

What do we mean by Socially Engaged Scholarship?

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Socially useful scholarship cannot contemplate a retreat into the world of concepts, dialogue, and theorisation alone. It must be located in the world of real relations, social struggles, human ontologies and the effects on the lives of human beings. This is not a negation of the importance of theorization. But it is critical of the idea that social reality can be reduced to a discourse of theoretical abstractions. It is truly about praxis, which is no less than a strong, deep and thoughtful relationship between how we think about the world and act upon it. Praxis is the enemy of paralysis and frigidity and rejoicing in the realm of abstraction alone. It is thus unnecessary to re-invent new and obscure concepts for well-known ideas for producing what appear to be intellectually innovative ideas. This can only reduce ideas to the realm of markets.

For us in academia the most difficult part of the process of constructing engaged scholarship is to understand how in daily practise an inherently distant world of academic life can construct real relations of respectful equality with the world outside of it. The engagement mandate of universities is being interpreted in a variety of typologies and I do not wish to delve into that save to say that academic descriptions of the activities of universities when engaging with its “communities,” and which meet the criteria of accredited scholarship, are generally referred to as the scholarship of engagement. Such descriptions refer to the variety of approaches used to conduct activities in the process of engaging with such communities. These activities could I think be described as either eleemosynary, utilitarian, and even paternalistic forms of engagement. They simply provide a typological description of these activities, their aims and purposes, histories, social relevance, methods, relationship to the other mandates of the university such as teaching and learning, providing a useful body of knowledge of scholarship and the debates about such scholarship. But these pre-occupations are qualitatively different from the attributes of engaged scholarship and are distinguishable from it.

This brings me to the substance of what I want to say which is that in the realm of the relationship between universities and its communities there are some extremely difficult and complex issues which arise principally from the real world of the social relations we

inhabit relative to the communities with which we seek to be engaged. This means that the very concept of engagement is the subject of contradictory interpretations – not just typologies which arise from the nature of these relationships - between academia and its constituencies affecting how the aims and purposes, interests, the nature of the relationships constructed, and its methods are interpreted and developed. And this must be properly understood if engagement is to have any socially useful and intellectually coherent meaning. It's a difficulty which is not well understood if one simply examines the typologies of engagement.

Let me add, preliminarily, that the communities I refer to are mainly of the working class, having evolved from the rural communities in the continent and elsewhere historically. Parts of this community continue to exist in such rural communities. Working class lives are now increasingly characterised by their daily struggles to survive. In order to survive some of these communities have formed organisations, movements, cooperatives and other forms of combination to defend themselves and to advance their struggles against the wide range of exploitative, oppressive and other discriminatory practises. This is worsened by the persistent failure of governments, at every level, to meet even the basic conditions of life for such communities. The reality of the multidimensional crisis – the polycrisis - that faces urban and rural working-class communities has destroyed the prospect of achieving even the minimum of human rights in a democratic society almost impossible. That is why the structures of resistance formed by communities are essential to defend themselves and to build alternatives to the present. Community organisations and movements are a great source of knowledge and understanding about the life-giving strategies and practices to represent the interests of their communities and for advancing the interests of society as a whole. Such knowledge is the result of the direct experience gained in the struggles faced by communities and provides knowledge and understanding to resolve the difficult issues faced by society especially in societies characterised by oppressive and exploitative practises.

The first premise for resolving the difficulty of contradictory approaches to the concept and practice of engaged scholarship, lies not so much in the realm of the theoretical discourses which conventional academic knowledge demands, but by understanding in the world of social political, cultural and historical relations and how these impact on the process of

research and the production of knowledge. How does that relate to the life and work of communities and especially of those solidaristic and collective initiatives derived from its forms of local and autonomous organisation and its social movements and the relations they produce. It is there that we must return to the source for understanding the scholarly attributes of knowledge developed out of an association with the communities of the university. Especially in societies like our own, understanding the lived experience of communities, and the struggles intrinsic to such life is likely to produce real understanding about how communities have contended with and devised the strategies necessary for their survival. It is here that we will find how communities and its leaders deal with its conflicts and contradictions in searching for the realisation of emancipation in both practise and conception.

But there are real barriers for us in the university system for the realisation of these ends – and they lie not only in the administrative hierarchies of power and bureaucratic demands of such research and knowledge, but in the very nature of predilections which inform how to approach such knowledge given the grip of the criteria and the outputs required of such research and its uses. These are derived from the strangeness of the academic *habitus* relative to the real relations we create with communities, in the context of the polycrisis facing the right to life and freedom of the communities I refer to. The conventions of academia tend to obscure what this reality means for an orientation to the construction of knowledge - for practical and theoretical purposes. These orientations inevitably (for those who are conscious of it) raise difficult moral and ontological commitments which explicitly recognise the wide ranging and intractable barriers constructed by academic ways of knowing. This is because the purposes of such engaged scholarship cannot be synonymous between the university and its community whether or not these engagements are based on ‘respectful’ relationships between the university and the community, since that does not by itself result in equivalent purposes even if the methods used in arriving at outcomes is mutually satisfactory.

Let’s us look at the different purposes.

