

UCLA

Critical Planning

Title

Jaqueline Leavitt: Activist Scholar

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1s1920rd>

Journal

Critical Planning, 23(0)

Author

North, Dustianne

Publication Date

2017

DOI

10.5070/CP8231038138

Copyright Information

Copyright 2017 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Jacqueline Leavitt: Activist Scholar

Dustianne North

University of California, Berkeley

As an activist for social justice, a scholar, and a social work practitioner, I have often grappled with the complexities and tensions inherent in these multiple roles. This has not just been a problem of practice—of how to act in accord with the needs of each of these roles when they sometimes conflict. It has also been a problem of legitimacy and acceptance: activism is often not highly regarded or well rewarded in the academy, nor are academics and social workers often fully embraced in leftist movements. Were it not for the guidance and support of just a few wise and brave souls, carving my path through my doctoral work and into my subsequent career may well have proved impossible. First among these mentors was Dr. Jacqueline Leavitt, who more than anyone taught me what it is to be an activist-scholar.

In 2011, I attended a forum presented by the Luskin School of Public Affairs at UCLA in partnership with NYU's Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service, in which we discussed at length how to promote social justice in our academic programs. Dr. Leavitt proposed that one important way to do this was to better promote the development of activist-scholars. By this time, Dr. Leavitt had already shown me by example what the work of an activist-scholar looks like. The innovative Community Scholars program she developed with Gilda Haas and others assembled graduate students and community activists to undertake concrete research-driven social change efforts, simultaneously giving hands-on training and changing the dynamics among scholars and activists in the field. Her focus on participatory research methods provided a set of tools for empowering unheard voices in research and fueling bottom-up social change efforts. At her side I learned from homecare workers, who often come with few marketable skills and little social power and yet have managed to unionize and begin to professionalize (North, 2004), women taxi drivers who have also unionized and sometimes created all-women taxi collectives to help combat the sexism and safety issues they have

encountered at work (Leavitt and North, unpublished), and in the classroom from low-income residents fighting to preserve their communities and their access to housing. Dr. Leavitt not only studied these populations but helped them tell their own stories, frame their own needs and arguments, and craft their own solutions. She also supported me throughout my dissertation process, even as her health began to flag, enabling a study of the sustainability and development of social justice organizers (North, 2013). In honor of her memory, I thought it fitting to offer a few reflections on her work and some thoughts about how to further her call to promote activist scholarship.

In her call for increased support for activist-scholars, Dr. Leavitt made the point that activism is often discouraged in scholarship. She suggested that to be an activist-scholar, one must be not only a scholar *and* an activist, but must commit to being an activist first; otherwise, the pressures and incentive structures of scholarly work often come to trump activist intentions. Piven (2010) similarly argued that “in the contest between scholarship and activism, the personal commitment to activism must be passionate and paramount if it is to survive the tension created by the dual path” (p.808).

Piven pointed out, however, that this tension is not so much inherently due to the need for research to be a dispassionate activity (whereas passion and a change agenda are presumed to be central to the realm of activism), since “politically relevant scholarship” is commonplace among scholars who fall on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Instead she suggested that this tension arises most pointedly when one’s political orientation identifies with “trouble-making assertions of power by groups at the bottom of society, or groups at the cultural margins” (p.807). In other words, it is when scholarly work that critiques institutional realities is itself aligned with disruptive and dissident movements that oppose these realities, that the validity of one’s scholarship is most often called into question. To make matters worse for such scholars, she noted that this tension is experienced not only in the academy but also in the movement. She argued that scholars are not often trusted in justice movements, offering at best “uncertain rewards” (p. 809) for participation, further adding to the tendency for scholars to seek activist goals as side projects only.

Despite such obstacles, several works have highlighted the important contributions of activist scholars over the past century. Some have pointed to African-American scholars (Collins, 2000; Few, Piercy, and Stremmel, 2007; Roach, 2004; Sinclair, 2015; Williams, 2001) and other scholars of color (Chung, 2009; Grewal, 2008). Piven (2010) pointed to the diversification of academic traditions that came from contested struggles both inside and out

of the academy during the 1960s and 70s, including the addition to the canon of critical theorists like Foucault and Marx and the advent of studies of disruptive movements themselves (see, for example, Allen's (1986) address of the role of the Marxist scholar). A body of feminist and gender studies has also addressed the importance and challenges of activist scholarship (Few et al., 2007; Grewal, 2008; Staggenborg, 2014; Williams, 2001). A few other inquiries have considered the relevance of student activism to both the academy and broader social change efforts (Chung, 2009; Whitford, 2011), and the role of scientific scholarship in the environmental movement (Kinchy, 2007).

