The Barricades and the Ivory Tower

Stephen Pimpare

Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics and Methods of Activist Scholarship
Charles R. Hale, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 390 pp., $34.95
On the Picket Line: Strategies of Working-Class Women during the Depression
Mary E. Triece, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007, 179 pp., $26.00
Social Change, Resistance and Social Practices

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Abstract
Through the lens of four recent books, this article considers the obstacles faced by those who undertake engaged or activist scholarship in the social sciences, examining professional methodological, theoretical, historical, and rhetorical challenges.

Keywords
activism, applied research, praxis, social movements

Charles R. Hale observes that graduate students and untenured faculty are warned away from “putting scholarship in the service of struggles for social justice, on the grounds that, however worthy, such a combination deprives the work of complexity, compromises its methodological rigor, and, for these reasons, puts career advancement at risk” (Hale: 2). He rejects the notion that such scholarship must sacrifice complexity or validity, but concedes the professional risk; Jessica Gordon Nembhard concludes that activist scholarship is perhaps “best undertaken by senior scholars who can afford to stray from the beaten path” (ch. 10: 290). But Hale and other defenders of an activist, engaged, applied, syncretic, synthetic, liberatory, participatory, or phronetic social science, which undertakes research as part of a commitment to furthering social justice, forget that there is another kind of activist social science that can be rewarded by the academy and political and economic elites; that it is disguised as the “neutral” work of serious scholars, and largely escapes the purview of Hale, is an indication of how successfully it has hidden its own biases and its own (sometimes much more radical) agenda.

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For all the usual scoldings that a “rigorous” and “objective” social science must be value-neutral, it is the most “mainstream” research that has produced the devastating “structural adjustment” policies of the IMF; various forms of domestic and international “shock therapy” (viz: post-Katrina New Orleans, post-Soviet Russia, occupied Iraq); the urgent rescue of the speculative finance sector followed by the anemic response by the Federal Reserve, Congress, and the Executive Branch to the broader effects of the Great Recession; and other deeply value-laden policies crafted by those we once called, without irony, “the best and the brightest.” This is no novel observation; the link between the American research university, the state, the market, and the military has long been the subject of analysis, which makes it curious to see it missing from so much otherwise sharp and useful thinking about “activist” research contained in Engaging Contradictions. Jennifer Bickham Mendez (ch. 5) even suggests that what may distinguish activist research from the normal science of the academy is that while all research has some form of method, and a goal or an agenda (that is, a question it seeks to answer), only activist research is also part of a broader strategy, or has a strategy of its own. On the one hand, that is a potentially productive way to think about the scholarship-in-the-service-of-social-justice that is the subject of Hale’s volume; on the other hand, it is blind to the strategies—implicit and explicit—of research that works against social justice or on behalf of the status quo. Lots of research has a goal, and much of it seeks to alter the world. To think that only leftist-radicals engage in such a project is naïve. Indeed, as Hale himself notes, Machiavelli and Marx were both activist scholars.

Thus, Hale may be mistaken to think that activist scholarship is anathema to the academy. Scholarship produced to assist those without political or economic power does indeed risk marking one as “unserious” or a dilettante (although many who do that work seem nonetheless to thrive), but work that helps problem-solve for political and economic elites, so long as it is clothed in the positivist methods and the traditional forms of paradigmatic social science, can be a path toward advancement and professional security (although that alone is no guarantee). Hale would object that the kind of radical-conservative scholarship I have in mind is outside the purview of what he means by activist research, which embodies a “shared commitment to basic principles of social justice that is attentive to inequalities of race, gender, class and sexuality and aligned with struggles to confront and eliminate them” (Hale: 7). Not just in its mission and purview, activist methods are distinct, too, he argues, using “horizontal dialogue and broad-based participation in each phase of the research; critical scrutiny of the analytical frame; [and] thoroughly critical self reflection” (Hale: 8). This suggests another kind of naïveté, common to such Habermasian approaches, a topic we will return to shortly.

