

Academics and Activists: The Importance of a Vision.

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Abstract

One major critique of many social movements — whether the new peasantry movement, the global ecological movement, or the occupy movement — is the lack of a deliberate, detailed blueprint to give to activists and the public. Only once a successful social movement is coupled with the academic and public backing of a conscious project is it possible to move to the next step of global ‘change’. No social movement is perfect, but it is important to examine the positive and negative parts of any large social movement to understand why change occurred or why it did not. The occupy movement is a primary case study for this phenomena. It had all the classical makings for a successful social movement, but still managed to fail. So why did the occupy movement not succeed?

Keywords: Occupy Movement, Activism, Academia, Vision

Introduction

Throughout human history there have been social movements; it is something inextricably human which constitutes a significant part of the human social process. In the modern industrial era, there has been a violent terrain for social movements, some successful, others failures. Only recently, however, have these movements been recorded in such detail. Developing social theory means that they are slowly becoming the subject of analysis.

Vision has many loose definitions in social science, including but not limited to: the end goal; the final step; the utopia; the direction; or the blueprint. Acknowledging this ambiguity, this article's definition of vision through social science lenses is: "The active and conscious planning of framework which enables an objective to be reached." In this definition, which I have developed, vision is not simply a translation of the Greek word *telos* – it is something more dynamic and complex. It is something which, while embodying the end goal, also contains cohesion and mechanisms by which the end goal is actualised.

The first section of this article begins by analysing the recent modern movement of Occupy — in particular, the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS). It represents the best case study for analysis because of the movement's popularity and modernity. It contests some of the largest contemporary struggles the Western world is facing, including but not limited to inequality, class, and capitalism. The OWS is a perfect example of the activist academic paradox inasmuch as it highlights the tension between activists and academics through a unique social power structure. OWS further demonstrates how a movement that is such a global phenomenon and presence can still achieve little to no outcomes. It is in the OWS

failures that the most significant lessons can be learned to heal the tension between activists and academics while uprooting some of the flaws in both parties.

This article posits that the case study of OWS demonstrates a lack of vision which stems inherently from an activist academic paradox. This paradox represents a fundamental social and epistemological dynamic of social movements which inhibits unification and progression.

Occupy Wall Street Movement Case Study

In Western culture, 2011 was embedded with the OWS movement's rallies, protests, and police brutalities. This media attention was provided by protesters inside the occupy movement in response to a globalized free market and to the infamous bailing out of bankers in the United States. The occupy movement, and specifically the OWS movement, came to fruition with the occupation of the Wall Street area on 17 September 2011. The movement occupied Wall Street for several months, and spawned over 750 occupy movements across the globe. Of the few thousand people occupying Wall Street, Castells points out that most were aged between 20-40 and that the movement was comprised of professionals and students, half of whom were employed full time or non-employed/underemployed (Castells, 2012). It is clear that the OWS movement had a strong student demographic. Most of this demographic distribution of students is a result of the climbing student debt in the United States which is paralleled by rising tuition fees in an increasingly hostile and volatile job market (Graeber, 2011, p 1).

The connection is clear, as the movement targets the heart of capitalism and corporations itself — namely Wall Street — and the two primary reasons why professionals were likely involved was because of the inequality within the United

States; note the 99% hash-tag and the injustice of the banking crisis in 2008. Between these two main demographic populations, the OWS movement tried to represent the vast majority of the population, the common American, as foregrounded in their message: “We are the 99%”, a symbol that would stand for the vast inequalities of income and wealth. This stratification between the one percent and the other 99 became the hallmark of the occupy movement. An ‘us against them’ message was remarkably able to initially cultivate and mobilize a large group of people across different ethnicities, ages, and social class. This initial involvement of public backing was a significant reason for the predicted success of the OWS movement; however, this initial interest was the historical height of the movement’s attention and action. Wall Street occupiers envisioned the movement as an American Arab Spring, hoping that this social movement would mark a new era in American history, a turning point of restoring power back to the common citizen (Brown, 2011; Van, 2011, p. 1-2).

OWS’s predicted success was also based heavily on its modern usage of global technology and the horizontal hierarchical power structure, which was organized to represent a pure democratic process of sharing ideas and debate (Juris, 2012, p.7). Castells observes that the Occupy Wall Street movement had the most successful usage of modern social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms, all operating across multiple languages and countries to maximize the public expose and to encourage proxy participation from people outside of America. Castells explains the intricacies of the occupy movement’s forum:

Once the camps were organized, they established their presence as specific occupations on the Internet. Most camps created their own website, set up a group on Facebook, or both ... The diversity of the occupy movement could be seen with the very rich web pages content and graphics ... The websites

served as sites to organize the movement and to create a public presence for it (Castells, 2012, p.174).

