

STS and Social Activists

by
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Over the past decade, I have interviewed dozens of social activists such as environmentalists and consumer advocates. My questions have covered campaigns and immediate goals, methods used in campaigning, organisational structure, long term goals, analysis of society, long-term strategy and choosing issues on which to focus. These topics are a prelude to two key questions. Though the way I express them varies, they amount to: "What intellectual work is useful to you?" and "What sort of intellectual work would you like to have done to help you?"

Scholars who carry out contract research are quite familiar with orienting their investigations to the interests of government or industry, though they are usually skilled at interpreting their briefs in ways that aid their own intellectual or career interests too. On the other side of the fence, organisations with money to fund research have an incentive to develop skills in proposing projects and enticing researchers. By comparison, the interface between social activists and researchers is much less developed.

Those who describe themselves as social activists are usually volunteers or work for low pay in seeking social change through a process of persuasion, mobilisation and direct action. For convenience I talk of "activists" and "researchers" though even with conventional interpretations there is considerable overlap between the two. I assume it is just as valid to orient one's intellectual work to activists, or to be an advocate oneself, as any other stance (1).

STS scholars have several audiences, including other scholars, students, institutional patrons and the "general public". Social activists are not a significant audience for STS research, at least judging by the activists I've talked to.

The lack of connection between STS research and activists has two sides. STS researchers are far more likely to be oriented to peers, as in scholarly articles, or to patrons, as in policy studies, than to activists. A few have expressed concern about orienting STS research to contemporary social problems (2). But who will pick the topics to study? Perhaps, as in science shops, there is a need to listen to what the activists want.

Perhaps a third of the activists I've interviewed were primarily environmentalists. Others were involved in the nonviolence, peace, consumer or other social movements. Nearly half worked full-time on their activism, some on salary (usually low) and some as volunteers. The others were activists in their spare time from other jobs. About two out of three were women.

It is difficult for me to summarise what I learned from the interviews because of the diversity of responses. Here are some tentative comments.

There are dramatic differences in the way that activists use intellectual work. A considerable proportion never read any "theory", nor indeed anything that is not directly relevant to current campaigns. Others are inspired by bodies of theory and writing; feminism is commonly mentioned in this regard.

Even those who are familiar with scholarly work find very little that is directly useful to them. Particular authors may inspire them but seldom give any practical guidance. Most of what activists do in campaigning is learned on the job.

No one yet has mentioned to me being aware of any STS research. More seriously, to my mind, none had ever thought about STS researchers as having any potential contribution to their activities. This should not be surprising. Having no money to fund research, activists never think about what they would like done.

There are some activists who are hostile to academics. Some activist organisations are inundated by academics and students who want to study them.

This takes up the activists' time while providing little in return. Others resent academics who write unintelligible and irrelevant articles and consider themselves superior while sitting on high salaries (compared to those of activists).

It is a novelty when I ask activists, "If you had a social scientist or two willing to do a project for you, what would you like them to do?" Answers are diverse. Some want studies specifically geared to helping current campaigns. Others want more general treatments of issues that will educate the public. One theoretically sophisticated activist asked for an analytical examination of current activist efforts, issues and especially campaigns, in the context of institutions and the political and economic environment.

Here are some of the projects suggested for a sympathetic STS researcher.

- * Critique of peer review.
- * Study of bovine growth hormone.
- * How do the views of scientists, especially toxicologists, relate to their social positions?
- * Estrogen replacement therapy.
- * Social impact of making Australian tobacco production illegal.
- * Environmental costs of suppression of conservation ecologists (state-by-state lists; species lost).
- * Design a system for improving the quality of government and for implementing it.
- * Investigate the bureaucratic process required to gain approval for a programme of pulp replacement by marijuana.
- * Effect of meat-based diet on the Australian environment.
- * Latrogenic illness.
- * Politics of organochlorines: regulations, politics, sequence of controls, standards.
- * Changes in policy for caring for people with major mental illness: politics, economics, etc., including suppression of people with certain views.
- * Study of a major industry (chemical, oil, coal, etc.) to see the framework from which it operates, from an environmentalist's point of view, in order to understand motivations, actions, people, networks, understandings.
- * How does the Department of Conservation and Land Management in Western Australia "manage" to avoid public scrutiny, i.e. manage the public participation interface to get its own way?
- * Technologies that benefit the community as a whole versus ones that are controlled by a minority.

It is apparent that some of these are just areas for research rather than detailed requests. This is because the activists had not thought before about research and had no experience thinking of things from a researcher's point of view. Some topics have already "been done": it is only necessary to put a finger on published papers. Yet other topics are too big for a single research project. It is apparent that activists need to develop the capacity to request doable research. Perhaps the key thing is to put research on organisational and movement agendas. Some larger organisations, such as Greenpeace, have the capacity to commission as well as foster movement-oriented research.

But even if activists ask for doable research, how many researchers would be able and willing to help? At a gathering of Australian nonviolent activists, a group of us asked individuals for their requests for relevant social science research. I then circulated the resulting questions to a group of some 15 Australian nonviolence scholars. The only substantive answers came from Robert Burrowes, a nonviolence researcher who, not coincidentally, is also a leading activist (3). Is the implication is that most scholars are too specialised to be of help for the general questions asked by activists, or that few scholars think along activist lines, or that scholars are preoccupied with professional demands?

Sometimes activists do not welcome research findings, even those that are intended to help them, when the findings conflict with their established beliefs or practices. For example, some of my work on the effects of nuclear war was strongly disliked in the 1980s peace movement. All that researchers can do in this situation is make their results available or, if so inclined, use their ideas in their own activism.

Linking researchers and activists is quite a challenge, with obstacles at both the academic and activist ends (4). A couple of years ago I compiled a list of STS researchers around the world who are potentially willing to assist social movements. This was the easy part; the hard part is getting activists to contact any of us! Nevertheless, the list has proved useful in putting activist-oriented STS people in touch with each other. Contact me if you'd like information about it.

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(1) Kristin Shrader-Frechette, "An apologia for activism: global responsibility, ethical advocacy, and environmental problems," in Frederick Ferre and Peter Hartel (eds.), Ethics and Environmental Policy: Theory Meets Practice (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), pp. 178-194.

(2) For example: Brian Martin, "The critique of science becomes academic," Science, Technology, & Human Values, Vol. 18, No. 2, Spring 1993, pp. 247-259; Richard E. Sclove, "STS on other planets," Technoscience, Vol. 9, No. 3, Fall 1996, pp. 12-15.

(3) "Research questions on nonviolence," Nonviolence Today, #49, March/April 1996, pp. 8-11, available at <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/96nvt.html>.

(4) Randy Divinski, Amy Hubbard, J. Richard Kendrick, Jr. and Jane Noll, "Social change as applied social science: obstacles to integrating the roles of activist and academic," Peace & Change, Vol. 19, No. 1, January 1994, pp. 3-24.