More immediately: by defining away other kinds of engaged social research, Hale passes up opportunities for inquiry into the boundaries between normal and activist social science. It may not be that activist scholarship per se marks one as insufficiently rigorous, but scholarship in which you (a) admit to normative goals and act (b) with and on behalf of marginalized populations and, by implication, (c) against the interests of political and economic elites. For all the political rhetoric to the contrary, universities can be fairly conservative institutions, ones that resist the extension of economic, social, and political power to new claimants. Why that is is perhaps an easier question than what one can do about it, especially in the context of what many see as the corporatization of American higher education.

That said, when we turn to Hale’s collection on its own terms it is enormously successful, asserting and then showing that the truth of activist scholarship is quite the opposite of what its critics would have you believe: diverse in its subject matter and methods, sophisticated in its thinking about the world, attentive to the use and misuses of theory, and potentially more rigorous and more difficult because, as Hale notes, it has a “built-in test of validity” (12; see also ch. 12) given its obligation to be applicable. It is a well-chosen set of individual essays that combine to form a rich collection that should be of interest to scholars across disciplines who identify
themselves as activist or engaged; that it emerged from a project funded by the Social Science Research Council might make it of special utility to those needing to persuade administrators or hide-bound faculty of the “legitimacy” of such work.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, with what she calls a “practical syncretism,” shows how the kind of bird’s-eye-view theorizing essential for the academic’s tool box can have practical applications for grassroots organizers, regarding, in this case, prison construction. Her essay is a keen meditation, drawing from multiple traditions, to get at this question: “How does the practice of engaged scholarship necessarily and ethically change the ideological and material field of struggle?” (55). She is right, it seems to me, to think of activist scholarship as an intervention (56). Dani Wadada Nabudere offers another way to think about the kind of work under consideration, as employing a “people-centered research methodology” (63), and, in the process of discussing her own work in East Africa, offers helpful historiography and analytic distinctions between praxis, participatory action research, and other kinds of engaged scholarship. Indeed, as Bickham Mendez observes (139), “the label activist research. . . encompasses a broad and messy array of disciplinary approaches, schools of thought, and methodological practices.” What unites them, she suggests, is a “shared commitment to social transformation” (140), or the common goal: “to reconfigure knowledge production so as to shift power and control into the hands of the oppressed or marginalized, privileging ‘subjugated knowledges’ and transforming oppressive social structures” (139). Joao H. Costa Vargas (ch. 6), in describing his own research on South Central Los Angeles organizations fighting against police violence and for a truce among gangs, offers an example of topics for which “traditional” research would be, quite literally, impossible: a “mere observer” would never have been allowed into these organizations, at least not with enough frequency to develop deep learning about them. Sometimes, that is, activist research is the only alternative to no research at all.

Davydd Greenwood (ch. 12) argues, much as Bent Flyvbjerg did some years ago in Making Social Science Matter (Cambridge University Press, 1996), that we should return to Aristotle himself for a vision of a phronetic social science, which is produced with the participation of those who might otherwise be mere subjects, and, at its best, serves a purpose for them. Distinct from episteme (a rigidly empirical, Comptian, positivism) and techné (a social engineering-style know-how) phronesis makes use of a particular kind of wisdom that can only come from experience. As Greenwood puts it, “Phronesis can be understood as the design of problem-solving actions through collaborative knowledge constructions with the legitimate stakeholders in the problem” (327). One of the virtues of Flyvbjerg’s thinking is that he is more attentive to problems of power than Hale and Greenwood are, arguing that the kind of Habermasian “communicative rationality” I referenced above, which is endemic to so much thinking about the rationale for and methods of engaged research (like some strains of “parecon,” or participatory economics), fails to take seriously the actually existing impediments to achieving it. Thus, argues Flyvberg, we need to foreground a Foucauldian conception of power and power relations, recognizing that academic discourse is itself a projection of power, and that discourses are always in competition for dominance. Similarly, while the recognition of inescapable power imbalances between subject and researcher, however democratic the goal or open the method, is not absent from Hale’s collection, attention to it is sporadic and in the background.

