



# Changing the World? The Politics of Activism and Impact in the Neoliberal University

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## Abstract

This article explores the political differences between academic activism and the recently emerged research impact agenda. While both claim that academic work can and should engage with and influence the world beyond the academic ‘ivory tower’, their political meaning and practice are radically different. Following the distinction made by Jacques Rancière, we argue that research impact performs a policing function which, despite its own rhetoric, is arranged as an attempt to ensure that academic work maintains a neoliberal status quo by actually having no real political impact. Academic activism, in contrast, serves to politicize scholarly work by democratically disrupting political consensus in the name of equality. Being an academic activist in an era of research impact rests in a twofold movement: that of both acting in the name of equality in an effort (using Marx’s terms) to ‘change the world’ and resisting and contesting an academic administration whose police actions have attempted to eliminate such forms of democratic practice from the political consensus. The argument is illustrated with examples from the Australia Research Council’s statements on research impact and the practice of climate change activism.

## Keywords

Academic activism, climate change activism, neoliberalism, research impact

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'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it' (p. 574), so wrote a 27-year-old Karl Marx (1976) in the spring of 1845. Marx's conviction was that if philosophy, and scholarly endeavour more generally, is to have practical meaning, then it needs to affect the material conditions of the world, most especially relations of production. In today's academic world, with a cursory reading, Marx's thesis could be taken as a testament to 'research impact'. Research impact has, in recent years, become an explicit dimension of the political governance of academic activity, especially in the United Kingdom and Australia (Chubb and Watermeyer, 2016). This registers how the criteria for assessing research quality include its direct influence beyond the mythical 'ivory tower'. In Australia, where we work, it is the Australian Research Council (ARC) that is charged with distributing government funding for non-medical research, as well as for auditing the quality of that research at a national level. By the ARC's (2015) definition, 'research impact is the demonstrable contribution that research makes to the economy, society, culture, national security, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond contributions to academia' (n.p.). So far, one would not be remiss in thinking that acolytes of Marx's 11th thesis have, like infamous entryists, surreptitiously infiltrated the ARC with their materialist convictions. Alas no! Indeed, the superficial similarities between a state-imposed impact agenda and a politically motivated activist agenda veils critical political differences.

Activist politics and the impact agenda both justify academic work on the basis of its ability to change the world, but do so in opposing ways. It is an exploration of this inherently political opposition, with specific reference to the Australian case, which is the subject of this article. We address this in reference to Jacques Rancière's (1998) distinction between 'policing' (understood as the maintenance of a dominant set of social relations and distribution of power) and 'politics' (understood as an interruption of the police order in the name of equality). Our argument is that research impact serves a police function, which, despite its own rhetoric, is arranged as an attempt to ensure that academic work maintains a neoliberal status quo by actually having no real political impact. Furthermore, we maintain that in a system of academic governance where research impact is a central mode of assessment, academic activism involves not just political engagement to, in Marx's terms, change the world, but also to resist the dominant policing of university governance itself. Although this makes academic activism more difficult, it also means that it is more critical than ever given that it is the very antidote to the depoliticization of academic work currently promoted by the impact agenda.

## **What exactly is research impact?**

Research impact is a recent dimension of a trend to establish a performance and audit culture in higher education, where the merit of research is judged by its economic and social benefits, and where impact is a proxy for return on investment (Gunn and Mintrom, 2016). In response to scrutiny over public spending on higher education, the research impact agenda involves government intervention to direct researchers' work to satisfy 'the requirements and norms of their academic peers while seeking to solve societally relevant problems with partners from other sectors' (Hills, 2016: 2). These activities are supported by a policy agenda that directs decisions about public research funding, coupled with mechanisms for its audit and evaluation.

