students pursuing liberal-arts-based education as an end in itself, while even the humanities are subject to productivity norms in the form of outcome assessments (US, Dept. of Educ., "Table 254"). The proportion of all baccalaureate degrees conferred in liberal arts disciplines has fallen from just under half in 1970 to roughly one-third in 2004. Among professional fields, degrees in business have gained the most, and those in education have suffered the greatest decline. Literature, math, and physical science grant fewer degrees than they did thirty years ago. If education is for such utilitarian things as getting a job or making money, receiving an educational credential now does not ensure a salaried position. Adult- and continuing-education programs, which enroll some one hundred million students a year, serve under these circumstances as a medium of lateral labor mobility for the permanently retooling professional and as a source of extra income for faculty members and universities alike. From patents, consultancies, and professional services to maintenance and matriculation of the professional workforce, the university is porous to its worlds. At the same time, higher education has become increasingly differentiated along myriad dimensions (salaries, revenue streams, student placement) both within and between research and selective liberal arts institutions and state, community, and proprietary schools.

Never a paradise, autonomy lost is the predicament of academia, including students, whose youthful radicalism was once understood as issuing precisely from their marginal position relative to political enfranchisement and the workforce (Horowitz and Friedland; Grossberg). Accordingly, now that students

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are no longer outside the social factory, the basis of their activism has shifted as well. In the forty years after the 1960s, more and more of the student body would find itself at work. By 1998 nearly four-fifths of college students were holding down a job (fifty percent working to pay for school and another twenty-nine percent going to school to improve their prospects at work [Riggert et al. 64]). Nearly two-thirds of all high school graduates go on to college, while returning students bring the median age of undergraduates to nearly twenty-five. At four-year schools over a third are working, and at community colleges nearly sixty percent work (US, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "College Enrollment").

Between a working student body and a faculty with diminished purchase on its value in university matters, it has become harder to deny that the road to the profession is paved by labor and not simply by an irremunerable passion (Ross). Higher education itself is more densely organized than the workforce as a whole (Rhoades). The union-proscribing private-sector institutions that supposedly stand as models for the future have met strife with disavowal. Brown, Columbia, New York, and Yale universities all deny that students who teach and do research are engaged in work, describing them rather as recipients of financial aid (Krause et al.; Nelson). The strident efforts to stop or revoke graduate student unionization seek to reverse the vectors of debt, so that students and faculty and staff members are treated as being in the service of a calling and not in the throes of an employment relation that they cannot address directly (Bousquet). Here, ironically, the effort to refute students' labor activism ensures that a feature of their education is to train them in the practicalities of struggles over academic labor and to foster an organizational intelligence that transcends their disciplinary and professional training (Vaughn). The claims that faculty members are managerial employees ineligible for collective bargaining are made brittle when the perquisites to supervising and disciplining students are usurped by senior administrators.

There is a long history of universities as sites of student activism and political ferment (Lipset and Schaflander). In just the past hundred years, the university's doings have increasingly occasioned activist responses, albeit ones without a fixed ideological position. If the 1930s saw students engaged with radical political parties and the 1960s advanced a critique of the imperial-epistemological complex, activisms of the past thirty years have entwined professional labor with the circuits of the technico-cultural economy. Indeed, a survey on student activism from the early 1990s made the general claim that "student political activism tends to be aimed at societal issues and broad political concerns rather than campus questions" (Altbach 214). The new positioning of the university in the knowledge industry suggests that campus questions are already embedded in broader political concerns, even if there are myriad routes through which these are named and from which organization issues.

A clearinghouse that monitors activism at institutions of higher education, *Campusactivism .org*, lists 1,713 groups, 233 multicampus networks, and over 50 upcoming events. Issues range from academic freedom, Afghanistan, and African poverty to university investments and research, vegetarianism or veganism, and youth rights. There are campaigns such as the 20% by 2010 Campaign, All Diamonds Are Blood Diamonds, and Students for Free Higher Education. Networks include the revitalized Students for a Democratic Society, which boasts over ninety chapters, and Campus Greens. Emblematic of the conservative equivalents of these entities is Students for Academic Freedom, which considers itself a clearinghouse devoted to providing balance for students and protection from professors' radical views. Organized by adults like David Horowitz, whose associates once paid students to observe potentially errant

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professors, the claims for balance suggest that radical views are pervasive and that they must be immediately countered (*Campus-watch.org*; *Horowitzfreedomcenter.org*; Messer-Davidow). Less organizationally than discursively, this right-wing activism imagines universities overtaken by alien ideas that can only be corrected by its own variety of external intervention. Self-anointed watchdogs operate where internal peer review might once have seemed sufficient to maintain appropriate academic quality.

Perhaps the most enduring feature of academic activism is the gap between the ephemerality of concrete interventions and the longer *durée* of reflection, leading to a circumstance where action always seems insufficient to the conception of change and the power of theory to grasp the significance of the moment is out of time with what it examines. The crisis of activism is not that it belongs to a lost past but that we fail to recognize, value, and know what to make of the activism in our midst so as to make more of it. Unlike scanning the horizon for a practice adequate to a given critique, knowing what to make of what we are and what we can do requires theoretical elaboration. There are important new political grammars that must emerge to account for the look of the political today (Virno). It is also worth attending to the history of political forms as they bear on current activisms—not so that we mechanically repeat the past but so that we can examine the ways in which longstanding contentions do continue to unsettle and remake the present. The durable moment of activism lies in its organizational residues, the registers in which the institutional edifice we inhabit is built.