Castells highlights how the occupy movement was at the frontier of public relations insofar as it had an incredibly modern and dynamic presence on social media and public media. If any social movement is to succeed and gain momentum into something global, it must utilize modern technology as the occupy movement did. Movements have to utilize globalization and interconnectivity to combine into a movement of movements; this means being included in a movement which is bigger than your own and a part of something which is directed at global change (Neilson, Gaylard, & Howard, 2015).

One of the most innovative ideas was to have public democratic speaking sessions to provide for and gather support for ideas. These sessions were, in turn, moderated to ensure that an almost pure 'Athenian democracy' existed in the realm of ideas. However, was this really what undermined the Occupy Wall Street movement? This style of purely democratic debate between the three groups of activists, the public, and academics places many constraints on the process itself. Firstly, the administrative and pragmatic cost has to be appreciated. The democratic process is slow; it takes time to engage in fully democratic debate, let alone in debate which would encompass literally thousands of people. Therefore, from an administrative standpoint the democratic process here is not suitable for such a wide and fragmented social movement. Roberts notes that from inside the occupy movement, it was extremely difficult to even agree on things that needed to be done due to the conflict between anarchists and other top down ideologies (Roberts, 2012, p.12).

From an academic standpoint, the process of debate is paramount to refining ideas. However, while within academia there exists a hierarchal structure of debate

and referencing, this is non-existent within the OWS movement, which places every citizen on equal footing. It is a grave misunderstanding of the complexities of economic and social development to think that all people are equally versed in the subject, and that all people deserve the same respected air-time. There is a reason why Western governmental ministries are broken down into specific subject areas such as health, social development and so on, because it specializes and refines the depth of understanding. Academia is much the same, however an academic vertical hierarchy is respected because it represents a standard of rigor and consistency which administrates and delegates discussion both internally and internationally.

As Szolucha puts it, this forum style is fundamentally the reason why the occupy movement ‘burnt out’ and became fragmented, because not only could it achieve nothing administratively, but also the demands of the occupy movement were highly contentious and internally disregarded (Szolucha, 2013, p.18). This disregard symbolizes, in essence, a lack of vision and unification. If the movement was able to demonstrate a comprehensive plan displaying how and why certain demands would be achieved, the movement’s vision would have unified and sustained past the attrition and through the fragmentation.

Vision Brings Unification

It is impossible to view the Occupy Wall Street movement without considering this anarchistic power structure. The Wall Street occupation was specifically designed to give voice to the everyday citizen, to ensure that everybody was seen as equal and had the opportunity to share their ideas, whatever these ideas were. In a theoretical world unbound by the constraints of living and sustaining oneself, this is perhaps the ideal structure of debate: one in which time is timeless and the passing of everyday life can

be dedicated to the philosophy of how society should be structured. However, we do not live in this world. This Athenian-inspired assembly led to thousands of ideas, hundreds of different messages, tens of different ideologies, and not one clear framework to display how any of these things were going to be accomplished. Given this, the fundamental flaw in the Occupy Wall Street movement was the lack of authority, the lack of a top-down approach to unify and constrain people to an extent where the collective is compelled to come up with a *unificatory* idea which every person can support and rally behind. The Occupy Wall Street movement ultimately failed to deliver a plan. Not only that, it failed to even deliver a clear object as to what the movement was trying to accomplish, and this is the result of the extreme devolution of power which deemed all participants as equals.

Despite this, the occupy movement imparts many lessons for running a successful social movement. What is significant about the Occupy Wall Street movement is that it was the first real attempt to open up free and welcome speech using a variety of technological and democratic methods in the occupied space. The idea of modern internet networking in social movements is fundamental to gaining exposure and involvement; any social movement which intends to have influence has to operate across various media platforms, languages and countries, all of which are possible in 2016. However, while this demonstrates a successful attempt to unify people out of everyday life, it does not address the large question of moving forward. The lack of an answer moving forward meant the occupy movement was never a real threat or a counter-hegemonic movement, because it lacked any long-term vision or blueprints of how the world should be and how to get there.

Vision is the most important ingredient in the recipe of success, and any praxis approach without vision is destined to struggle in both capturing the public eye and

delivering a comprehensive and counter-hegemonic opposition. Social movements, however simple or complex, have to retain this vision and direct conscious planning to ultimately formulate their praxis — as shown in the OWS example, which failed to retain vision and thus resulted in no praxis. Praxis can only be realized through the synthesis of academia and activism precisely because it requires the best from both parties. A praxis-orientated approach is something which combines the theoretical with the practical as a means to accomplish counter-hegemonic and progressive action that is backed by an overarching vision and plan. In the OWS, the absence of a deliberately detailed blueprint to give activists, the public, and academics generated a blockade to the movement's progress and, as Szolucha explains, there is a risk of burning out due to stagnation when this occurs (Szolucha, 2013, p.18).

