

What are main motivations for scholars (both young and established) to get involved in activism?

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Background

Scholar-activism debate has become popular in recent years thanks to Political Geographers, Anthropologist and scholars from other disciplines. In recent years, global climate justice movement, indigenous rights and food sovereignty campaigns have further accelerated the need for scholar-activism engagement.

The trend came out of the realization of shortage of action-oriented research due to the neo-liberal shift of the education system associated with the ivory tower mentality. Also many academics from different corners of the globe are increasing claiming to be working for the poor and the marginalized while they rarely join the actual struggles of the so called poor and marginalized groups.

According to Chatterton, Fuller, and Routledge (2008), scholar activism work seeks to contribute to practices that lead to societal transformation and not just production and sharing of knowledge. In his inaugural professorial lecture in April 2016, Professor Saturnino M. Borrás describes scholar-activism as 'rigorous academic work that aims to change the world, or committed activist work that is informed by rigorous academic research, which is explicitly and unapologetically connected to political projects or movements' (Borrás, 2016).

Some sections of academics have branded scholar-activism as baseless advocacy work which has no space in modern-day academia. Sara Goldrick-Rab from the University of Wisconsin-Madison emphasize that, scholar-activism should not be confused with advocacy. She identifies herself as a scholar-activist and not an advocate. The distinction according to her is that, 'advocates begins with a core and guiding goal—not a theory' while on the contrary scholar-activists 'begins with a set of testable assumptions, subjects these to rigorous research, and once in possession of research findings seeks to translate those findings into action'(Goldrick-Rab, 2014).

This is one of a series of reports on the relationship between research and activism, produced following the ESRC STEPS Centre Summer School 2016. It informs and is part of a web-based resource on research-activist links. We are grateful to the [Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le Progrès de l'Homme \(FPH\)](#) for their support of this initiative.

Visit the website: learning.steps-centre.org

Avenues for Scholar-Activism (Part of this also came from our group debate at STEPS)

There are various ways in which academics can engage in and contribute to scholar-activism; they include the following among other

- i. Involvement in action groups on various social issues
For example Peter Newell and his student involvement in fossil divestment campaign (Fossil-free Sussex) and Ben Ramalingam work on refugees rights
- ii. Conduct research and speak to the media about work with marginalized groups such indigenous people and smallholder farmers – Borrás
- iii. Taking part in campaigns within universities through unions. Recent demand for pay-raise across the UK for instance
- iv. Undertaking research that informs or supports activism. This will allow academic research to be taken and applied by activists and advocacy groups
- v. Offering support and advise to students activists groups
- vi. Taking part in policy debates through direct engagement/submissions to policy makers
- vii. Conducting participatory research with our research subject for the sake of achieving a common goal

Key Issues from my table at the Summer School

The original question for our table was: What are main motivations for scholars (both young and established) to get involved in activism – eg: from moral concerns or pressures to fulfil impact requirements

Group members decided to rephrase the question to: **What the main motivations and obstacles for scholars to fully engage in scholar-activism work!** After a long discussion, the following came out as motivation and obstacles;

Motivations for scholars to engage in scholar-activism work

- i. **Personal experience-** This depends scholars' life history and nature of their upbringing. Those who grow up witnessing injustices are more willing to take a more radical approach and engage in scholar-activism work
- ii. **Nature of academic disciplines-** Some disciplines such as anthropology and environmental science/management has a long tradition of involving activism in their work. Scholars from such disciplines tend to be more motivated to get involved
- iii. **Impact and the quest to reach wider audience-** Some scholars sees scholar-activism path as a chance to have long-lasting impact in solving societal needs and

impact a much bigger audience. Scholar-activism offers a rare chance to connect with people outside traditional academic circles

- iv. **Seniority-** Senior and more established scholars in different fields feels more motivated to engage in scholar-activism work due to such factors like job security. Once scholars have reached the top of the their profession, they fell less-pressure to get involved is what is deemed to be risky path
- v. **Interaction with NGOs with rich activism history.** Scholars who have interacted or collaborated with such NGOs like Friends of the Earth, GreenPeace, La Via Campesina and others tend to appreciate activism and are more motivated to get involved. The group cited Andy Stirling as an example.