Greenwood is otherwise astute. He identifies the mundane, material limitations to engaged scholarship: “Tayloristic academic institutional management structures basically make the necessary multidisciplinary work of activist scholars impossible by organizing daily life in a way that ties academics to their campuses. Under these circumstances, sustained interactions with the nonacademic world are extremely difficult” (319). The obstacles have deep roots, though, in “the domestication of social science” in the late nineteenth century, through which “reformist political economy (both neoclassical and Marxist) was subdivided into hermetic disciplinary
minicartels and deactivated as a reform activity” (320-321). Thus, when Greenwood asks why, if “action research” is potentially so superior it is so “poorly represented in academia,” his answer is: “the purging of the reformist elements in the social sciences; the hermeneutic professionalization of the social science disciplines, making them inward-looking and self-regarding; and the creation of a work-life organization that is incompatible with action research” (333). The argument is a bit functional, but it is nonetheless a reminder that efforts to broaden the university’s conception of research to include authentically interdisciplinary work (as opposed to the superficial, rhetorical interdisciplinarity that is so much in fashion) and scholarship with a social mission face a century-long entrenchment of conservative, narrow conceptions of what constitutes “serious” scholarship in the social sciences.

Jessica Gordon Nembhard (ch. 10) contributes a critique of neoclassical economics—“perhaps the most well-defended safe haven of . . . positivist ideology in the social sciences,” writes Hale (introduction: 9)—to frame a discussion of her own research in what she calls democratic community economics and subaltern cooperative economic development (267): the design, creation, and maintenance of socially and environmentally responsible, cooperative business enterprises and the study of how “subaltern populations take control of their economic lives” (280). Owing something to parecon, if a bit better grounded in practical concerns, this chapter speaks most directly to economists (and thereby draws attention to how much of the book is rooted in sociology and anthropology; that is also true of Flyvbjerg, and true of the philosophy of social science literature more broadly). One of the many virtues of this chapter is the manner in which it lays out a rationale and framework for a values-based evaluation of economic enterprises. Like so much of the volume, it is thoughtful, nicely structured, and offers practical advice.

Taken together, these articles show that not only can activist scholarship improve the world, it can improve the quality of research across disciplines. Far from sacrificing rigor or validity, good activist scholarship may be more difficult and more sophisticated precisely because it must always reconcile theory, data, and historical narrative-making with the three-dimensional reality of the world they seek to describe, categorize, and explain. As Flyvbjerg is at pains to point out, the mixed-methods approach often employed by activist scholars can offer deeper and more reliable insight than the abstract modeling and mathematical analysis fetishized across the modern social sciences.

In Rhetoric for Radicals, Jason Del Gandio offers one example of what good activist scholarship looks like. The book is filled with lots of crisp analysis and smart strategy, marking an explicit effort to bring the knowledge produced by communication scholars to social movement activists who depend upon effective communication for their practical success, and, in turn, to measure the soundness of that scholarship against actually existing rhetorical struggles. He defines rhetoric broadly as “consciously crafted communication for the achievement of social and political ends” (ix). It is a tired old saw to insist that words matter, but that insistent claim is at the heart of this slim volume, something of a how-to manual: “Words are never neutral arbiters of reality; there’s no such thing” (x). As Bickham Mendez similarly observed, (Hale, ch. 5: 141): “The promise of activist research is the possibility that one can contribute to counterhegemonic projects and that intellectual activity can become social justice work.”

While Del Gandio does not write for academics, there is ample material here for any scholar looking to insinuate their work into the world. If one side of activist scholarship is research designed with and produced to serve the needs of people struggling for social justice, its other side, just as important, is to develop effective strategies for communicating that knowledge to those with the social, political, and economic power to enact reform. Indeed, effective rhetorical strategies and acquiring skills that enable one to convey complex ideas to non-specialists are essential for activist scholars in ways that they are not for traditional academics who engage primarily with a small coterie of other specialists. It is one of the professional tensions that
pinions engaged academics: the obscuritanist language that is often rewarded by publishers and promotion committees is utterly antithetical to the mission of research that aims to be of use to the world. Radical scholarship can be oblique, but activist scholarship cannot be.

