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Academics and social action

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Few academics spend all their time in an ivory tower. Indeed, one of the expected duties of academics, besides teaching and research, is 'community service'. Many academics devote a lot a time and effort to the activities of primary and high schools, company boards, churches, art bodies, sporting clubs, the media, local government bodies, and community service groups. Some of their social involvement is directly related to teaching and research, as when academics consult for companies or give talks on scholarly topics to schools, community service clubs or radio programmes. Other times the social involvement has no immediate connection with scholarly duties but can be just as important and socially relevant, as when a geologist helps run a camp for deprived teenagers or a psychologist stages a musical comedy. The relative freedom academics have over their conditions and hours of work – plus the occasional encouragement for 'community service' – means that many academics become quite involved in community activities.

Of the wealth of community involvement by academics, one type seems to gain the most attention of the media and the public: involvement on behalf of social causes, either as individuals or by association with political parties or other groups. This sort of activity, to distinguish it from the more routine forms of social involvement, could be called 'social activism'. The usual term is 'social action'.

A large part of social action is on behalf on 'left-wing' causes such as socialism, feminism and environmentalism, although considerable social action is on behalf of 'right-wing' causes such as opposition to abortion. However, the key characteristic of social action is not political orientation, but a demand or encouragement for a say in social decision-making for those outside the formal channels such as parliament.

The academic community is commonly seen by the general public as containing a large number of the 'radicals' who are involved in social action. But are academics actually prominent among social activists? This is the question I address in this paper. Do academics join groups active on controversial issues, help organise constituencies, help plan public meetings and demonstrations, or make public statements? Contrary to popular perception, most of the social activists from the academic community are not the academics themselves, but are rather students and ex-students, with a sprinkling of junior staff.

It was only in 1983, after many years of experience in social action groups in Canberra – seven years in Friends of the Earth, four years in Canberra Peacemakers and three years in Community Action on Science

and the Environment – that I realised that not a single tenured acadmic had ever been involved. Canberra is a city of over 200,000 people dominated by white collar government employment. There is a major university, the Australian National University (ANU), with some 5000 undergraduates, 1000 postgraduates and 1000 academic staff of whom some 600 are tenured. (I have been a non-tenured member of the research staff at ANU since 1976.) The other major but smaller tertiary institution is the Canberra College of Advanced Education. Numerous government scientists also work in Canberra and many of these, especially those in the CSIRO, are primarily academic in orientation. Out of over 100 people involved to the extent of having attended more than one organisational meeting of the three groups mentioned, tertiary institutions are well represented: probably half have been students, either undergraduates or postgraduates. The next largest category would be those working but officially unemployed people who commit themselves to various social causes. Many of these have been ex-students. The rest fit a variety of categories, including a number of government employees, Environment Centre employees, mothers and teachers, a smaller number of untenured university staff, CSIRO scientists and assistants to Australian Labor Party members of parliament, and a few miscellaneous others including a computer programmer, a hospital worker and a construction worker. I am told that a similar pattern prevails in other Canberra groups such as Women Against Rape, Canberra Committee in Solidarity with Central America and the Caribbean, Jobless Action and Amnesty International.

In 1981 Canberra Peacemakers sent a letter to the *ANU Reporter,* a house journal of the ANU which is distributed to all staff and members of convocation. The letter stated that there are numerous research topics on which academics could do studies which would be of use to peace groups, and invited any interested person to contact the group. Only one response was received, from a research assistant who, due to funding cuts carried out at the expense of untenured staff, lost her job at the end of the year.

Being a social activist does not require being involved in groups. Individual action often can be just as effective. How many established academics take strong individual public stands on social issues that are in any way controversial? Very few. For example, perhaps the single most significant social issue in Australia in the years 1976 to 1980, in terms of stimulating community activism, was uranium mining and nuclear power. Three senior ANU academics – Professors Sir Ernest Titterton, Heinz Arndt and Ted Ringwood – entered the public debate in a significant way as individuals on the pro-nuclear side. On the anti-nuclear side also, only a similarly tiny number of senior ANU staff took a public stand as individuals. By contrast, quite a few junior staff and numerous students helped publicise and participated in rallies and other anti-nuclear activities organised by anti-nuclear groups.

These experiences in Canberra are suggestive, and generally in keeping with experiences elsewhere. For example, at national meetings of the activist organisation Friends of the Earth, there are

students and unpaid workers in abundance, but no sign of any tenured academics. Student activism on campuses around Australia is episodic, but there is a strong continuing tradition of involvement in social issues. In contrast, organised staff action is a rare sight, and is mostly confined to protecting staff salaries and conditions. And in the late 1960s, during the boom years of the 'New Left', it was students (with the support of some junior academics) who led many of the campaigns, not academics.

