

"ACTION WILL BE TAKEN"

Left Anti-intellectualism and Its Discontents



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Activismists

"We can't get bogged down in analysis," one activist told us at an anti-war rally in New York last fall, spitting out that last word like a hairball. He could have relaxed his vigilance. This event deftly avoided such bogs, loudly opposing the U.S. bombing in Afghanistan without offering any credible ideas about it (we're not counting the notion that the entire escapade was driven by Unocal and Lockheed Martin, the "analysis" advanced by many speakers). But the moment called for doing something more than brandishing the exact same signs - "Stop the Bombing" and "No War for Oil" - that activists poked skywards during the Gulf War. This latest war called for some thinking, and few were doing much of that.

So what is the ideology of the activist left (and by that we mean the global justice, peace, media democracy, community organizing, financial populist, and green movements)? Socialist? Mostly not - too state-phobic. Some activists are anarchists - but mainly out of temperamental reflex, not rigorous thought. Others are liberals - though most are too confrontational and too skeptical about the system to embrace that label. And many others profess no ideology at all. So overall, is the

activist left just an inchoate, "post-ideological" mass of do-gooders, pragmatists and puppeteers?

No. The young troublemakers of today do have an ideology and it is as deeply felt and intellectually totalizing as any of the great belief systems of yore. The cadres who populate those endless meetings, who bang the drum, who lead the "trainings" and paint the puppets, do indeed have a creed. They are Activismists.

That's right, Activismists. This brave new ideology combines the political illiteracy of hyper-mediated American culture with all the moral zeal of a nineteenth century temperance crusade. In this worldview, all roads lead to more activism and more activists. And the one who acts is righteous. The activistists seem to borrow their philosophy from the factory boss in a Heinrich Böll short story who greets his employees each morning with the exhortation "Let's have some action." To which the workers obediently reply: "Action will be taken!"

Activists unconsciously echoing factory bosses? The parallel isn't as far-fetched as it might seem, as another German, Theodor Adorno, suggests. Adorno - who admittedly doesn't have the last word on activism, since he called the cops on University of Frankfurt demonstrators in 1968 - nonetheless had a good point

when he criticized the student and antiwar movement of the 1960s for what he called "actionism." In his eyes this was an unreflective "collective compulsion for positivity that allows its immediate translation into practice."

Though embraced by people who imagine themselves to be radical agitators, that thoughtless compulsion mirrors the pragmatic empiricism of the dominant culture - "not the least way in which actionism fits so smoothly into society's prevailing trend." Actionism, he concluded, "is regressive...it refuses to reflect on its own impotence."

It may seem odd to cite this just when activism seems to be working fine. Protest is on an upswing; even the post 9/11 frenzy of terror baiting didn't shut down the movement. Demonstrators were out in force to protest the World Economic Forum, with a grace and discipline that buoyed spirits worldwide. The youth getting busted, gassed and trailed by the cops are putting their bodies on the line to oppose global capital; they are brave and committed, even heroic.

But is action enough? We pose this question precisely because activism seems so strong. The flipside of all this agitation is a corrosive and aggressive anti-intellectualism. We object to this hostility toward thinking - not only because we've all got a cranky

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intellectual bent, but also because it limits the movement's transformative power.

Our gripe is historically specific. If everyone was busy with bullshit doctrinal debates we would prescribe a little anti-intellectualism. But that is not the case right now.

The Real Price of Not Thinking

How does activist anti-intellectualism manifest on the ground? One instance is the reduction of strategy to mere tactics, to horrible effect. Take for example the largely failed San Francisco protest against the National Association of Broadcasters, an action which ended up costing tens of thousands of dollars, gained almost no attention, had no impact on the NAB, and nearly ruined one of the sponsoring organizations. During a post-mortem discussion of this debacle one of the organizers reminded her audience that: "We had three thousand people marching through [the shopping district] Union Square protesting the media. That's amazing. It had never happened before." Never mind the utter non-impact of this aimless march. The point was clear: we marched for ourselves. We were our own targets. Activism made us good.

Thoughtless activism confuses the formulation of political aims. One of us was on a conference panel during which an activist lawyer went on about the virtues of small businesses, and the need for city policy to encourage them. When it was pointed out that enthusiasm for small business should be tempered by a recognition that smaller businesses tend to pay less, are

harder to organize, offer fewer fringe benefits, and are more dangerous than larger businesses, the lawyer dismissed this as "the paralysis of analysis." On another panel, when it was pointed out that Alinsky-style community organizing is a practical and theoretical failure whose severe limitations need to be recognized, an organizer and community credit union promoter shut down the conversation with a simple: "I just don't want to discuss this."