It is important to recognize the three distinct groups. The activists, the public, and academics do not make up the entirety of society or social movements, however they do represent the main spheres, each of which require different degrees and outlooks on the vision to move forward (Bevington & Dixon, 2005). When viewing these three groups within social movements, each group reacts differently towards praxis and has different ideas of what drives social change. Therefore, it is firstly important to have vision which can be communicated through different channels to meet these groups.

Activists are largely a demonstrable group. This group responds typically to 'real' work — work which has direct social consequences, and whose medium of choice is the human social process. Simply put, activists work well within direct social environments for work which can be demonstrably tangible (Buechler, 2000). On the other end of the spectrum, academics prefer a process which is largely considered by the public to be abstract or intangible. This is work which is not

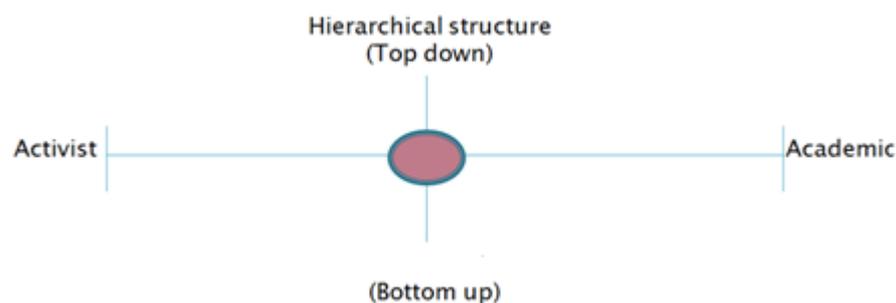
necessarily demonstrable, however it is carried out through the ideological cut and thrust of debate. This ideological debate may happen in the political sphere, through the media, behind closed doors, and, most commonly, through the medium of journals, which serve as a platter for academics to present their arguments (Johnston and Goodman, 2006). It would follow, then, that the most successful way of communicating to academics would be in the language which they most commonly understand and through a medium which they frequent; this is true for all three of these groups. Delivering a vision which is academically sound is key to any project which hopes to convince academics of its worth through a complex and deep explanation of thought and ideology.

The Activist Academic Paradox

Summing up these two ends of the spectrum, one might come to the conclusion that activists fight the societal battle, whereas academics fight the ideological battle. This is not to say that neither can do the other, but for the large part of the praxis process, these groups carry out change through two distinct mediums which therefore require a different style of vision brought to them. If activists were on the left side of this spectrum and academics on the right, then the public would be in the middle. The public is deemed to be in the middle not because of superiority but because of the medium through which they communicate. The medium of common media is one which academics and activists both share, however a key to communicating to the public is neither through demonstrable acts or ideological debate, but rather through a synthesis of the two. Another reason to place the public in the middle is that the public transitions to or from the activist or academic end; often, they are people who provide support from their homes and in an ever-increasing diversity of ways.

However, when they begin to make the transition to the activist role of demonstrable praxis acts, they become an activist; likewise, when they become involved in the ideological battle through a range of different social mediums, they become attached to the academic spectrum. Typically, the public will break down into either side of praxis with relation to the activist and academic spectrum.

The distrust and disregard of academics is something which has sadly become ingrained within our public and political spheres. However the distrust and disregard not only comes from the public and politics, but also from activists — more specifically, activists who support the very same causes as academics. It is a puzzling and frightening phenomenon which I have tried to explain through the use of a model called the Activist Academic Paradox (AAP).



The paradox begins with the spectrum between action on one hand and theory on the other, with activists being associated with the school of action and academics located with the school of theory. Both of these parties criticise each other. The most popular and common forms of criticism directed towards academics is that they inhabit an ivory tower; that they are pretentious; and that they are disconnected from the ‘real world’ and consumed by their theoretical understandings and abstract models. Here, the activist’s perspective is that academics ‘do nothing’ in the sense

that they do not operate at the micro and individual level of socialization in social movements: they take ‘no-action’ (that is to say, no ‘tangible’ action); they do not operate in the ‘here and now’; and they largely seem to be removed from social change. This is an understandable but naive perspective, for while academics do operate in a world within a world, they still devote their lives to understanding the world we live in. Perhaps a retort from academics would be that they best understand the world because they spend much of their lives studying it.