Engaging in social action is one way to respond to the continuing existence of social problems such as unemployment, racism, sexism, environmental degradation and war. When mainstream institutions are inadequate to tackle such problems, and indeed are themselves the origin of the problems, responsibility for doing something about them is thrust on individuals and groups in the general community. Personally, I believe social activism is bound to be an essential part of any community that aspires to be democratic and equitable, and also that social activists have been the driving force behind many major reforms such as the abolition of slavery, gains in women's rights and reduction in exploitation of workers.

But why should academics in particular be expected to be involved in social action? First, because they are both more aware and more socially skilled than most other groups in society. In other words, they are in a good position to recognise social problems and take effective steps towards solutions. Second, academics as a group are supposed to be trained and experienced in social criticism and thus be able to cut through rhetoric and apologetics to the roots of problems. Third, academics are granted 'academic freedom' which should enable unfettered creative thinking and bold experimentation towards the solution of social problems. Finally, academics are supposed to be self-reflective, and hence to be able to critically examine their own ideas and actions. Thus they should be better able to determine whether they are really being effective in helping achieve social goals.

In some cases lack of activism can be justified by extraordinary devotion to high quality teaching and research. Unfortunately all too few academics can invoke this excuse. In any case, social activism is somewhat more common among academics who are more highly productive according to conventional scholastic criteria.

The relevant question here is, why are academics less represented among social activists than might be expected given many good reasons for social activism? In this article I will outline a number of different answers to this question, with the aim of throwing a bit of light on the dynamics of academia.

Social factors

Several of the common explanations of the inactivity of academics on social issues rely on the psychological characteristics of individuals or the social characteristics of the academic community. These explanations provide some insight, although in the end they toss the questions back to another level.

Psychological inclination

Many people become academics precisely because they want avoid the messy affairs of the wider world. Usually this is an unconscious process. It is perhaps more common in the sciences[1] and humanities than in the social sciences and professional subjects. Academia affords the opportunity to become totally involved in a narrow specialisation, without much contact with others except those with similar preoccupations. For any people there is a warm feeling of satisfaction and security in fully understanding a particular topic, or in solving a well-defined intellectual puzzle. These sorts of isolated, self-contained pockets of knowledge are uncommon in areas relevant to action on social problems, so it is no wonder that many academics prefer to avoid the complications of social reality. Many academics are workaholics, spending every spare moment in their specialised passions, thus avoiding any more than the necessary minimum of ordinary social intercourse. Such commitment naturally leaves no time for social action.

Academia also provides a haven for those who among themselves like to feel superior to non-academics but underneath are very threatened by the outside world and insecure about the irrelevance of their own work.

Another group attracted to academia are those who seek power over others. Some academics thrill in their control over students – especially via the grading process – while others ruthlessly pursue power via the competitive research game. For several decades the power of university administrations has been increasing and academic life has become increasingly bureaucratic, providing more encouragement and opportunities for 'authoritarian-academic personalities'.

But psychological inclination itself is not an explanation, since it remains to be explained why academia provides to some people such an attractive haven from social problems or an attractive base for exercising power.

The tenure process

The prerogative of tenure is commonly justified by an appeal to 'academic freedom'. Tenure is said to give academics the opportunity to pursue controversial or unorthodox topics without fear of prejudicial dismissal. In practice, the process of obtaining tenure is a strong influence towards conservatism. Instead of encouraging the treatment of controversial topics, tenure more often gives the freedom to pursue irrelevant topics or serve vested interests without public scrutiny. For it is precisely those without tenure – students and junior staff – who are most likely to take up controversial issues, to challenge injustices and to take risks with their careers.

In some cases the prospect of tenure is the immediate reason for more conservative behaviour. Some radicals in academia decide to keep a low profile until their vulnerability to sanctions is reduced: 'Once I have tenure, then I'll be able to speak out without worrying so much about the consequences'. The trouble is that by the time tenure is achieved, many of the one-time radicals see no reason to speak out. Or perhaps they are waiting for a promotion or new job where they will have 'real power'. The flaw in 'the long march through institutions' – that is, social change

via radicals rising to positions of power – is that the institutions change the radicals long before the radicals have a chance to change the institutions.

The tenure process encourages academics to gradually adapt to their situation. Students often rebel because their tolerant upbringing and beliefs in a communal concern for learning receive a rude shock when they enter on the receiving end of the academic hierarchy. Tenured academics are of course the students who survived without rebelling too much.

But it is not so much tenure itself that reduces social activism, but what happens to people while they are striving to achieve it. What is it then that affects erstwhile radicals in academia?

Peer recognition

In the academic community, it is psychologically hard to survive without some recognition from peers. The easiest way to achieve peer recognition is to perform and conform: teach the usual subjects in the usual way, and do marginally original research in conventional topics. It also helps to be sociable, witty, white, male, not too young or old for one's position, and not overtly too stupid or too intelligent. But there is one thing not to do: become involved in social issues, or in any activity that contravenes the normal way of doing things in academia.