The anti-war "movement" is perhaps the most egregious recent example of a promising political phenomenon that was badly damaged by the anti-intellectual outlook of activism. While activists frequently comment on the success of the growing peace movement - many actions take place, conferences are planned, new people become activists, a huge protest is scheduled for April in Washington, D.C. - no one seems to notice that it's no longer clear what war we're protesting. Repression at home? Future wars in Somalia or Iraq? Even in the case of Afghanistan, it turned out to be important to have something to say to skeptics who asked: "What's your alternative? I think the government should protect me from terrorists, and plus this Taliban doesn't seem so great." The movement failed to address such questions, and protests dwindled.

On some college campuses, by contrast, where the war has been seen as a complicated opportunity for conversation rather than sign-waving, the movement has done better. But everywhere, the unwillingness to think about what it means to be against the war and how war fits into the global project of American empire, has also led to a poverty of thinking about what kind of actions make sense. "How can we strategically affect the situation?" asks Lara Jiramanus of Boston's Campus Anti-War Coalition. "So we want to stop the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan - what does it mean to have that as our goal? I don't think we talk about that enough."

We're not arguing for conformist ideologies. The impulse to resist hierarchy and mind-control is one of the more appealing and useful facets of the new activism. Consider the campus anti-sweatshop movement, which includes members of the International Socialist Organization, SDS-type radical democrats, anarchists and plain-vanilla liberals. This movement's willingness to embrace radicals and non-radicals alike has been a strength, attracting both policy wonks and people who like to chain their throats to the dean's desk. Such flexibility is usually commendable. What bothers us about activism as an ideology is that it renders

taboo any discussion of ideas or beliefs, and thus stymies both thought and action.

Many activists agree. Jiramanus, who is also involved in the Harvard Living Wage Campaign, says that some in that group believe that the fight for a living wage is part of a "larger ideal" while others don't. "But if your analysis is not broad enough," she points out, "you're not much different from those groups that do charity work." In her campus labor solidarity group, "people will say, 'I'm not progressive, I just care about this issue.' There's a failure to think of our work in a larger context, and a reluctance to ask people what they believe. There needs to be a venue for talking about alternative economic systems." But she says these questions don't get talked about, and people who do think about them are afraid to bring them up in meetings. "It's like, 'there's no time for it, we need to win the living wage campaign right now.'"

Thoughtful people find this censorious hyperpragmatism alienating and can drop away from organizing as a result. But that's not the only problem. It's important to encourage better thinking, says Jiramanus, "so hippie-to-yuppie doesn't happen again." As she points out, without an analysis of what's really wrong with the world - or a vision of the better world

you're trying to create - people have no reason to continue being activists once a particular campaign is over. In this way, activist-ism plus single-issue politics can end up defeating itself. Activism is tedious, and its foot soldiers suffer constant burnout. Thinking, after all, is engaging; were it encouraged, Jiramanus pleads, "We'd all be enjoying ourselves a bit more."

Increasingly, there are activists who treat ideas as important. "We need to develop a new rhetoric that connects sweatshops -- and living wage and the right to organize -- to the global economy," says the University of Michigan's Jackie Bray, an anti-sweatshop activist. Liana Molina of Santa Clara University agrees: "I think our economic system determines everything!" But about the student movement's somewhat vague ideology, she has mixed feelings. "It's good to be ambiguous and inclusive," so as not to alienate more conservative, newer, or less politicized members, she says. "But I also think a class analysis is needed. Then again, that gets shady, because people are like, 'Well, what are you for, socialism? What?'"

The problem is that activists, like Molina, who are asking the difficult questions that push into new political terrain are very often forced to operate in frustrating

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isolation, without the support of a community of fellow thinkers.

From Whence Came This Malady?

Steve Duncombe, a NYC-DAN activist, author, and NYU professor, says his fellow activists "think very little about capitalism outside a moral discourse: big is bad, and nothing about the state except in a sort of right wing dismissal: state as authoritarian daddy."

Activism is also intimately related to the decline of Marxism, which at its best thrived on debates about the relations between theory and practice, part and whole. Unfortunately, much of this tradition has devolved into the alternately dreary and hilarious rants in sectarian papers. Marxism's decline (but not death: the three of us would happily claim the name) has led to wooly ideas about a nicer capitalism, and an indifference to how the system works as a whole. This blinkering is especially virulent in the U.S. where a petit-bourgeois populism is the native radical strain, and anti-intellectualism is almost hard-wired into the culture. And because activism emphasizes practicality, achievability, and implementation over all else, a theory dedicated to understanding deep structures with an eye towards changing them necessarily gets shunted aside.