In Australia, the ARC's *Research Impact Principles and Framework* (2015) sets out the government's definition of impact and what it sees as its public value. This opens with a broad ambition that 'the Australian Government recognises the importance of research, science and innovation for increasing productivity and wellbeing to achieve long term economic growth for the Australian community' (n.p.). This statement attests to research being appreciated principally for its economic value. Even if the welfare of individual citizens is considered, that welfare is construed as a means

to an economic end. The ARC pronounces that impact ‘will become increasingly important in a tight fiscal government environment’ and that ‘research is a key contributor to improving Australia’s productivity over the longer term’ (n.p.). The ARC operates on a neoliberal model of research governance that understands research, as indeed all other dimensions of human endeavour, solely in market terms (Brown, 2015). Research is rendered not so much about the pursuit of knowledge, but as an investment seeking maximum financial return. Essentially, public funding of research is judged entirely on market-based criteria (Lorenz, 2012).

The ARC’s position on impact shows a palpable lack of even the most distant appreciation of the idea that University research might have a relationship with preserving or enhancing democratic society, with their pronouncements abstaining from any mention of equality, democracy, justice, freedom, fairness or rights. It is thus unsurprising that, according to one analysis (Lynch, 2016), the 630 research grants awarded through the ARC’s prestigious Discovery Program in the late 2016 were dominated by inventions ranging from ‘engineering consultancy’ to ‘programmable chips’. The proposed impact of the grants included better global competition for Australian businesses and helping ‘organisations [...] to exploit social media’. Silence speaks louder than words, with no funding given for a single project that investigated critical social and political issues related to asylum seekers, nuclear weapons, islamophobia or journalism. This bears witness to the practical effects of a neoliberal set of values whereby ‘equality, liberty, inclusion, and constitutionalism are now subordinate to the project of economic growth, competitive positioning, and capital enhancement’ (Brown, 2015: 26). To be sure, criticizing such conditions is not a matter of claiming that university research focussed on, for example, business efficiency, saleable inventions, applied scientific discovery or financial management techniques is not important. It is to say, however, that if political ideals are stripped out of the criteria used to assess the public value of research, then the important democratic function of the University is neutralized.

We suggest that, using Rancière’s (1998) terms, research impact serves a neoliberal policing function for research. This idea of ‘police’ is not a reference specifically to the constabulary, instead it calls attention to the way that power in society is organized so as to produce a form of consent that legitimizes a prevailing distribution of power. This conception of police reflects an assumed social consensus that maintains a particular status quo and works to establish its putative normality. As such, the logic of consensus through which the police operates is achieved by the suppression of alternatives to the existing distribution of power. Coming back to research impact, this distribution is such that ‘politics’ is something that is to be left in the hands of professional politicians and their business compatriots; it is not to be tampered with by scholars, intellectuals or researchers. These latter poor souls, according to the ARC sponsored police consensus, should direct their energies solely towards generating knowledge that will contribute to the business of ‘economic growth’, this itself conceived of as natural and apolitical. The impact agenda for research is specifically designed to promote the value that academic work should have no real political impact whatsoever, and for no power to be relinquished from within the neoliberal police function it supports. Impact is, rather, a particular exercise of power whose purpose is to leave the neoliberal consensus untouched. At play is a politics that enrolls academics to support its conservative agenda, all the time working to shield that agenda from critical questioning.

## **Academic activism after impact**

The political implications of research impact are realized through the limitations it places on academic freedom. If all research, as the ARC would have it, should lead to industrial and economic development and productivity, then the freedom to do otherwise is limited. In the language of neoliberalism, the ARC is ‘incentivizing’ academics to preserve the neoliberal status quo. In our

own field of management and organization studies, the dangers of using 'industry' and 'market value' as the benchmark for academic work have long been realized. Back in 1960, Loren Baritz (1970) complained that

the usual industrial social scientist, because he [sic] accepted the norms of the elite dominant in his society, was prevented from functioning critically, was compelled by his own ideology and the power of America's managers to supply the techniques helpful to managerial goals. (p. 140)

Baritz specifically located his argument in terms of the relationship between theory and practice, or 'mind and society' as he termed it. His conviction was this relationship should, most productively, be characterized by a 'healthful tension' lest the social scientist becomes reduced to being a 'servant of power'.