It would be quite unfair to say that all academics avoid social issues. In fact, there are quite a number who adopt minority or unpopular causes, whether as members of action groups or in their own individual way by making public statements, writing letters or articles in the mass media, or teaching courses. What is revealing is how often such individuals are penalised for this activity: passed over for appointments or promotions, given heavy teaching loads, or have their articles rudely rejected. In some cases attempts to deny tenure or to dismiss individuals involved in socially relevant activities are so blatant that a good case can be made that suppression is the explanation[2]. This can happen to individuals: the difficulties encountered by political economist Ted Wheelwright at the University of Sydney, especially in being passed over for a professorship, provide perhaps the best known Australian example. Whole programmes and areas of study also come under fire, as in the cases of the long antagonism to the environmental Human Sciences Program at ANU and the long opposition to courses in political economy at the University of Sydney. In case such as these, the attacks come not from opponents outside the university, but from powerful figures inside.

Not every academic active on social issues is attacked in these ways. Some academics are careful only to take public stands when an issue has become 'trendy' and the risk of antagonism is reduced. But the attacks that are made provide sufficient example to set the tone of academic life, in which to get ahead it is made clear that one should keep one's nose clean. Peer recognition, so forthcoming for conventional behaviour, can recede dramatically from those who partake in social action. After all, who wants to – or dares to – associate with radicals who at any time may bring down the wrath of the professors or administration upon them, and perhaps upon their colleagues and

subject areas too?

Sometimes those who are victimised for their social activism are hushed forever, but others find victimisation a radicalising experience. Because of hostile peer reaction, sometimes minor or even accidental dissidents find return to ordinary academic life impossible. For example, attempts were made to dismiss Clyde Manwell, Professor of Zoology at the University of Adelaide, as a result of his activities on environmental issues. This dismissal attempt was launched after he had co-authored a letter to the newspaper criticising aspects of the South Australian government's fruit fly spraying programme, thus offending powerful agricultural chemical interests. As a result of his experiences, he has become one of Australia's fiercest critics of abuses in science and academia. If blatant suppression were too frequent, many such cases might result, even to the extent of mobilising significant numbers of academics in sympathy, as has happened in some notorious suppression cases[3].

Academic peer pressure against social activism can be quite potent. It is a primary reason why the tenure process promotes conservatism. But few academics would admit that their lack of activism is due to fear of the consequences. Self-reflective and self-justifying, academics have developed a coherent and persuasive set of reasons for their behaviour. To fully appreciate the social atmosphere of academia, it is necessary to turn to the ideology of academic passivity.

Ideology of academic passivity

Academics place a high value on theory rather than practice, on observation rather than participation, on 'objectivity' rather than 'subjectivity'. In short, they put a higher premium on thinking than doing. These preferences are deeply embedded in the standard conception of scholarly behaviour, in the idea of value-free knowledge, and in the conventional view of the role of the university in society. Indeed, these ideas have become part and parcel of the self-identity of most academics.

Contrary to these conceptions, it can be argued that knowledge obtained without an integration of theory and practice is at best a partial knowledge, that values enter scholarly practice and the construction of academic knowledge at every level, and that 'objectivity' is a cover for an uncritical commitment to the prevailing orthodoxy. It is inevitable that knowledge, in any particular instance, is more useful for some purposes than others. Because of the influence of funding and job opportunities from governments and corporations, and the self-interests of academics, most academic knowledge is selectively useful to governments, corporations and academics[4]. The usual academic conceptions of value-free knowledge and of proper academic behaviour provide a self-justifying world view that may be called an ideology.

For most academics, the proper and effective way to express social concern is by doing one's academic job well, namely by pushing back the frontiers of knowledge by research and fogs of ignorance by teaching. Many are quite uninterested in doing anything of social relevance. They prefer 'important work', measured by criteria such as alleged

intellectual rigour or technological sophistication. What these criteria disguise is the unadvertised influence of elite interests in the form and content of research and teaching.

One thing which brazenly flouts academic adherence to the myth of value-free knowledge is social commitment. To many academics, such commitment is simply beneath contempt, and smacks of the excesses of advertising agencies or Stalinist ideologues. How can one be both a true scholar and make speeches at rallies? It is not sufficient for the activist to reply that academic 'detachment' is a form of commitment too, though less overt, since such a reply simply shows a lack of understanding of the quest for the scholarly ideal. So, at least so long as the ideology of academic passivity is held by most academics and openly touted by some, it will remain uncomfortable to be both an academic and a social activist.