Marxism's decline isn't just an intellectual concern - it too has practical effects. If you lack any serious

understanding of how capitalism works, then it's easy to delude yourself into thinking that moral appeals to the consciences of CEOs and finance ministers will have some effect. You might think that central banks' habit of provoking recessions when the unemployment rate gets too low is a policy based on a mere misunderstanding. You might think that structural adjustment and imperial war are just bad lifestyle choices.

Unreflective pragmatism is also encouraged by much of the left's dependency on foundations. Philanthropy's role in structuring activism is rarely discussed, because almost everyone wants a grant (including us). But it should be. Foundations like focused entities that undertake specific politely ameliorative schemes. They don't want anyone to look too closely at the system that's given them buckets of money that less fortunate people are forced to pay for.

Activism is contaminated by the cultural forms and political content of the non-profit sector. Because nonprofits are essentially businesses that sell press coverage of themselves to foundation program officers, they operate according to the anti-intellectual logic of hyper-pragmatism and the fiscal year short-termism generated by financial competition with their peer organizations. When nonprofit business lead, the whole

left begins to take on the same obsessive focus with "deliverables" and "take aways" and "staying on message." For many political nonprofits, actions - regardless of their value or real impact - are the product, which in turn promise access to more grants.

Nonprofit culture fosters an array of mind-killing practices. Brainstorming on butcher paper and the use of break out groups are effective methods for generating and collecting ideas and or organizing pieces of a larger action. However when used to organize political discussions these nonprofit tools can be disastrous. More often than not, everybody says something, break out groups report back to the whole group, lists are compiled - and nothing really happens.

What is to be done?

Our point is not that there should be less activism. The left is nothing without visible, disruptive displays of power. We applaud activism and engage in it ourselves. What we are calling for is an assault on the stupidity that pervades American culture. This implies a more democratic approach to the life of the mind and creating spaces for ideas in our lives and political work.

We're not calling for leadership by intellectuals. On the contrary, we challenge left activist culture to live up to its anti-hierarchical claims: activists should themselves become intellectuals. Why reproduce the larger society's division between mental and physical labor? The rousing applause for Noam Chomsky at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre was hardly undeserved, but ideas don't belong on pedestals. They belong in the street, at work, in the home, at the bar and on the barricades.

We put out this call - to indulge a bit of activist-ism lingo - because the current moment demands some thinking. With overwhelming approval for Bush and his endless war, waving one's "Stop the Bombing" sign from ten years ago won't build a mass movement. Nor will bland moralism win the day: "War is Not the Answer" is

little better than "War is the Answer" -- as read a counter demonstrator's placard recently spotted in Manhattan.

The Movement is also undergoing a fascinating rhetorical shift, as activists reject terms like "antiglobalization," which emphasized - not very lucidly - what they're against, in favor of slogans like "Another World is Possible" which dare to evoke the possibility of radically different economic arrangements. What would that other world look like?

Activists must engage that question - and to do so, they have to do a better job of understanding how this world really works. Intellectuals briefing activist groups on some aspect of how things are often face a tediously reductive question: "That's all very interesting, but how can we organize around that? What would be the slogans?"

None of us were in Genoa or Porto Alegre, but we're told that there was plenty of serious discussion of both this world and the better one. But Americans shouldn't have to go all the way to Brazil or Italy to talk and think about this stuff. Unfortunately here at home, those with the confidence to discuss such questions are too often the ones with the silliest ideas: at the "Another World Is Possible rally" during WEF weekend, speakers waxed

hopefully of a world in which all produce will be locally grown. That's absurd, unless you're planning to abandon cities, give up on industrial civilization, and reduce the world's population by 95%. But we're barely acknowledging these issues, much less debating them.

The spirit we wish to inspire was expressed a few years ago by a Latin American graduate student. Seeing one of us holding a copy of Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory*, he exclaimed with all seriousness: "That book is like having an intellectual grenade in your hand. Hasta la Victoria." In many other countries, activists' tiny apartments are stacked with the well-thumbed works of Bakunin, Marx and Fanon. We'd like to see that kind of engagement here. And judging at least from the European experience, it would pay off even in activism's own pragmatic terms: protests in major European cities routinely dwarf our own, and activists there have far more influence on mainstream discourse and even government policy. In the long run, movements that can't think can't really do too much either.

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