



Demand the Possible: Journeys in Changing our World as a Public Activist-Scholar

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Sometimes I wonder why I work in a university at all. I spend most of my time outside of it, organising community events, helping out at a local free space, supporting local co-ops, doing asylum seeker support, going to activist gatherings and demonstrations, helping with campaigns, putting on film screenings, and hosting radical speakers. I suppose I have become someone who blends activism and the academy. As a result, life is busy, challenging, confusing, but generally enjoyable.

Then I remember why I still work in a university. It's because I'm an activist-scholar, someone who sees the value in radical education and the public debate of ideas which challenge the norm. I bring my activism into the university for a number of reasons. In spite of the way they are being re-engineered, universities are still amazing places of encounter, conflict, diversity and debate (not to mention resources), and it is crucial that we find ways to defend and expand these and open them up to others. Engaging with the activist world, while it raises the eyebrows of many senior colleagues, excites and inspires my students. It reminds me of what Paulo Freire once said about the purpose of education: it is the practice of freedom. Defending education as a path to freedom and not as a route to debt, precarious jobs, and conformity is one of the most important political tasks of our time. And it's also an essential antidote to the endless consumer parade which student life has become, as well as to the efforts of British Aerospace, KPMG, Deloitte, and their ilk, to parcel up their futures.

So how does all this work? What does it mean to be an activist-scholar? How do you promote radical ideas and debates within the academy? I want to explain through three stories: my involvement in challenging the publishing giant Elsevier, the formation of a new Masters programme called "Activism and Social Change", and my work with a popular education collective called Trapeze.

Take One: Disarm Dsei: Arm your Writing

September 11, 2001. You will remember it for the obvious reasons. But I remember it because I was dressed in a large pink cardboard tank outside the biannual Defence Systems Exhibition International (DSEI) arms fair at London's ExCel centre. I was there as part of the DisarmDsei mobilisations which were taking direct action against one of the world's largest arms fairs. It wasn't until May 2006, however, after talking with Dave Featherstone from Liverpool University, and friends from the Campaign against the Arms Trade (CAAT), that I became aware that publishing giant Reed Elsevier (RE) was involved in organising DSEI through a subsidiary of the Reed Group, Reed Exhibitions. Our initial reaction was "what the hell are academic publishers doing in the arms trade!" Reed Elsevier publishes many of the key journals in the discipline of Geography. We decided that the links were obvious and serious and we had to highlight this by writing a piece in the journal *Political Geography* calling for a boycott of RE journals.

We submitted an article to *Political Geography* entitled "Elsevier, Critical Geography and the arms trade", which appeared in 2007. In the article we pointed out that at the London arms fair, which RE had organized, around 1000 exhibitors sell everything from battleships and attack helicopters to cluster bombs and machine guns. We noted that this represented a significant "disconnect" between the types of research and ideas promoted most frequently in the journal, and the actual practices of the journal's publisher. We wrote:

This situation represents a challenge to the geographical community. Are we as critical, left leaning academics willing to accept a situation whereby some of the most significant journals in the discipline are owned by a company which aggressively promotes the arms trade? ... This does not seem to us an acceptable situation. Beyond this Editorial/Intervention we therefore will refuse to publish in Elsevier publications or to referee papers for Elsevier journals until the company divests itself of links to the arms trade. As such a divestiture is unlikely, one option may be for these journals to find friendlier homes in the publishing world. We are also calling for the wider geographical community to take action against this situation.

The next issue featured an anonymous response from an RE spokesperson, who attempted to defend the company's involvement in the arms trade by arguing that not just the military, but also equipment for peaceful and defensive uses was traded at the fair.

The debate didn't end there. It quickly emerged that RE was publishing an important book in Geography, *The International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography*. Hundreds of geographers had been asked to contribute entries for this encyclopaedia, and as the links between RE and the arms trade spread, people began to withdraw their entries. There was

a long debate amongst the editors about the ethical issues surrounding the project, but in March 2007, the senior editors issued a statement explaining why they would continue the project with RE. Their argument was threefold: first they argued that since we are compromised in nearly every area of our lives in everything we do, why is their project and this company being highlighted? Second, people had already invested time in the project; third, the editors had to honour commitments already made.

These reasons rang hollow to us. Like the Elsevier spokesperson's reaction, they represent a classic (non)response to challenges to the status quo of our everyday worklives. None of the editors' reasons explained why the project could not go ahead without RE, using for example, increasingly common open source publishing models such as Creative Commons Licenses or wiki pages for the on-line version. Wouldn't this then make it a truly public and free project like it should have been in the first place?

Even though the encyclopedia project continues with RE, the controversy around it reached the public domain, and in 2007 RE decided to pull out of the arms fair business. This has given countless geographers hope that we can act collectively and effectively as an academic community. The key point of being a critical geographer, for me, is to connect with wider public debates on injustice, inequality and oppression, especially those we find in our daily working lives. Small victories like these are essential to motivate people to further action. There remain thousands of Reed Elseviers out there in our work worlds, but we are now learning how to challenge them publicly.