One way to reconcile radical views and an academic career is to become an 'academic radical'. In the phrases 'academic radical' or 'academic Marxist', the word 'academic' is used in its pejorative sense of being irrelevant to practical affairs. The academic radical has many radical ideas – and indeed may be scathing towards those whose ideas are less developed or rigorous – but seldom puts them into practice. (Sometimes the ideas provide their own justification for inaction: 'First we must work out a theory of the state".)

Some socially aware academics restrict the expression of their concern to their teaching, especially when this is possible in areas such as sociology and political science. The logical implications of their ideas, namely social action, are more likely to be taken up by students, although they too may come to accept the academic separation between knowing and doing.

For academic radicals, the ideology of academic passivity has won out over the practical implicatins of radicalism. Restricting radicalism to ideas is one way to survive – at least sometimes. For in academia, ideas are used as resources to power struggles, and academic radicals are not immune from attack. Even being an academic radical can result in isolation and ostracism. How much easier it is not to even express any unorthodox or controversial views!

Finally, the ideology of academic passivity is connected with self-justification for a pervasive apathy and cynicism. Many academics are quite happy to sit around criticising society while feeling smug at being intelligent enough to realise there is nothing they can do about it. The feeling of powerlessness is not restricted to the underprivileged.

There are, then, several psychological and social reasons why academics and social activism do not mix so very often. Many intellectual escapists are attracted to academia. Even those who are inclined to action must spend years on the path to tenure, during which peer recognition depends on not rocking the boat, and during which the pervasive atmosphere of the belief in restrained scholarly behaviour in the quest for value-free knowledge is imbibed. These psychological and social reasons for academic passivity are valid in the sense that they address the personal experience of academics in their own academic culture. But what explains the ideology of academic passivity itself? To

do this it is necessary to go beyond psychological and social factors to the institutional features which provide the framework for academic life.

Structural factors

What is the role of academics in present day society? The standard perspectives based on descriptive sociological characteristics or on Marxist analysis provide little insight about the social activism of academics. More useful, I find, is a perspective[5] that distinguishes between the traditional manual working class and the group of those who make their living by mental activities. The latter group can be called the 'white collar class', the 'professional-managerial class'. the 'New Class' or, as I will do here, the 'intellectual class' or IC for short. Whether or not this group – which includes academics, teachers, members of the medical, legal and other professions, and office workers in corporate and government employment, among others – should be called a 'class' in the Marxist sense has been a matter for much heated debate. But whether this group is called a class, a stratum or interest group is not particularly important here. What is important is the perception that the group of workers who make their living by mental activities has a distinct set of group interests which at times conflict with the interests of political and economic elites and with the interests of the manual working class.

Clearly academics are key members of the IC. Their own distinctive role is that of training and certifying new members of the IC, in other words of reproducing that class. There are various paths which the IC can take to increase its power and privilege vis-a-vis the rest of society. One way is to act as servants of elites, helping to manage corporations and governments. Academics play this role by orienting their research and teaching to corporate and state interests, and by developing systems of ideas which justify the present distribution of power and wealth.

Another avenue for the IC to pursue is to directly promote goals beneficial to its own freedom and expansion, such as professional control of standards and working conditions. For academics this means defending and expanding university autonomy, academic freedom, and the size and importance of higher education generally. Since in capitalist societies many of the constraints on the prerogatives of the IC come from business interests, the IC may ally itself with the working class in some campaigns, such as for better wages and conditions. A radical variant of this alliance is represented by many Marxist parties, whose leading members are dominated by alienated members of the IC. Historically, the victories of communist parties have led to the the creation of vast new bureaucracies with many jobs for the IC. The working class, in whose name the expropriation of the capitalists was carried out, finds itself dominated by a new set of rulers.

This broad outline of the role of the IC has several illuminating features, but leaves out many factors. Most importantly, the IC – like other classes – is internally differentiated. In white collar bureaucracies, for example there is a vast difference between the power and privileges of top managers and lowly clerks. In universities, the interests of deans and tutors, or of engineers and historians, may conflict as well as overlap, depending on the issue.

The increasing penetration of bureaucratic modes of organisation into academia is one of the most important changes to have affected academic life over the past several decades. University administrations rather than outside interests are now the most serious threat to academic freedom[6]. The following categories, among others, can be recognised among academics:

servants of power, who actively serve outside groups, and are typically found in professional areas such as engineering, forestry and commerce;

old line bureaucrats, or rather authority-crats, who identify with and serve the current internal power structure;

technocrats and other academic elites who actively promote the independent interests of intellectual elites;

time-serving academics, whether sitting in a position or hoping to move, who depending on the situation may support any or all of the above groups;

marginal staff, typically those without immediate prospect of tenure, who may decide either to play the academic game, exit to other careers, or join radical groups.