In that regard, Del Gandio’s second chapter, “Labors of the Multitude,” is especially valuable, offering detailed, practical advice for effective public speaking (with good guidance on organization, delivery, and overcoming anxiety) and clear writing (including advice about how to select an issue, find a hook, shape a thesis, clarify and organize the key message, identify the principal audience, build an argument, and choose rhetorical devices for maximum effect). It would serve as a helpful guide for students preparing class presentations or needing a more thorough-going primer on clarity of expression in the spirit of George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language,” his 1946 assault on muddy thinking, bad writing, lazy speech, and deceptive political rhetoric. But activist scholars must develop the skills to speak to a general audience, and this can be a guide for them, too. These are talents especially useful for radical economists trying to reach a general audience, given the difficulty of conveying macroeconomic theory and tracing out its implications for politics and policymaking. Paul Krugman and Robert Reich demonstrate regularly that it is possible, but they may well be the exceptions that prove the rule, as John Kenneth Galbraith was in another era (and none of these men, of course, could be credibly characterized as radical).

In his effort to make the case that movements are destined to fail without effective rhetorical strategies, Del Gandio may skip too lightly over the material bases of power. Rhetoric constructs reality, to be sure, but the networks and institutions in which discourse is rooted matter too, and to argue that “twenty-first century radicalism suffers from a rhetorical crisis” might be to misplace emphasis to make a point. Del Gandio acknowledges this (see 2-3), and he is clear that this other face of power is not his primary concern, so we cannot fault him too much on this account; the challenge it presents to us, then, is to devise a means by which we might evaluate the relationship between the institutions that structure power relations and create or limit opportunities for resistance, and the ideas that can bind activists together and, eventually, persuade publics and politicians that their cause is just. That is, he may well convince us that rhetoric matters, but left unanswered is when it matters most, and how. He observes that it is not enough to alter material conditions, but that people need to envision an entirely new world in order to avoid making new, but similar, kinds of errors. But even if “hundreds, thousands, and hopefully millions of people undergoing revolutionary shifts in their rhetorical orientations set the conditions for the possibility of profound and long-lasting social change” (3), it is unclear how such a transformation might be made to happen; and I am inclined to believe, by contrast, that altering material conditions first might be a path toward altering ideas about the world. Not that we have an easy recipe for that either. Ultimately his claim is perhaps that actions alone cannot change the world (7), and his point that too many of the most revered social critics of the Western canon had precious little to say about how to effect change for the better is well taken (202).

Del Gandio is explicit (180ff) about the values at the heart of contemporary activism: it should be anti-authoritarian, idealistic, multi-historical (there is no one history, no one narrative, no single uncontested truth), privilege complex interrogation, and promote diversity while being confrontational, visionary, self-righteous, and self-critical. But above all, it is strategic, it seems to me; he emphasizes with some frequency that effective communication must understand its intended audience and seek to bring it in, not push it away. Anger and outrage have their uses, but they are not always the best choice. It is this practical side to the transformative vision that makes his advice resonate so powerfully. Although there is only passing reference here to Saul Alinsky, both he and Hale (see 24) also understand the importance of a kind of pragmatism that was (and is) so central to good organizing techniques and, similarly, to effective activist research.
Mary Triece recounts the challenges that women leaders of the Communist Party faced in the Great Depression, and the arguments they deployed in order to first justify their rightful place outside the home and in the labor market, and second to argue that once there they should be treated as equal to men. She may overstate the importance of rhetoric in the period, but insofar as it does matter, she offers a historical example of some of the challenges Del Gandio outlined in *Rhetoric for Radicals*, especially when what is being proposed so thoroughly challenges core ideas about gender. As she puts it, “Studies of the labor movement of the 1930s tend to overlook the specific contributions of women while literature on women of the 1930s tends to overlook their roles as laborers” (3). By paying particular attention to the rhetoric of these particular women—and, like Del Gandio, she often takes the dramatization of struggle manifested in the strike or protest march as rhetorical, in addition to its other faces (“extra-discursive reality” or “extra-discursive actions” she calls them)—she seeks to offer new insight into the twentieth century’s long transformation, not only in ideas about women and their “proper” roles, but in how those affected their economic, social, and (to a lesser extent) political lives.

