

Editorial

The Conditions of Praxis: Theory and Practice in Activism and Academia

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Whitney: After the 8th European Feminist Research Conference ‘The Politics of Location: Revisited’ held in the summer of 2012 at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, Maya, Marianna and I began the process of creating this special edition of the *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, ‘The Conditions of Praxis: Theory and Practice in Activism and Academia’.

Marianna: Echoing the talk given by Adrienne Rich in 1984 at the Conference on Women, Feminist Identity and Society in Utrecht (see Rich in Díaz Diocaretz and Zavala 1985), the 2012 Budapest conference aimed at revisiting the concept of the politics of location. As a transnational meeting of feminist scholars it was an opportunity to revisit some of the idealized notions of dismantling oppressive categories via theoretical tools often taken up in a purely academic environment. While some were seated in the conference rooms discussing gender

dimensions of recent revolutionary protests in different parts of the world or the global economic crisis and the impact of austerity measures on the condition of feminist movements, others joined local activists on the streets of Budapest in bringing attention to the current political situation in Hungary.

Maya: In this edition we (if I might speak of a tentative editorial, activist, and/or thinking and writing ‘we’) wanted to address the ways in which theory and practice are intertwined, and whose division is constantly assumed and affected with great stakes. To work and live, to speak and write, in ways which honor the existing interconnections of theory and practice, and to strengthen these connections against the insinuations of their separation thus undermines neoliberal co-optation of the very fabric of everyday life.

Whitney: The conference seemed to be an opportunity to discuss the

locatings of academic work in, with and from activist and feminist practices and positionings. While the conference connected a network of feminist-oriented academic professionals, it seemed to have some structural models (the cost of the conference, the represented groups participating) which heavily prioritized particularized academic standards and practices with strong ties to hierarchies which so many feminists in attendance, and surely organizing, actively work to destabilize. With this recognition, we felt it was important to try and address the sites of praxis between the often oppressively divided ideas of academia/theory and activism, to trouble the often co-optive, neoliberal practices by privileged groups (i.e. academia) which structurally de-politicize and domesticate the tools, groups, ideas and politics which feminist academics/activists so much wish to nourish, embrace and ally with.

Marianna: Oftentimes scholarly interest in emerging social movements and political activism is done in pursuit of grounding theories of power relations and identity formation in the models and methodologies developed in social and political practice. This canonization later becomes a substrate for scientific knowledge production. On the other hand, various groups, collectives and movements also utilize radical theoretical ideas in everyday activ-

ism, giving new meanings to what we might term anti-oppression academic research. It is important to locate this dynamic relationship within the context of shifting epistemological, ontological and ethical boundaries that delineate hierarchies inscribed into the capitalist mode of knowledge production.

Maya: It seems to me that the apparent, oft bemoaned split of theory and practice, activism and academia, is crucial for maintaining neoliberalism as a political ideology. In this context, my experience at the 8th European Feminist Research Conference was multifaceted. On the one hand, I was excited about the organizers' concern with inclusivity, reflected in solidarity grants and the sheer size of the conference in Budapest. On the other hand, the quality of the exchanges was endangered by allotting speakers less time than expected, which often gave even seasoned scholars too little time (15 minutes) to turn a thought, so to speak. So, I would agree that not only were some typical academic hierarchies reproduced, but the very structure of the event suggested a neoliberal smorgasbord, where all thought could be tasted without swallowing; contacts exchanged, yet little else shared ... Even if, hopefully, there were exceptions to this rush that has pursued every discipline including feminism, in its academic dash.