This background provides a useful perspective for addressing structural factors influencing the relation of academics to social action.

Privilege

Academics, especially tenured ones, are a privileged group in society: high salaries, job security and a large degree of control over their work. Indeed, academia is one of the very best places for a member of the IC to work. Tenured academics have 'made it'. Why should they stick their necks out to participate in social action campaigns?

It is clear that privilege often inhibits social action, but why are academics privileged? One reason is their service to dominant institutions: their orientation toward research which serves corporations and governments, their teaching which trains skilled labour for these areas, and their articulation of sophisticated apologetics for the status quo. Especially at the top echelons of academia, there is considerable interaction and interchange with elites in corporations and government. Research contracts, consultancies, sitting on boards, and jobs all help keep academic leaders responsive to corporate and government interests[7],

Among academics, consulting for and obtaining posts from corporations and governments is accepted and encouraged, and is an advantage in obtaining appointments and promotions. In contrast, consulting for trade unions or comunity groups – especially if there are no lucrative fees – is of low prestige and can be a positive hindrance in one's career. Academics and academic institutions sometimes study the underprivileged and the less powerful, but avoid consorting with them. For example, the Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards' Committee, which led the workers of Lucas Aerospace in Britain in developing an alternative corporate plan for the producing socially useful products and protecting jobs and job skills, had considerable difficulty in finding a tertiary institution willing to house a centre for students and staff to work on socially useful products, to be jointly

controlled by the Combine and tertiary institution[8].

Because of the involvement of academia in the military-industrial-bureaucratic-scientifc complex, there can be considerable antagonism by academics, especially leading ones, to those who speak out on social issues and potentially jeopardise the good will of business and government patrons of academia. Hence the attacks on people such as Ted Wheelwright and Clyde Manwell.

Although academics can increase their material privileges by keeping in the good graces of business and government, business intervention in academic affairattacks were strongly resisted by the university officials in the name of academic freedom.[9]

A more usual pattern is for attacks on outspoken academics to come from university staff and officials who subscribe to knowledge frameworks which are selectively useful to business and government interests, as in the case of the Human Sciences Program mentioned earlier. Such attacks may also come from academics with a narrow perspective oriented to local elites and fearful of any disturbance to the local power structure. By contrast, academics who identify with colleagues around the world – so-called cosmopolitan academics – are more likely to be involved in social action and to defend academic freedom locally. Yet even in second-rate universities run by self-glorifying adminstrators, the existence of a strong insistence on the freedom of academic pursuits is a strong force, and can be interpreted in part as support for the special interests of the IC.

There is another aspect to the material privileges and control over working conditions enjoyed by academics. Those who fund academia are aware of the potent force university intellectuals can play either in legitimating current social arrangements *or* in undermining that legitimacy. Provision of high salaries and relative autonomy is one way by which academics can be bought off, and the number of academic dissidents minimised. Elites utilise both the carrot of privilege and the stick of suppression, just as academics can choose either to be servants or critics of power.

Hierarchy and division of labour

Hierarchies of power and influence are an important feature of academia, though these are not as formalised or rigid as most corporate and government bureaucracies. On top are leading administrators, deans, professors and heads of departments. Below these are the bulk of tenured academic staff. Then come the temporary academic staff, tutors, technical staff and research assistants. Finally there are typists, cleaners and gardeners. These levels are not rigid indicators of power: everyone knows of the influential departmental secretary. Yet it is the prevalence of clear differences in status and power, only partly attributable to ability or performance, that is important. This existence of hierarchy stands in contrast to the ideology of equality in academic discourse, an equality that is in practice quite restricted in its applicability.

Another important feature of academia is a high degree of specialisation. This includes not only the division of knowledge into disciplines, but also the minute division into narrow topics which

characterises most research. Specialisation provides the basis for intellectual escapism that draws some people into academia.

Both hierarchy and specialisation help to make academics responsive to powerful outside interest groups. Academic elites, who usually rise to power via conventional narrow research and avoidance of controversy, are the ones who have greatest contact with elites in business and government, via consulting grants, conferences, clubs and informal ties. The academic elites reinforce their orientation to outside elites by their influence on appointments, promotions, allocation of funds and decisions on courses. Attacks on dissidents are facilitated by the network of elites. One insidious avenue is through spies and informants for intelligence organisations.

Academic specialisation serves the interests of business and government by encouraging focus on specific practical problems without attention to the social context, and discouraging interdisciplinary interaction which often is essential to addressing social problems. The key division of knowledge in academia is between means and ends. Nuclear physics, econometrics and rat behaviour can be studied without any attention to what groups in society are capable and interested in utilising the knowledge. Academic specialisation discourages the sort of interdisciplinary interaction which addresses the political and social motivations for and consequences of the form and content of knowledge.