Take Two: Radicalise Learning

Being a public scholar is not just about being "out there" beyond the walls of the university. It is also about radicalising our own workplaces and teaching. To these ends, I have developed a new Masters programme called "Activism and Social Change" in the School of Geography at the University of Leeds. This programme is unlike many academic courses. It is infused with ideas about the possibilities of more horizontal social organisation, and the abilities of people to manage their own affairs through mutual aid and solidarity. It presents a commitment to workable alternatives to the daily grind of wage labour and monetary exchange, and a mistrust of those with blueprints or vanguardist leadership.

I wanted to develop a course that would introduce students to these ideas, not in a doctrinaire or theoretical way, but as living ideas that would catch their imagination and act as possible openings for how we might live more sustainable, just and equal lives. The really tough question we asked in the class was "what do we mean by 'activism'"? Activism takes many forms, and visions of social change differ across

time and space. Business activists, for example, have been the most successful activists of recent years. We did not want to fix ourselves to one particular ideological or political viewpoint—we certainly aren't all Marxists or anarchists. But we do see ourselves and our visions for social change as part of what has become known as the “anti-capitalist”, “anti-globalisation” or “global justice” movement, which has become visible at the summit sieges of Seattle, Prague and Cancun, and the World Social Forums.

We have come under fire from many activists and campaigners who see us professionalising something that should be organic and on the streets. However, we have responded by saying that our energy will come from breaking down barriers between the university and broader social movements for change, and courses such as these are the first step. In terms of content, we have developed modules in radical ideas, resistance movements, skills for researching and campaigning on social change, engagements with activists and campaigners, how to implement ideas, and a large action-research dissertation. Campaign groups such as the World Development Movement, Friends of the Earth, and CorporateWatch have officially backed the course because it engages the outside world and builds skills for campaigning and action. In a situation where alternative ideas are marginalised and social movements are often repressed, there simply needs to be more of these kinds of radical education projects to help build and support campaigning and social movements. They also reclaim space within universities from depoliticised, or at least corporate-focused, education and career options. We need to create, expand, and defend these forms of radical education.

Take Three: Make the Leap

I've spent a lot of time outside the walls of academia with a popular education collective called Trapeze (Taking Radical Action through Popular Education and Sustainable Everything!). Many people were upset to find out that we were not circus trapeze performers! Our motto “making the leap” refers instead to ideas and action and not the high wire. In 2004, the Collective started developing workshops in the build-up to the 2005 summit of the Group of 8 Nations, which was being held in Gleneagles, Scotland. We toured the UK, and Europe giving workshops on the role of the G8, and the big issues on the agenda such as climate change and debt, with student unions, church groups, and peace and campaign groups. Our focus concerned understanding what the G8 meant, as an elite group of nations who set the global agenda for the maintenance of the capitalist economy, and also discussing what workable alternatives existed to give people a sense that other worlds and ways of living are possible beyond those proposed by the G8. Here we introduced examples such as community gardens, workers co-operatives, and social movements such as the Zapatistas, union

organisers and campaigns on climate change. We also focused on action planning and how people could empower themselves to take action both in terms of joining the protests against the G8 and also developing local campaigns afterwards.

Since then, we have developed a range of workshops and skill-sharing sessions. We found a huge demand for workshops which focused not just on the issues, but also what skills and abilities people needed to engage with the issues. We have worked with a number of groups such as the Permaculture Association which gives courses on the principles of permaculture design; Seeds for Change which gives workshops on facilitation, consensus decision making and direct democracy; alternative media groups such as Indymedia and ClearerChannel who actively promote and help distribute alternative media and film as tools of empowerment; members of the UK social centres network who actively encourage occupied and self-managed social centres; direct action collectives who develop tactics for taking action and campaigning; and cultural activists such as the Clandestine Rebel Clown Army and the Vacuum Cleaner who bring together art and activism to pull stunts, occupy offices and make interventions (including my favourite, Praying for Products, which involves a large group of people kneeling down in front of a well known branded item and numerous bemused shoppers in a large chain store, and giving thanks at the top of your voice to the world of consumer goods!).

Working alongside these activist-oriented associations inspired us to create a handbook to empower people to get involved in social change. In the end, the book was called, *Do It Yourself, a Handbook for Changing our World*, which was edited by the Trapeze Collective and published by Pluto Press in 2007. The intention of the book was to blend ideas with a practical “how to” guide. The topics we covered included sustainable living, decision making, education, health, food, cultural activism, media, direct action and free spaces. The crucial part of this project for us was that the reader could learn about the issues and then see practical advice on how you could instantly implement ideas. So, for example, a discussion about the impacts of peak oil and the end of cheap energy was complemented by a guide to build a solar shower in your back garden. We insisted that the book was published under a creative commons license that allows people to use the material freely for non-commercial uses, and it was collectively written to move away from individual names and reputations. These are small additions, but they really change the feel of the work we produce.