Baritz was not suggesting an ivory tower separatism; quite the contrary he argued strongly for the value of connecting theory and practice, just not in a way that renders the former subservient to the latter. The implications of this had already been formulated in 1947 when Arthur Kornhuaser complained that in an era of social and economic turmoil at a global level, the best industrial psychologists could do was to create tests that would determine what type of advertising campaign 'will sell more of our company's beauty cream' (in Baritz, 1970: 149).<sup>1</sup> This was just 100 years after Marx's call to 'change the world' but Baritz observed to his chagrin that the social scientists of his time were actually making such changes, but for a whole different set of reasons and ends. No doubt beauty cream sales increased! Today, Baritz's warning still holds true, particularly for business school academics such as ourselves. This led Jeffrey Pfeffer (2016) to assert that management and organization studies is dominated by a culture where 'the focus on costs, profits, and economic success has pushed concerns of human wellbeing to the side' (p. 6). Pulling no punches, Pfeffer declares the situation as one where 'the assholes are winning'. Given the dominance of economic criteria espoused in the ARC's impact agenda, it appears that the Australian government agenda is promoting scholarly activities that would make 'assholes' out of all of us.

Debates over whether research should, of necessity, be economically productive, or even managerially relevant, speaks directly to the distinction between research impact and academic activism. To be an activist refers to the ways that academic work, and academics themselves, can politically intervene into the non-academic world 'out there' with a view to changing it. Practically, this can take a number of forms ranging from action groups, media engagement, political campaigning, advising non-academic activists, trade union activity or engaging in activist research. Moreover, this can be directed at many different political issues such as, climate change, asylum seeking, gender and sexually based discrimination, racism and indigenous politics (Flood et al., 2013). Notably the relationships and ideals that inform such activism are very particular and very much distinguished from the neoliberal focus on economy and market competition imbued in the research impact agenda. As Catherin Orr (2006) explains, academic activism has long been defined by connecting academic activity with issues and movements focussed on equity and social justice. This is of course, not new and academic activists have over the years contributed to labour movements, civil rights, anti-nuclear protest, the women's movement, anti-war campaigns and movements against globalization. Realized in such activities is a heritage, vision and meaning of the University as a political/democratic institution rather than an economic/industrial one, as well as one that sees critical thinking as an end in its own right. This does not divorce the University from society, quite the contrary it establishes a particular relationship between the two, whereby critique serves to nurture a civil society, not the least by exercising a cultural authority to 'raise concerns or advance ideas that are antithetical to the interests of other powerful constituencies, like business or government' (Orr, 2006: 5), and indeed antithetical to the impact agenda.

## The politics of academic activism

Earlier we characterized the research impact agenda as a form of ‘police’ activity, and we can now consider specifically how this differs from the ‘politics’ of academic activism. Rancière (1998) refers to politics as ‘an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing’ (p. 29) in that rather than seeking to embed consensus, its object is dissent in the name of equality. This is not a utopian dream of a new political order where all inequalities are eradicated, but an ongoing project that disrupts the forces that would instantiate a political consensus benefiting the few. Such a politics is inherently democratic, not in the sense of supporting a democratic state, but by interrupting the tyranny of imposed consensus in the name of equality. Politics as ‘an intervention in the visible and the sayable’ (Rancière, 2010: 37) is a form of dispute that allows subjectivity to emerge against the police forces that would have it muted in the name of consensus.

Although there are numerous examples of academic activism which have challenged social inequality and political power, a pertinent and illustrative current example concerns the role of academics from many disciplines (including management and organization studies) in the global climate movement. Climate science itself dates back over 150 years, however, it was the forceful political testimony of scientists like James Hansen during the late 1980s that brought the issue to mainstream political attention (Weart, 2011). Of course, the climate movement does not just comprise academics; it involves a range of civil activists, journalists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), politicians and business people (Dietz and Garrelts, 2014). However, academic research has provided the bedrock for broader political activism by highlighting the physical need for dramatic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reductions, and asserting the profound justice and human rights implications of human-induced climate change. While climate scientists continue to develop our understanding of the physical nature of the climate crisis through peer-reviewed research and the statements of major scientific organizations, academics have also sought to consider the political and moral implications of our current economic path (Gardiner, 2011).