Even when academic programmes are set up to study areas of social concern, the results can be severely limited by the structure of academia. For example, the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at ANU is based on the use of the separate and narrow knowledge frameworks of neoclassical economics and of systems analysis, on hierarchical relations between staff and on a primary orientation to government. As such, it is inherently unsuited for coming to grips with the roots of resource and environmental problems[10] Nevertheless, the extent of hierarchy and specialisation in academia is much less than in most factories or government bureaucracies. One reason for this is the interest of many academics in control over their own work situation, reflecting a general interest in this by the IC. The claims of university autonomy and academic freedom are genuinely pursued to push in the direction of equality in academic discourse, for example in assessing scholarly contributions. In this way academics, including most junior academics, are united in defence of academic prerogatives against blatant outside intervention in academic affairs.

There are limits to the extension of equality in academic matters, and students and non-academic staff are definitely not included. This is reflected in the widespread academic antagonism to equal student participation in departmental decision-making. One reason for the intense and often hostile scrutiny of the Centre for Continuing Education at the ANU is the Centre's commitment – whether or not the reality measures up to it – to democratic participation of all staff in decision-making.

The impact of hierarchy is clearly revealed in the response of university decision-makers to the continuing government squeeze on university finances in Australia since 1976. There has been little attempt

on the part of academics to mobilise public support against the cuts. University administrators have reacted to the squeeze by wielding the axe internally, for example cutting untenured posts and chopping small and socially relevant programmes, and generally diverting diminishing funds to the more powerful groups in the university power structure, including the administration. This reduces social activism by academics, especially those in vulnerable positions or running vulnerable programmes, who feel obliged to concentrate on mere survival. In short, those most privileged inside academia have strengthened their positions at the expense of the weak. On the other hand, university governing bodies have strongly resisted government moves to directly interfere with the internal decision-making of universities, as in the case of imposing conditions on the use of student fees.

When academics become involved in social action groups, it is quite often in groups which are similarly hierarchical to academia itself, such as political parties. In addition, organisations such as political parties or social welfare bodies are much more an accepted part of society than are feminist, environmental or unemployment action groups. A senior academic in a hierarchical action group often becomes president or some other member of the executive. This may serve their own careers as well as being compatible with their pivileged position in academia.

Since members of the IC, both individually and collectively, stand to gain most from an extension of state bureaucracies, academics active in party politics are usually found in social democratic parties such as the Australian Labor Party. An exception to this party orientation may occur at the top levels of older more traditional universities where connections with local elites are longstanding.

Another feature of those social action groups which academics tend to join is an orientation towards influencing decision-makers. For example, the primary focus of the Society for Social Responsibility in Science (SSRS) in Canberra – which was dominated by CSIRO scientists and ANU academics – was on producing expert reports and lobbying government. Many overtly controversial subjects were avoided. Typically, SSRS was formerly constituted, organised and run. Also, as the dominant members of the organisation grew older and rose higher in professional hierarchies, SSRS gradually became less active. But let it be said that SSRS and other such organisations, while reflecting the social structures of scientific and accademic organisations, nevertheless do a lot of valuable work, and are not always inhibited in their methods of action or treatment of controversial issues. Social action contains a dynamic of its own which sometimes can overcome behaviour patterns imbibed in academia.

Status

Academics are a privileged group, and also a high status one. Part of this privilege and status depends on restriction of the supply of academics, and upon keeping scholarly activity a privilege only for those employed to pursue it. Academics, as the trainers and certifiers of members of the IC, largely support the expansion of higher education, and the production of more graduates for positions in business, government and

the professions. This can only increase the prestige of academics themselves. However, it is quite another matter to spread academic skills indiscriminantly and so debase the currency of academic privilege. The maintenance of professional control in academia depends on restricting academic positions to those who have been fully socialised by a long apprenticeship and, just as important, keeping academic discourse unsullied by interaction with too many non-scholars. If people found out that almost anyone with a few months training could do just about everything of social significance that an academic can do, this would be devastating for the status of academics[11]

Within academia, protection of status is an important reason for the development of jargon and antagonism to popularisation, the pursuit of esoteric research, the long and formal course work utilising the 'banking' concept of education[12], and the orienting of research and social action to decision-makers. Protection of status is also a basic reason for the elitism and arragance of amny academics, and their assumption that the life of the mind is superior to 'public' activity. Among academic radicals, Marxism is popular partly because it puts radical intellectuals in a privileged role. The idea of deprofessionalisation, so popular with the general public through the works of Illich and others, is a non-starter in academia.