Marianna: One of the structural models perpetuated in the institutionalized academic setting of a research conference was the lack of transparency of the location of the meeting itself, where the socio-economic and political context in which it was held was rendered almost invisible. Paraphrasing Adrienne Rich, maybe what is needed is a closer understanding of the embodied *politics of location* applied also to the feminist academic setting, so that any attempt to destabilize the centre does not automatically reproduce another periphery:

My body
Nador Street 9, a lecture hall of
the Central European University
Budapest
Hungary
The continent of Europe
The Western Hemisphere
The Earth
The Solar System
The Universe¹

Whitney: The insidiousness of so many of these assumed ways of operating, naturalizations, the things overlooked (too often structural violences and oppressive hierarchies) even in movements with feminist and anti-oppression goals, is often disheartening, to say the least. Checking these assumed systems of values and offering and taking critique is a dear part of the critical reflexivity needed for any collective, accountable coalition based on

building solidarity and alliance, rather than co-option and consumption. In this kind of discussion, we hope to open up differing understandings of connection (praxis), disrupting the binary divides that keep groups, strategies, tools and structures as if separate, thus disallowing them from understanding and working together.

Marianna: We have invited scholars and activists to create this special issue as a platform for exchanging experiences and sharing knowledges on the tensions and potentialities of border-crossing political engagement. It might seem contradictory that this space is envisioned and realized in what is ultimately an academic journal, but we believe that with the variety of topics covered in this issue we managed to open up critical debates that are needed in scholarly endeavors. From queer-feminist punk countercultures, Occupy politics, student rallies and genderless utopias to DIY cultures, the topics of the essays in this special edition reflexively bridge the junctures emerging along the lines of activist practices.

Maya: I wonder if exploring the interconnections of theory and practice in activism and academia would only pose a contradiction through its apparent location in an 'academic journal' to the extent that the journal remains academic. Whereas, the way I understand our work here, is

precisely as an attempt to open up this 'academic' textual space for encounters that question the erection of academic towers by working on the borders that are supposed to keep activists and academics divided.

Contents

The article opening this edition shakes up a hierarchical division often made between academia, art, and activism. In **'Do We Scare Ya' Cuz, We're Not Afraid To Fuck?': Queer-feminist Punk Counter-cultures, Theory, Art and Action**, Katharina Wiedlack explores the important role contemporary punk countercultures play in feminist critique and queer theory by resisting the appropriation of queerness into the neoliberal capitalist model of knowledge production. By analyzing lyrics, music, zine-writing, performances, cultural settings, d.i.y. aesthetics, and the engagement of queer-feminist punks in various projects that practically apply queer politics, Wiedlack argues that countercultural actors not only form a political movement, but also actively produce queer-feminist theory. She coins a term *artivism* to highlight the artistic aspects of queer-feminist punk rock, as well as the revolutionary method lying behind these creative, playful and daring forms of anti-oppression action and meaning-making. In her article Wiedlack offers an in-depth analysis of the complicated entanglements between academic accounts of anti-

social queer politics and the radically political models of liveable and lived queer activism.

In ***Gender as a Category of Analysis: Reconciling Feminist Theory with Feminist Methodology***, Charlotte Wu discusses gender theory-based analysis. She posits this analysis as consistently politically rooting, and, through a discussion of the 'non-human person', as enabling openings to question the more latent assumptions of 'human subjectivity'.

The holistic view reconciling the division between theory and praxis is presented by Marco Briziarelli in his ***(Re-)Occupy Critique! The Condition of Theory and Praxis in Contemporary American Academia***. Coming from the perspective of communication studies, the author offers an analysis of the narratives on the Occupy Wall Street movement and argues that the prevalent focus on the discursive performativity of this social phenomenon in theoretical commentaries reduces its agency and fails to account for the material aspects of this political action. According to Briziarelli, the New Social Movement's take on the OWS, heavily informed by the post-structuralist insistence on the discursive determination of social change, does not engage in the class politics and the material conditions of the critique itself. The article is guided by an analysis of the figure of the

intellectual and her/his positioning in the process of political change. Following Gramscian theorization of hegemony and his organic intellectual figure, Briziarelli proposes a materialist intervention into the field of social critique and academic theorization of social movements that, similarly to activism, needs to take into account the economic, political and ideological conditions of theoretical knowledge production.