Climate change highlights one of the most profound inequalities of the global economic system. Those affected by the climate crisis in the developing world and future generations are least responsible for causing the problem. This has led to calls for a new ‘environmental justice’ as a direct challenge to older inequalities of global economic development, indigenous and human rights (Klein, 2014). The political and activist implications of academic research in this space are further highlighted by researchers investigating humanity’s remaining ‘carbon budget’ to avoid dangerous climate change. Indeed, it is this which formed the basis for the hugely successful global programme of fossil fuels divestment developed by climate activist Bill McKibben and the environmental NGO 350.org (McKibben, 2013). Researchers have also gone to some lengths to call out specific companies and countries which have been the key contributors to anthropogenic GHG emissions, contributing to NGO campaigns against ‘fossil fuel majors’ such as Exxon, Shell and BP (Heede, 2014). On a more personal level, individual academics, such as Manchester University’s Kevin Anderson, have stressed their personal responsibility to reduce their high-carbon lifestyles and engaged in public advocacy for climate action (Anderson, 2014).

Climate activism exemplifies how, in the political contestation over climate change, academics have played a central role as their research reveals the ‘inconvenient truth’ that our economy is at war with a habitable future. Moreover, this is a truth that has a long tradition of being ardently denied within the discourse of neoliberalism (Antonio and Brulle, 2011). Contesting this has, for academics in both the physical and social sciences, meant extending their work beyond peer-reviewed publication and government funded research projects so as to engage directly in political debates through mainstream and social media, as well taking direct protest action. Not surprisingly, the pushback on academic climate change activism from the fossil fuel industry and its political

allies has been dramatic. As US climate scientist Michael Mann has documented, this has involved attacks from conservative politicians and right-wing lobby groups, orchestrated campaigns of harassment via email and social media, threats to job security and career, and even death threats (Wright and Mann, 2013). In Australia, climate and social scientists have also been subject to political and public attack for highlighting the urgent need for emissions mitigation and climate action (Milman, 2011). Academic activism thus comes with a potentially high cost for individuals, particularly in an era of government funding cuts to higher education and when the issue at hand (in this case, the future of the fossil fuel industry) fundamentally challenges the economic agendas of powerful elites.

## Acting up and the university

The example of climate change activism shows how the value of academic work exceeds, and can at times refute, an impact agenda erected to police academic work along a neoliberal agenda. Such activism has had, at its core, a determination to upset the political consensus that has underpinned industrial development on a global scale. In other words, it exemplifies a political undoing of ‘the perceptible divisions of the police’ (Rancière, 1998: 30). The logic of research impact is precisely the opposite in that it assumes a homogeneous order where the right to speak is limited to those who will and can attest to the neoliberal domination of the economic over the political. This institutes a doubling up of the effort required for academic activism in the impactful University.

Universities themselves, especially in the United Kingdom and Australia, have broadly embraced the impact agenda, if nothing else out of a lack of choice in a fiscally constrained higher education sector. The impact agenda is a particular manifestation of the corporatization of the university where commercial values trump democratic ones, where capitalism is seen as the only possible route to freedom, and where anyone who suggests otherwise is ‘dismissed as either a crank or worse’ (Giroux, 2002: 104). That the academic activist might be castigated as such a modern-day crank is precisely a function of the way that neoliberalism’s hold on the contemporary university embodies a particular ‘partition of the sensible’ (Rancière, 2001), whereby neoliberal discourse excludes democratic politics from the reality of what make institutional sense in Universities. This ‘sense’ is organized such that ‘impact’ is designed precisely to have no political impact. Although impact is imminently sensible in this regime, activism rooted in democracy and equality is excluded; shunned as a curio from a bygone era. More than anything, this reflects an academic manifestation of the logic of state politics in our era, one where ‘the absolute identification of politics with the management of capital is no longer a shameful and hidden secret behind the “forms” of democracy; it is the openly declared truth by which our government acquire legitimacy’ (Rancière, 2010: 113). Within the impact agenda, to suggest that the value of research might lie outside corporate domination of the economic realm simply makes no sense.