This leads on to the academic perspective of activists. It should be noted that the academic playing field has changed over the past decades, and especially in New Zealand. Universities have changed their primary function from a public good to a private good model. This is reflected in academia’s world of the PBRF rating system and the increase of what Speer calls the individual contribution, which attempts to justify the increasing prices in tuition fees (Speer, 2013, p. 2). The main criticism of activists is that they lack the theoretical understanding and the systematic understanding of how society functions at both the political and economic level, thus resulting in the activists’ work being regarded as non-existent or counter-productive. Academics, like the activists, have a significant point to make; uninformed activism can be unproductive and it can also be counter-productive. Take the example of Green’s Peace’s damage of the Nazca lines in late 2014, where a lack of archaeological guidance lead to permanent damage to a national monument (Ruble, 2014). An example of the activists’ critique can be seen in the World Social Forum, which is a democratic open market place for debate and ideas. However, the World Social Forum has received much criticism for its lack of achievement in regard to progressive social change. It is clear that, epistemologically speaking, action without information and/or education is ill advised, but also at the same time, information and

education without action is destined to be swept into the dustbin of history without making a dent.

The centre of the AAP spectrum represents the best chance for curing this problem of vision. It is combining the activist with the academic (from left to right), and the top down with the bottom up (from north to south), to create a multi-faceted power structure with the individual in the middle. In an ideal world, the perfect activist would be someone one who is educated in the area of their social movement and who has the confidence to develop ideas and act within the movement. The power structure would combine the debate of ideas and frameworks through a democratic space, with a chain of authoritarian command to delegate which ideas have priority over others. People should have the opportunity to share ideas, which is of course the pinnacle of academic freedom. However, a situation like the Occupy Wall Street movement and the World Social Forum is something that should be avoided through an overall top-down approach.

Lack of vision will continue to haunt us through the disconnection or paradox of behaviours between activists and academics who share a common ground for progressive social change. This dysfunctional relationship is caused by both parties, and only when a synthesis of academia and activism occurs will praxis be created. A deliberate combination of theory and action on a massive scale is required to generate strong vision which will deliver what is required by the majority of people today. That vision has to be consciously designed as argued in this paper; it has to be something which is grounded in strong theoretical and academic understanding of the political economy. In the twenty-first century, a pragmatic vision is something which is becoming increasingly complex, multifaceted, and dynamic. To think that serious social change being delivered through the political and social system could be straight

forward and succinct is to misapprehend how complex and diverse the world has become today (the academic's critique). However, due to the nature of this subject, a consciously designed vision is something which academics are failing to construct and deliver to the general public. This is due to a disconnect within academia and an inability to communicate the academic process to the public's understanding. At the same time, the public is clearly detached from academia — whether through popular media or socializing, public and political spheres only exacerbate the common disregard for academics through a dumbing down of a society driven by increasing aggregate materialism and inequality.

Reconnecting the academic and the activist will be one of the most progressive things society can do. It is something which can be done outside of the political and economic spheres; something which can be done, and done well, with the resources we already have. This reconnection would allow both the public and activism spheres to re-engage with the literature and knowledge, which would empower them to not make the same mistakes of the past; namely, it would stop social movements from being swept into the dustbin of history much like the occupy movement has been. Solving the AA paradox would be something which is beneficial to all parties, and it takes the effort from both likewise. The academic must become the activist and vice versa: both must engage in each other's practice to create and carry out a vision which will provide the progressive social change we need. In 1888, Marx wrote a famous passage which is as relevant now as it was then: "The Philosophers have interpreted the world; the point is to change it" (Marx, 1972).

Conclusion

Vision comes in many shapes and sizes, and its importance cannot be overstated. It is the unificatory factor which binds both academic and activist social actors together and awakens the praxis for social change. Throughout this paper, there has been a running theme of vision as the true underlying factor which determines a social movement's success. The OWS moment has been one of the main social movements in the Western world in the twenty-first century, and it provides an excellent example of a significant social movement for analysis. As scholars have shown, OWS had all the typical characteristics for becoming an impactful and lasting social movement, however after months of occupation, nothing of substance emerged and another project lost the war of attrition against the neo-liberal hegemony (Roberts, 2012, p.2). It is apparent that there was a distinct absence of clear and directed vision within the movement; the vision was fragmented into hundreds of different strands through an overly democratic academic hierarchy which exacerbated and highlighted the AA paradox. The lack of vision can be described by the disconnection between activists and academics within our society today, not just within social movements but within the communication between these two groups and the public/political spheres. This disconnection has been responsible for unproductive and even counter-productive action within society, and is largely born out of the ontological differences between the nature of academic and activist work.

Many social movements today such as the World Social Forum, the ecological movement, and the new peasantry movement — all of which are characteristically liberal movements — are falling because of this problem of vision. This, in turn, brings about its own questions of the left's development of vision in the last two to three decades and its own internal activist-academic struggle. Creating and opening

strong networks between both of these two groups is likely to be the best hope at generating a vision which will transpose onto the public and become the backbone for a counter-hegemonic movement.

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