For the university it is an activity which is inseparable from its knowledge producing, discovery, teaching, learning and supervision functions. And it contributes essentially to the aspirations of individuals even if they are doing the work as a group. It is always hoped that

these engagements will promote nomothetic outcomes - the possibilities for theoretical generalization. Its scholarly outcomes are heuristic with the objective of producing scholarly knowledge within the bounds of the criteria for such even though it may have uses for some understanding of causality more deeply, to produce ideas about the curriculum and the pedagogy, to devise programs and projects to do more of this work and of course to support university's quest for transformation.

For communities, the process of engagement is not about these issues which are incidental to its willingness to engage. For them, the purpose of engaging with universities is largely to meet an exigency, the need to support culturally syncretical, integrating, and indigenous processes for self-organization. It is best expressed through shaping the possibilities of useful outcomes, for finding the linkages with other forms of struggles in which the community is engaged more widely and solidaristically, for clarifying more deeply the nature of the exigency with which communities are confronted - through research about the facts of circumstance, through analysis, experimentation, and strategic thinking. It is for widening the reach of social agency and its mobilisation in support of increasingly democratic and accountable practices within communities. It is also, against the depoliticization of its struggles for emancipation and is intrinsically a critique of the approaches adopted by most NGOs to community "development". These important purposes are often subverted by the demands of academic arrangements, its criteria, funding and administrative (performative) requirements. And communities generally acquiesce to these requirements for obvious reasons. They rarely complain against these because there are at least some marginal benefits to be derived even if they have little to do with reconstructing social relations.

The meaning of this is that academic establishments and researchers must go much further than they are able or permitted to and this requires a radical shift in their orientation to the purpose of constructing engaged scholarship. Such scholarship must be self-critical and understand its intellectual limits. Rigorous knowledge can only be based on such self-critical consciousness and a frank acknowledgement about the intractable divisions I refer to. That will open up the possibilities for genuinely collective knowledge for its co-construction through a shared understanding of the real purposes of engaged research and how that is constructed and could lead to a new approach to the use, control, and allocation of resources for the purpose.

For this to happen choices must be made and interests declared - not just academic and intellectual but socio-political, historical and ethical. Through that we can begin to have real value and redemptive possibilities for our collective freedom and humanity.

Choudry¹ who has done an enormous body of work in this area draws on interviews with activists, organisers and movement researchers from the Philippines, South Africa, Argentina, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and North America. He regards this work as intrinsically about 'research for resistance' and talks of how such research can be done 'with, for and about social movements,' distinguishing it from knowledge in 'professionalised forms of research and expertise' and how this could be used to support collective agency. He goes further as follows:

The researcher must commit to critical self-analysis whereby the initial stance and agenda dynamically develops as it is continuously negotiated, contested, and changed in dialogue and collaboration with youth. Power relationships between researchers and participants must be unmasked, interrogated, and transformed.²

In other words, in contexts such as our own, such research is quite explicit about its intention to support the mobilisation of agency. It does not simply emphasize the methodologies shared between academics and community groups but is much more about 'the purpose to which the research is put and how it can be used.' In such circumstances categorising a stand-alone activity called "research" is difficult when it is inseparable from action, learning, and sometimes key to building stronger bonds and collective consciousness among communities through their struggles.

He argues that the social movements and organisational forms that arise from the collective life and struggles of communities are intrinsic not only to the mobilisation of community for socio-political and cultural purposes but also as expressions of the modalities of learning and knowledge development that takes place daily in them. The latter occurs in mostly unseen and academically unrecognised ways even though such learning is the lifeblood of the forms

1. Aziz Choudry† (2022) Social Movement Research in/and Struggles for Change: Research for What and For Whom? *Education as Change*, Volume 26 | 2022 | #11337 | 21 pages.
<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC> ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)

² EDUARDO VIANNA and ANNA STETSENKO, (2014) Research with a Transformative Activist Agenda: Creating the Future Through Education for Social Change, *National Society for the Study of Education*, Volume 113, Issue 2, pp. 575–602:597)

of resistance and solidarity essential to the survival of communities. This means that a recognition of the intellectual work and learning that takes place through the forms of activism that is inherent in them is key to understanding the relationship between academic work and community engagement properly conceptualised. This would enable academics to understand the forms of knowledge creation and social learning that take place more-or-less continuously in such communities during their life activities. As Choudry suggested:

Such work can greatly enrich, broaden, and challenge dominant understandings of how and where education, learning, and knowledge production occur and what these look like. It argues that these are resources that can provide critical conceptual tools with which to understand, inform, imagine, and bring about social change. It contends that the success of organizing to fight injustice and create a better, fairer world depends on taking such knowledge and learning seriously. But this also requires being able to reflect critically, build spaces where people can come together to act and learn collectively, and appreciate the unfinished nature of popular struggles for social and political change.³

This inevitably also raises questions about how far we are prepared to venture outside the body of academic life and its conventions, the commitments we can make to the radical modes of practice we can pursue. It is this which is both a precondition and an outcome of the development of the actual methods, techniques, strategies for engagement and its purposes.

³ Aziz Choudry (2015) *Learning Activism the Intellectual Life of Contemporary Social Movements* University of Toronto Press. Page 1