To be clear in our argument, we are not saying that research motivated by democratic and activist values will necessarily be assessed as not having impact. We are also not saying that activist work is bound to fail in attracting funding from government. This is clearly not the case, and climate change research itself is a case in point. In light of this, we might be charged with making a distinction between activism and impact in a manner that is overly black and white, as if the two can never co-exist. We would resist such criticism; the distinction we make is one that marks out a clear and identifiable divide in the practical and rhetorical justification of research as it has been established by the impact agenda. As such, whereas in practice it might be possible to engage in democratically motivated activist research in a manner that can still be ‘counted’ as impact, this does not dismantle or discredit the distinctions we are making.

What is abundantly clear is that research (even when it is politically motivated) is increasingly under pressure to publicly justify itself on neoliberal grounds, and that those grounds exclude politics. The effects of this are significant in that the policing regime demands that academic work be framed in terms of particular economic justifications, and with this comes the inherent danger that work dedicated, for example, to democratic dissent or social and environmental well-being is inherently corrupted in favour of a market logic (Nyberg and Wright, 2013). There may well be so called ‘win-wins’ where activist and instrumental goals can be simultaneously achieved (or at least claimed), but when this is the case the political ‘win’ has still to be justified in terms of the market. Put more simply, if there is no market-based justification then research cannot easily be promoted as having impact. It is in this sense that a market assessment of the value of academic research (although not of necessity problematic in and of itself) is, in practice, taking over as the only means through which such value can be assessed. The result is a steady corruption of other values of worth, most especially political and democratic ones.

In a situation where political governance is identified with ‘the managerial practice of bowing to commercial necessity’ (Rancière, 1998: 112), the meaning of being an academic activist now rests in a twofold movement: that of both acting in the name of equality in an effort (using Marx’s terms) to ‘change the world’ while resisting and contesting an academic administration whose police actions have attempted to eliminate such forms of democratic practice from the political consensus. Rancière (2001) is clear in stating that consensus is not about ‘peaceful discussion and reasonable agreement’ but rather rests in the ‘annulment of dissensus’ and the ‘reduction of politics to the police’ (p. 14). Academic activism, as we have construed, is precisely a move to challenge this consensus both in the University itself and in the relations between the University and society more generally. By this account, the relation between theory and practice is not characterized by ‘impact’ as if one thing leads to another along the lines of a one-dimensional flowchart. Instead, the relationship is one that is political and democratic, such that ‘theory’ engages with the world in the name of equality.

Notwithstanding a powerful neoliberal consensus which seeks to restrict academic activism, it is notable that this agenda has not been altogether successful. One aspect of the impact agenda, the desire for greater ‘public engagement’ by academics, harks back to an older tradition of the ‘public intellectual’ and contains the potential for academics to develop an activist identity through calls for greater equality, democracy and a challenging of elite power. Moreover, the desire for democracy instituted through political action lives on in a University where academics refuse to have their profession defined in its entirety by its police. If we look at management and organization studies for instance, despite the overwhelming institutional forces that would have it otherwise, there exist significant activist agendas relating to, inter alia, issues of sexism, racism, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) discrimination, climate justice, worker exploitation, slavery and economic inequality. It might just be this kind of acting up that saves the University from itself and from those who wish to police it.

## Note

1. It has not missed our attention that we are reading Baritz, and citing Kornhauser, in a book edited by Jack Douglas in 1970 titled *The Impact of Sociology*.

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