Leon Sealey-Huggins and André Pusey analyze the ongoing changes in student organizing against the co-optation of education in *Neoliberalism and Depoliticisation in the Academy: Understanding the 'New Student Rebellions'*. Reflecting on participatory-research methodology affecting many activist-academics in this edition and beyond, in *Researching DIY Cultures: Towards a Situated Ethical Practice for Activist-Academia* Julia Downes, Maddie Breeze and Naomi Griffin probe the risks and advances of engaged activist-academics who do not perch above their so-called subject matter. Harriet Cooper, in *Defamiliarising Passivity with the Disabled Subject: Activism, Academia and the Lived Experience of Impairment*, proposes to reevaluate passivity as a potential model for academia.

We close this edition with *Investigating Genderless Utopias: Ex-*

posing the Sexual Harassment of Female Protestors in the Egyptian Uprisings of 2011, in which, by utilizing the writing piece as example, Emily Miles shows how (often academic) feminist analysis can participate with and in political uprisings in ways that help challenge the limits of both, and enact better methods toward social transformation. Miles specifically discusses sexual violence against women in the actions at Tahrir Square and the lack of a gendered politic in 'democratic mobilizations' in order to place activism and feminism as politically accountable to each other and with potential for transformative alliance.

The book review section of this special issue presents three publications that cover a wide range of topics connected to activism and theoretical accounts of issues such as queerness, conflict studies, racial discrimination and equality policies from differently situated views of Central-Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the United Kingdom.

The post-conference anthology *IMPORT – EXPORT – TRANSPORT. Queer Theory, Queer Critique and Activism in Motion* (Mesquita, Wiedlack and Lasthofer eds. 2012), reviewed by Evelien Geerts, offers a polyvocal, de-centralizing perspective on queer theory and praxis outside of the Anglo-American context.

Judith Butler's new book *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012) is reviewed by Maya Nitis. Butler discusses the living trauma of the Shoah and historical tragedy, asking difficult questions regarding collective memory.

In her latest book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012), Sara Ahmed applies phenomenological method to an analysis of the effects of institutional procedures and policies on the materiality of its subjects. In Anna Kuslits' review, the interrelations between the bodies, spaces, documents and institutions, brought forward in the book in connection to anti-discrimination/diversity/equality policies in the UK, are presented in a critical way that bridges the tensions between theory and practice.

Whitney: We understand the complicated practice of utilizing an academic journal-setting to discuss these needs for accountability, shared methodology and the destabilization of hierarchies of legitimacy, and it is important to note that no matter our intention as editors to destabilize traditional presentation and division and to welcome differing practices, there are areas where this is successful, and areas where this is not.

Maya: Yet if the exploration of these interconnections was closed with academic articles, then we will

indeed have failed in challenging the continually reinstated borders in thinking, as much as the apparent division of language and practice which enables the co-optation of academic work for the perpetuation of structural injustice. We are thus forced to hope that the words do not remain on the pages assigned to them but spring from their academic and textual limits and spill into our lives where they might strengthen modes of resistance required to challenge the neoliberal global order.

Marianna: To conclude, we hope that this edition will offer not only an insightful and thought-provoking collection of essays that will inspire our readers to explore further tension between academia and activism, but will also result in a practical engagement in the topics brought here by our authors. We warmly welcome comments and reflections on these issues from our readers in any form (written, visual, sound, etc.). Please contact us through the general editor's email address: editors@gjss.org.

We would like to sincerely thank the editors of GJSS, Alexa Athelstan and Rose Deller, for their guidance, help and for allowing us to collaborate on this special edition. We would also like to thank the rest of the GJSS staff and all of our peer reviewers who have helped to put this edition together.

Endnotes

¹ See Rich. 1985. Notes Towards a Politics of Location: 8.

References

Adrienne Rich. 1985. Notes Towards A Politics of Location. In Myriam Díaz Diocaretz and Iris M. Zavala eds. *Women, Feminist Identity and Society in the 1980's: Selected Papers [presented at the First Session of the Utrecht Summer School of Critical Semiotics, 1984]*, John Benjamins Publishing,