For faculty members, thinking about activism is particularly challenging when it is confined to the conventional triptych for assigning worth to work: professional activity, teaching, and service. Both inside the academy and without, service is associated through its raced and gendered histories with free or discounted labor. Typically afforded little status or compensation in the university, service has become increasingly pervasive as a kind of work (four-fifths of all jobs in the United States fall in the service economy). Where it appears, appreciation for being a team player, being collegial, or being part of the enterprise translates into a demand to give more affectively to building community, serving on committees, advising students, and the like. Similarly, faculty involvement outside the university used to be called public service. This passive and undervalued terminology of service is being challenged by an innovative rubric of civic engagement. Accordingly, the university is opening to knowledge it had hitherto not deemed legitimate and to constituencies previously inadmissible while subjecting its own expertise to other tests of utility and measures of right than those of shareholder sovereignty. Faculty members are assigned responsibilities, rewarded, and retained in the context of students' expectations that more than token attention will be given to their own community interests and work, and the university is under pressure to negotiate community relations that are central to urban and regional viability (Ellison and Eatman; *Campuscompact.org*; Boyer; Burgett; Hale; Groeneveld et al.).

The question of engagement is not only civic but also at the heart of internal authority for decision making, of how institutional missions are defined or pursued, and of how responsibilities for the future are apportioned. The work of service and engagement that weaves together what happens on campus and off can be rethought as administrative labor. What was once outside faculty purview by covenant of employment now offers a fertile if unexpected foundation for contemporary academic activism. This is not another advertisement for the do-it-yourself nation (Don't like your job? Become your own boss!) but an invitation to look critically and reflectively at what academic labor has become (McGee). Administrative labor includes the leadership

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operations that are so well compensated at the university and the expanding domain of academic and nonacademic support services that are a devalued and disposable, if essential, feature of our work setting. As faculty governance based on a century-old compact of tenured autonomy is now narrowed to discretion over intradepartmental matters such as curricula, the locus of decision moves outside this "responsibility center" to other revenue streams, to interdisciplinary initiatives, and to the positioning of the university in relation to its various industrial interlocutors (Shuster and Finkelstein; Whalen).

While much has changed over the past century, state, industry, and class endure as domains of constitutive power for faculty members. Each of these arenas is still accessed and shaped by corresponding organizational forms—political parties, unions, and professional associations that administrative labor engages and directs. Instead of being modes of activist organization still to come or already surpassed, these circuits of engagement are immanent to the work faculty members do, and they need to be adequately essayed. As an exercise in self-governance, the implementation of peer review won faculty members a measure of participation by treating disciplinary knowledge as producing its own norms by consensus. Where such norms become procedural axioms, judgment can operate by assertion, and much of value is marginalized and overlooked. If terms of participation are rethought, peer review can be advanced as a call for answerability in decision making. The professional association can refer to a reinvigorated peerage of university management that does not substitute presumptive consensus of disciplinary, procedural, or interinstitutional hierarchy for a robust dialogue on what aims will be served and by which means (Butler). While one still needs expert knowledge in order to pass judgments, the tactical applications one needs to abet the work of committees, departments, schools, and fields require strategic intelligence, applied listening, and organizational diligence—all of which redistribute value by recognizing the moil that runs the institution—working on and through the authority of others.

Labor organizing on campus certainly indexes the organizing of industries (as opposed to single-craft occupations) and occasions solidarity among students and staff and faculty members. The United Automobile, Aerospace, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, for example, which now represents faculty members and graduate students, also negotiates on behalf of curators, writers, lawyers, and others in the knowledge sector (*UAW.org*). Such organizing recognizes knowledge making that flows across a range of sites and links epistemological formations with work. Media, cultural, policy, and science studies as well as ethnic, race, gender, global, and queer studies—the very fibers of interdisciplinarity that have transformed the social sciences and humanities—are the cognates in the university to circuits of knowledge in informatics, biotechnology, mass media, and social services. These connections between faculty intellectual work and industrial formation bear practically on how we make alliances and with whom, on what can be claimed as proprietary and what is part of the commons. Thinking these connections along industrial lines sets together the often long march toward collective-bargaining agreements that formalize governance with the ministered associations by which professionals now govern themselves.

Finally, the idea of affinity with a political party seems far from individualistic faculty dispositions, something best treated as a private matter or a personal preference. Yet when we look at the places where the greatest anxiety over faculty utterances in public has been, in area and ethnic studies especially, it is apparent that activist faculty members are speaking not simply from their fields of expertise but also in the register of the state.

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They are challenging the state's perquisites and reach of power, doing precisely what political parties are responsible for. Activist voices that question war, foreign policy, and urban reconstruction, or that advocate abolition and reparation, speak comprehensively to the direction of society. These critical inquiries have organizational resonance for related populations and help develop platforms by which people, regardless of where they work or live, can inhabit this world. A political party collects permission for our tall order. Certainly, clustering these interventions and engagements under the sign of activism may strike some as overly generous or insufficiently rigorous. Yet a kind of rigor is in evidence because the responses to these actions are so strident, suggesting that the actions are indeed activating a problematic that carries well beyond themselves. More, a generosity of concept toward action oriented outward may be required to overcome the sense of scarcity that otherwise clouds our future.

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