Obstacles/Limitations to practice Scholar-activism

- i. **Limited space in academia-** Modern-day academia doesn't encourage or reward activism. The space is controlled and those who wish to engage in scholar-activism are accused of tarnishing institution's image.
- ii. **Fear-** Scholar activism is not popular in modern-day academia and many scholars fear to be labeled as troublesome and controversial. The fear of reprisals within academia discourage many
- iii. **Job insecurity-** this is especially common to junior academics and early career researchers who are concerned with the repercussion of their scholar-activism work. Concerns over job security discourage them to get involved
- iv. **Scientific credibility** – Many see scholar-activism work as characterized by biasness, normative positions and lack scientific rigor. This discourages those who want to get involved due to concerns over their credibility as scientists
- v. **Time and financial limitations-** Engaging in scholar-activism work means one has to put some academic interest aside to engage more with communities. This demand a lot of dedication in time and financial resources which are lacking in most cases
- vi. **Geographical limitations** – Some scholars facing challenges while working with communities outside their geographical borders. For instance, an American scholar working in Africa may wish to engage in scholar-activism work but may face challenges of not being a native of the continent
- vii. **Ethical concerns and legitimacy** – Some of contemporary societal challenges which call for scholar –activism approach are ethically sensitive and researcher's ethical positions and legitimacy is always questioned. This means a lot of scholars are shying away from practicing scholar-activism work due to such concerns
- viii. **Different degree of contestations in fields/disciplines** – Some scholars (natural scientists) work in topics which are less politicized with less degree of contestations. On the other hand, social scientists work in highly political and contested topics which

require a more radical approach to research. Social scientists are in most cases more motivated to practice scholar-activism due to nature of their fields

- ix. **Workplace attitudes and perceptions** – Scholars working in places where colleagues are not interested in scholar-activism tend to be less motivated while the opposite is true
- x. **Country context**- Engagement in scholar-activism work differs in different countries. While some countries do tolerate activism and radical ideas, others are not open enough and those involved in scholar-activism work put their lives in danger as the recent case involving my [Mozambican university colleague](#) who was gunned down by authorities
- xi. **Limited channels** – The publish or perish culture is somehow limiting scholars to engage in scholar-activism work. There are very limited channels to showcase scholar-activism work

Useful web resources and networks

[The Antipode Foundation](#), a community of radical geographers

Scholar-Activist Project Awards - <https://antipodefoundation.org/scholar-activist-project-awards/>

Uniting Detroiters: Coming together From the Ground Up-

<https://antipodefoundation.org/scholar-activist-project-awards/201213-recipients/sapa-1213-safransky/>

Engaged Scholarship and Action Research- <http://participatoryresearch.web.unc.edu/web-resources-for-participatory-research/>

International Network of Scholar Activists - <https://inosawikispaces.com/>

The Global Scholars Network

https://depts.washington.edu/gcp/research_pages/global_activist_networks.htm

Open Random Questions to Digest

- a) What constitute credible scholar-activism methodology?
- b) What ethical and epistemological considerations for scholar-activists?
- c) How best can we blend scholarship and activism?

- d) What the role of emotions in scholar-activism research
- e) What are the opportunities and challenges of engaging with non-academic collaborators?

Suggestions for STEPS Website on Scholar-activism

- Think of the scope and intended audience of the scholar-activism web platform
- Ensure web materials are not too academic to encourage non-academic actors to engage
- Hope the sponsor (French Foundation!) is not a corporate giant with negative environmental/human rights footprint

Conclusion

For a meaningful, effective and long-lasting scholar-activism work, scholars must strive to overcome the artificially created borders between academia and societal needs. The notion of scholarship and activism as two separate and opposing spheres must be eliminated. There is a huge potential for scholar-activists to engage in both activism work while fulfilling meaningful contribution to academia

Literature Cited

Borras Jr., S. M. (2016). Land politics, agrarian movements and scholar-activism: Inaugural Professorial Lecture delivered at the Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University

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