Protection of academic status is one of the main reasons for the peer pressure against academics 'going public' on social issues. This can apply to those with right-wing as well as left-wing views. Normally keeping a low profile allows academics to serve vested interests while maintaining the guise of neutrality. But even some of those who resort to the media to support corporate or government patrons – such as some of the vociferous defenders of tobacco or nuclear weapons – are ostracised by academics. Extreme views, obviously presented to serve vested interests, may shatter public illusions about the competence and integrity of academics.[13]

When it comes to social action, the high self-image and elitism of most academics is simply not compatible with participation in egalitarian action groups. Friends of the Earth, Canberra Peacemakers and Community Action on Science and Environment, the action groups in which I have been involved, have each had no formal office bearers, have attempted to share tasks and spread skills, and have aimed at encouraging public involvement in social decision-making rather than appealing to elites. In such groups, academics do not merit a superior role, and indeed often have far more to learn than contribute, since others have greater experience and understanding both of the issues and of political strategy. To add to the embarrassment, these highly knowledgeable activists are often students or dropouts.

In some ways, egalitarian social action groups are a greater long term threat to the privileged members of the IC than are elites or powerful working class organisations. The irony is that many of those who join and become most active in such groups are products of the academic system. While the academics pursue autonomy, academic freedom and control over work conditions for their own self-interest, these action groups are attempting to apply these same ideals to a much broader constituency.

Responses

Is it worth trying to involve academics in social action at all? After this rather depressing account of the pressures against such involvement, it is tempting to answer no. But this would be overly pessimistic. While academics are inactive compared with students, they are on average more active than some other groups such as corporation executives or soldiers. Furthermore, the ideas of academic freedom and of the worth of social criticism that are cultivated in academia, partly to justify academic privilege, are also powerful tools for encouraging academics to be more socially active. The problem of social activism by academics is only part of a larger problem of social activism throughout the community towards a society that is more just, free and worth living in. Here only a few implications of the foregoing analysis will be spelled out briefly.

One key point is realising that currently the mainstays of social activism are students and junior staff. They have much more leeway to become involved in social issues. Academics, especially senior ones, who take public stands on social issues are often under a lot of pressure, and can benefit from both moral and practical support. Sometimes there is a support network for radical academics, but even with such a network individuals can easily feel isolated and demoralised. It is worthwhile building or extending such networks to include academics from a range of disciplines and to include sympathetic non-academics. Support networks can take the form of formal groups, informal discussion groups, occasional social events or just keeping in touch. For an academic in a hidebound department, it can be a real morale booster after taking a public stand to receive a token of appreciation from an acquaintance or a stranger.

Support networks become crucial in mounting campaigns against sackings, funding cuts and other attacks against socially active individuals or socially relevant research or teaching programmes. In opposing cuts to Women's Studies programme at ANU, staff, students, feminists and other non-academic supporters have combined their efforts to vocally and publicly expose the unfair administrative actions. Such campaigns have a much better chance of success than passively accepting administrative fiat. The more that students and staff do that goes beyond the usual bureaucratic channels, the more likely is success. Bureaucrats just do not know how to respond effectively to petitions, letters to newspapers, television coverage, demonstrations and occupations. In mounting campaigns on academic issues, the incorporation of experience by non-academic activists can be useful, especially in overcoming academic passivity and nit-picking. Broad-based campaigns against suppression and cuts also can radicalise quite a few of those who participate.

A solid basis for such campaigns lies in the principles of academic freedom, social criticism and the pursuit of truth in all its forms. Academic freedom is seldom enough exercised and may be invoked to protect the special interests of academics, but it is nevertheless well worth defending and expanding. Indeed, the concept of academic freedom should be broadened beyond the academic context, and efforts made to protect and extend the right of free speech without reprisals from

employers to apply to government and corporate employees and others.

So much for defending radical academics. What about actually transforming academia? One way by which academic teaching and research can become more relevant is by increased interaction between academics and community activists. Academics can visit – or even participate in – social action groups, to obtain ideas, suggestions, perspectives and support. In the other direction, community activists can make more of an effort to contact academics and suggest relevant research and teaching.

The more difficult problem is institutionalising such interaction. One important model is the science shop, well developed at several Dutch universities. Groups such as trade unions or community welfare, peace or environmental groups can contact the science shop for advice about questions involving expertise in science and technology. The workers at the science shop try to connect the requesting group with scientists willing to work on the problem[14]. Another example is the Centre for Alternative Industrial and Technological Systems, a research unit set up at North East London Polytechnic to study problems relevant to the alternative corporate plan developed by Lucas Aerospace workers.

What about the structure of the university? Would it be better if tenure were weakened, since tenured staff are so often passive on social issues? Actually, the more probable result of weakening tenure would be an attack on the most vocal tenured academics. The problem is not tenure but the power structure of the university, especially the power of academic elites and administrations. Flattening the academic hierarchy would do more to allow genuine academic freedom than marginal fiddling with tenure, procedures, or staff and student representation on committees. If all high salaries were reduced – for example to the average wage – then staff numbers could be greatly increased and everyone given tenure. This would free numerous people from publication rat-races, bureaucratic infighting and boot-licking, and permit a great deal of innovative teaching and research. An alternative would be to provide tenure only to those on the lowest salaries, who are the ones who need it most.