So what did we achieve by writing this book? Most importantly, we want education to inspire others to get involved in change. We have to address apathy, denial, powerlessness and often just a lack of time. This is easily done through templates for action, action planning, inspiring stories and crucial emotional support. My work with Trapeze aims to

take to the public discussions on big issues such as privatization, climate change, resource conflict, social inequalities, and political apathy, whilst at the same time talking about what kinds of workable alternatives are feasible. These issues are too important to lock up in small academic seminars and inaccessible journal articles.

Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible. . .

Let's save our pessimism for better times. These are my stories of being a public scholar-activist, of challenging, inspiring and innovating in my work and life. I want to galvanize dissent, normalize critique, and make radical alternatives seem like real possibilities for our times. There are always possibilities for radicalising public debates, be they in our workplaces (disputes with management, supporting junior members of staff, challenging corporate restructuring and management diktats, introducing radical ideas into our teaching) or outside (helping groups with campaign strategies, showing solidarity to those in resistance, attending events and demonstrations, lobbying and defending for particular causes). The progressive Left is weak in its ability to justify, demand and argue publicly for the implementation of our utopias—be they co-operative working practices, less work, more pay, or the safeguarding of public goods and services. Critical Geography has a role to play in voicing these real dreams and desires and creating public debates around them. Our job is to make alternatives seem feasible and sensible, not crazy and left field. It is a battle of ideas, words and practices about a better world, a battle, alas, that too many professors forget once they have joined the elite club. Here's a few things we can all do:

- Introduce as much challenging material into our teaching as possible—including street work, innovative assessment, learning radical histories, outside engagements.
- Push for new courses in universities which actively promote engagement, campaigning and civic activism.
- Support open source and online publishing and challenge metrics.
- Inform ourselves about who owns the journals and books we publish in. Which large firms are behind them? Support the ones we feel comfortable with and tell those we avoid why.
- Spread the word on corporations who have too much influence in our work lives and get together with others to challenge them.
- Try and create publicly accessible versions of our work in the form of pamphlets, tip sheets or websites.

Life's too short. Push the boundaries, kick up a fuss, organise with friends. Don't let management push you around! Challenge lazy, overpaid professors, connect with inspiring movements for change, and turn your work places into spaces of joy, hope and rebellion!

Online Resources

- Campaign Against the Arms Trade. Campaign group against militarization, <http://www.caat.org> Accessed 4 February 2008
- Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army. How to take direct action through rebel clowning, <http://www.clownarmy.org> Accessed 4 February 2008
- ClearerChannel. Group promoting grassroots media and activism, <http://www.cleaarchannel.org> Accessed 4 February 2008
- Creative Commons Licenses. All you need to know about going copyleft, <http://www.creativecommons.org> Accessed 4 February 2008
- DisArm DSEI campaign site, <http://www.dsei.org>, Accessed 4 February 2008
- Indymedia. News from the streets from around the world, <http://www.indymedia.org> Accessed 4 February 2008
- Kiptik Zapatista Solidarity Group, <http://www.kiptik.buz.org> Accessed 4 February 2008
- MA in Activism and Social Change at the University of Leeds, <http://www.activismsocialchange.org.uk> Accessed 4 February 2008
- Permaculture Association. Lots of information about this inspiring design strategy for changing our world, <http://www.permaculture.org.uk> Accessed 4 February 2008
- Seeds for Change Collective who undertake workshops on consensus and direct democracy, <http://www.seedsforchange.org> Accessed 4 February 2008
- The Common Place, Leeds' autonomous social centre in the UK, <http://www.thecommonplace.org.uk> Accessed 4 February 2008
- The Vacuum Cleaner. Hilarious, effective and inspiring creative direct action outfit, <http://www.thevacuumcleaner.org> Accessed 4 February 2008
- Tom Stafford's on line petition, <http://www.idiolect.org.uk/elsevier/petition.php> Accessed 4 February 2008
- Trapeze Popular Education Collective. Resources for popular education, <http://www.trapeze.org> Accessed 4 February 2008
- Trapeze Popular Education Collective. *Do it Yourself: A Handbook for Changing Our World*. London: Pluto Press, <http://www.handbookforchange.org> Accessed 4 February 2008
- Wikipedia on line resource, <http://www.wikipedia.org> Accessed 4 February 2008

Paul Chatterton is a radical educator with one foot in the School of Geography at the University of Leeds. His activism and writing involves the popular uprising in Argentina since 2001; resisting gentrification and the corporate control of cities; and alternative approaches to development. He is also involved in various solidarity and campaign groups around the UK and beyond, including Kiptik, a solidarity group helping to build appropriate technology water systems in the Zapatista autonomous communities in Chiapas, Mexico; the Common Place, a social centre in Leeds; Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network (LASSN), which provides voluntary support, advice and friendship to refugees and asylum seekers; and Trapeze, a popular education collective who recently published *DIY: A Handbook for Changing Our World* with Pluto Press (<http://www.handbookforchange.org>). Most recently he has started up a new Masters at Leeds University called "Activism and Social Change" (see <http://www.activismsocialchange.org.uk>).