The manner in which she teases out the connections here, drawing upon work from political theory, rhetoric, history, and political economy, is deft; I am not sure that the rhetoric-change causal chain is entirely persuasive here, but I am not sure that it ever is. And to her credit, she is typically at pains to speak of “influences” rather than using cruder, more determinist language, and never loses sight of the fact that whatever power rhetoric may have, “Language has consequences in the material world, but this is not to say that language is material in the same way as factories and homes” (36). Triece occasionally describes a boycott or strike as *speaking loudly* (see 66, e.g.); while we know what she means, and that there is undoubtedly truth in that, it is nonetheless a bit facile, and begs for some unpacking. What is perhaps most welcome is how she shows the manner in which particular women in the 1930s worked to unsettle and then dislodge the ideas that made their discrimination seem normal, and the militancy with which they went about their tasks: not complacent, not passive, and surely not “feminine” by the standards of the time.

The goal is to “take issue with the contention that working-class women and their advocates took a primarily defensive posture and remained content with the little they could get from New Deal legislation” (10) and to weave the activism and ideas of these early second wave feminists more fully into our history. On those counts, it succeeds. What is harder to explain with empirical satisfaction is the particular ways in which rhetoric matters, or does not, and what precise relationship it bears to movement outcomes. That it matters seems clear; but, once again, how it matters, when it matters most, and why it matters are harder questions, ones that a more relevant and engaged social science might take on as a goal, for Triece offers what we might characterize as radical scholarship—one that offers potentially useful lessons—but does not claim activist goals.

After a brief introduction to *Social Change, Resistance and Social Practices* in which co-editor Richard Dello Buono sketches out his interest in the links between oppression and resistance in the context of globalization, migration, and ecological crisis (5), Matheu Kaneshiro and Kirk Lawrence offer a précis on how a global environmental movement might serve as a “gateway” movement, as they put it, to “fight against the privatization of the world” (13). They offer a network analysis of participants at the 2005, 2007, and 2009 World Social Forums and find that geographically and attitudinally (regarding the WTO and some basic positions on the relationship between democracy and capitalism; see their Table 1) environmentalists differ little from non-environmentalists. They likely overstate their findings by describing environmentalists as a “microcosm of the global left” (24), but discover that only members of human rights organizations are more inter-connected across movements. Potentially bringing together those working on climate change; environmental justice (especially their human rights aspects), battles over oil,
minerals, and water (and privatization schemes), across the global North and South, such a meta-
movement might unite activists of all stripes against the “common enemy” of “neoliberal corpo-
rate capitalism” (19). Why human rights would not better serve as this “gateway” movement, if
there can be such a thing, they do not address; indeed, they later back off the strong vision of their
claim to suggest that “environmentalism, along with human rights, can potentially ‘lead’ activ-
ists of all varieties in the global left to pressure for change” (29, emphasis added).

It is a piece that raises good questions, even if it does not necessarily do so explicitly, but it
does not defend the central thesis with much analytic rigor or suggest a practicable path toward
attaining the goal. Neither does the chapter serve as a preview of what is to come, alas: whether
there can be (or should be) a movement of movements, and what the World Social Forums have
had to say about the possibilities for large-scale global movement building are not the agenda of
this volume. Fair enough, and there are some fine contributions here: Nicole Trujillo-Pagan’s
chapter, “The Production of the Illegal Subject,” is especially noteworthy, a crisp, insightful
analysis of the political economy of migratory labor that would be an excellent choice for class-
room use and for discussions of what she calls the “migration industrial complex” (171).