The typical strategy by radicals in academia has been to try to get more radicals into position within the present academic structures, whether this is via promotion of talented radicals to high positions or by increasing staff and student representation on decision-making bodies. The more fundamental strategy of flattening the hierarchy has seldom been adopted. The challenge – as yet largely unmet – is to develop persuasive campaigns with this more fundamental change as a goal.

Some examples for the university can come from the experiences of action groups which try to be non-hierarchical, participative and self-managing. This has been the direction taken by sections of the feminist, environmental, anarchist and nonviolent action movements[15] Whether such alternatives can have an influence on academic organisations remains to be seen. In any case, they provide a base outside the academic community where intellectual activity and social action can be linked in an ongoing process of building campaigns, undertaking cooperative research and learning, and communicating via journals and newsletters.

An alternative to the university as a place to understand social problems is important, since not much reliance can be put on academic institutions to tackle the roots of these problems. In many cases, environmental studies programmes or peace research institutes only deal with symptoms, due to using inherently limited disciplinary perspectives and organisational structures. These programmes may give activists the illusion that someone is doing something about the problem. More effective than lobbying for more peace research is grassroots peace activism linked with self-critical evaluation and study. This provides both an alternative to relying on academia and at the same time strengthens the positions of those academics who do engage in or promote genuinely critical research and teaching. If a participative social movement with a sound set of principles and strategies for social change can be built, then universities will join the bandwagon sooner or later.

Notes

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1. Gerald Holton, 'On the psychology of scientists, and their social concerns'. in *The scientific imagination: case studies,* Cambridge University Press, 1978, pages 229-252.
2. Brian Martin, 'The scientific straightjacket: the power structure of science and the suppression of environmental scholarship', *Ecologist,* volume 11, number 1, Jan/Feb 1981, pages 33-43.
3. The most well known Australian case is the dismissal of Professor Sidney Orr, a public advocate of university reform, from the University of Tasmania in the late 1950s. The events are meticulously documented in W H C Eddy, *Orr,* Brisbane, Jacaranda, 1961.
4. Robin Blackburn (editor), *Ideology in social science: readings in critical social theory,* Fontana/Collins, 1972; Brian Martin, *The bias of science,* Canberra: Society for Social Responsibility in Science A C T , 1979.
5. Barbara and John Ehrenreich, 'The professional-managerial class', in Pat Walker (editor), *Between labour and capital,* Harvester, 1979, pages 5-45; Alvin W Gouldner, *The future of intellectuals and the rise of the New Class,* Macmillan, 1979; George Konrád and Ivan Szelényi, *The intellectuals on the road to class power,* Harvester, 1979.
6. Lionel S Lewis, *Scaling the ivory tower: merit and its limits in academic careers,* John Hopkins University Press, 1975, chapter 6; Anthony Arblaster, *Academic freedom,* Penguin, 1974.
7. James Ridgeway, *The closed corporation: American universities in crisis,* Random House, 1968; Theodore Roszak (editor), *The dissenting academy,* Random House, 1967.
8. Hilary Wainwright and Dave Elliott, *The Lucas Plan: a new trade unionism in the making?,* Allison and Busby, 1982, pages 226-230.
9. Martin Brian, *op. cit.*
10. Brian Martin, 'Academics and the environment: a critique of the Australian National University's Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies', *Ecologist,* volume 7, number 6, July 1977, pages 224-232. See also David W Livingstone and Richard V Mason, 'Ecological crisis and the autonomy of

science in capitalist society: a Canadian case study', *Alternatives,* volume 8, number 1, Winter 1978, pages 3-10, 32.

[11] See the programme of Gary L Huber for training people in medical research, described in John Holt, *Freedom and beyond,* Penguin, 1973; George Williams, *Some of my best friends are professors: a critical commentary on higher education,* Abelard-Schuman, 1958, page 202: 'The fact is that anybody and everybody with a month's training in methods and source materials, with elementary knowledge of almost any subject, and with normal mentality, can do publishable research'.

[12] On this and much else see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed,* Penguin, 1972.

[13] For an example, see Brian Martin, 'The naked experts *Ecologist,* volume 12, number 4, July/August 1982, pages 149-157.

[14] Ad Meertens and Onno Nieman, 'The Amsterdam science shop: doing science for the people', *Science for the People,* volume 11, number 5, September/October 1979, pages 15-17, 36-37.

[15] See for example The Training/Action Affinity Group of Movement for a New Society, *Building social change communities,* Movement for a New Society, 1979.