Whatever its virtues, however, there is a problem here that is relevant to our discussion: too
many of these authors importune us to make a new world—as with Rose Brewer’s call for “crea-
ting a liberatory praxis in the social forum process” (68)—without doing the critical labor required
to chart a path toward such transformations. To return to Del Gandio, rhetoric may be necessary,
but it is never likely to be sufficient, and the material, mundane forces that inhibit democratic
progress need to be accounted for, not merely wished away, if we are serious about altering the
status quo rather than in crafting theory or sounding a call to arms. Simon Sottas’s chapter on
Gramsci (73ff) highlights the difficulty of producing genuinely useful activist scholarship; there
is good analysis here, but it is hard to identify what its practical application is. Krista Brumley
goes to some trouble to identify and categorize the goals and tactics of NGOs in one Mexican
city, but does not then evaluate their relative effectiveness; that more than half of those she stud-
ied employed strategies that did not match their goals (127) is more than a little interesting, but
without evidence about which strategies succeeded and which did not, it can be little more than
that. To highlight a problem on the obverse, Molly Talcott (131ff) offers a catalog of the “vital
dimensions” needed for indigenous movements to “generate effective ‘political cultures of oppo-
sition’” (141), but offers too little history, evidence, and analysis to make the case in a more than
superficial fashion.

Activist scholarship requires more than having a point of view, or aligning yourself with the
needs of marginalized populations; it must mean producing research that has a use (even if that
use is rhetorical). Given that one of the editors suggests that these essays can help one build a
“script for liberation” (9) it is not, I think, too unfair to judge the collection by this standard, and
in that way perhaps it can stand in as a reminder that activist scholarship is not necessarily better
or more useful, and a caution to those of its advocates who would fall into the same trap as the
traditionalists, and privilege method (or mission) itself. Not all research can or should involve its
subjects as participants, not all “life knowledge” is generalizable or broadly useful, and not all
“radical” scholarship helps us better understand or improve the world. As George Lipsitz wrote
in his stand-out chapter in Hale (ch. 3: 91), “Combining scholarship and activism offers no auto-
matic guarantee of either better scholarship or better activism.”

Hale’s collection is in some measure a book about methodology: how can scholars produce
socially useful research (why they should, though occasionally and artfully articulated, is
assumed)? The benefit to individual scholars—despite the risks—is the obvious one: to have one’s
work have meaning for real struggles by real people, and quite possibly improve their well-
being. But as Lipsitz (Hale, ch. 3: 91) puts it, scholars are needed by advocates and activists
because part of what they are fighting against is the entrenched knowledge of other scholars or
experts: the “scientists, judges, physicians, criminologists, bankers, urban planners, and economists” who exert so much power, seen and unseen, in the world in ways that both shape and constrain the lives of marginalized populations. It is a sideways acknowledgment of the dilemma I pointed to earlier: that some kinds of activist scholarship are, in fact, widely accepted and influential. And it is the work that pushes back against their effects that potentially puts academic advancement at risk.

While these books mostly ignore economics, focusing on sociology and anthropology, there is no reason economists should ignore them; attention to forms of resistance and the analysis of social movements should be as important to political economy as it is to sociology. It is those movements, after all, that disrupt “normal” operations of the system and create space for an alternative allocation of money, resources, and power. Effective resistance may need economic and social analysis to help hone strategies, but just as surely a radical economics of reform will need movements. As A. Kathryn Stout writes (in Hale: 39): “To the extent that social movement activities create bona fide dilemmas for the state (in its ongoing reproduction of the political economy), they ultimately challenge the organization of capitalist production and constitute a visible manifestation of fundamental underlying contractions.” Hale, Triece, and Del Gandio offer theoretical, methodological, historical, and rhetorical guidance for those who would, despite the risks, work to make their scholarship matter outside the academy. Given the state of the world, the need for that is clear.

Bio

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