Piven and Leavitt's respective calls for increased activist scholarship came not because scholarly activism aiming at justice goals was by any means a new concept, but because they followed three decades during which society as a whole (and academia as a part of it) had moved in a decidedly neoliberal direction. The unprecedented economic inequality and exploding social problems that resulted from this shift in the 1990s and 2000s led to a significant increase in populist activities on a variety of justice oriented issues. By 2010, this foment was beginning to spur significant interest among scholars in social justice goals and strategies, raising anew questions about the importance of activist scholarship and the need to address the challenges that can undermine it.

Leavitt and Piven each posited strategies to make it more possible for scholars to place their activism as central to their scholarly work. Piven focused most on individual strategies, such as choosing a less prestigious university, which may allow for more choice in scholarly activities, or joining or forming scholarly associations with activist orientations. Focareta, Siskind, and Sopko (2002) provided support for the value of participation of activist scholars in such professional associations in their account of the emotional relief experienced by approximately sixty participants in the second annual Ohio Progressive Scholars Conference at Oberlin College in 2001. Piven suggested that while activist career pathways in academia might not offer the same material rewards as pure scholarship, they might at least allow for the survival of an activist scholar career.

Leavitt's ideas were oriented more toward the need for institutional support in the academy for activism. Few et al. (2007) made a similar call: noting that Few, an African-American feminist scholar for whom experiences of racism and sexism were central to her identity development as an activist scholar, asserted together with her department head (Piercy) and departmental chair of tenure and promotions committee (Stremmel) that institutions must challenge constructions of excellence in scholarship that devalue public

service, teaching, and social change work, and must strive for more inclusivity and diversity of scholarship orientations. Dr. Leavitt envisioned scholars as agents of empowerment of movement member voices, and she did a great deal to develop models for alliance-building between scholars and movement activists and to create spaces supported by universities in which community activists, students, and faculty could work together toward shared goals. Such activities may not only provide emotional buffers and motivational value, but also guidance in the complex practice of activist scholarship. Focareta et al., (2002) noted an array of practice challenges presented by such a role:

How do you do real community work and build real trust when you've got one semester's funding to interact with the community's people? How do you explain to a research board that your objectivity is not compromised when you attend birthday parties of the same people you observe transitioning from welfare to work? How do you encourage students to critically analyze the institution that teaches them and pays you? How do you present data academia would relegate to a dusty bookshelf, but you intend to stir up public policy? How do you do research from a place of privilege without becoming the colonizer peering into the colonized? How do you rock the boat without falling out?

Finney (2002) described the benefits she gleaned from conducting her doctoral work in the context of a supportive learning community in the Organizational Behavior program at Case Western Reserve University, which allowed her to engage in a long-term collaborative project with several NGOs invested in global social change agendas and helped her to resolve dilemmas such as those described by Focareta and colleagues.

Writing this piece, I cannot help but reflect on the sacrifices Dr. Leavitt must have made throughout her career to keep her commitment to activism. And yet at the same time, I am struck by the scholar that she was. Achievements such as her prolific body of published works, her stellar performance as Senate Faculty at UCLA, as founder of the American Planning Association Planning and Women Division, and as a Fulbright Scholar defy the notion that remaining committed to activism must necessarily undermine one's scholarship. Perhaps it was the very fact that she had faced those challenges over decades that made her such an excellent mentor to students like me. Her deep understanding of my work offered guidance when little was elsewhere available, and validation where I otherwise encountered skepticism, and she helped to impart a willingness to challenge the status quo, which continues to serve me today. Were it not for Dr. Leavitt's example, I may have given up

on academia altogether. Were it not for her guidance, I may not have found this slim but walkable path through the complexities of the work I feel called to do, and were it not for her dedication to supporting activist scholars like me, I might find fewer allies in my work. Jacqueline Leavitt is owed a great debt of gratitude, and her impact will be felt for decades to come.

References

- Allen, J. S. (1986). The Marxist scholar and political activism. *Science and Society*, 50(3): 336-339.
- Chung, J. Y. M. (2009). Relevant activism: Contexts, challenges, and possibilities for Asian American students.
- Collins, B. J. (2000). Teaching to transform: The legacy of African American scholar-activists in higher education.
- Few, A. L., Piercy, F. P., & Stremmel, A. J. (2007). Balancing the passion for activism with the demands of tenure: One professional's story from three perspectives. *NWSA Journal*, 19(3): 47-66.
- Finney, M. S. (2002). Reflections on the development of character for global social change and scholar-activism: A multimedia story-searching and aesthetic inquiry. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Case Western Reserve University. Cleveland, Ohio.
- Focareta, D., Siskind, M., & Sopko, K. (2002, Mar-Apr). Asylum from the institution: Ohio's scholar-activists meet to beat schizophrenia. *Clamor*, 13: 61.
- Grewal, J. (2008). Theorizing activism, activizing theory: Feminist academics in Indian Punjabi society. *NWSA journal*, 20(1): 161-183.
- Kinchy, A. J. (2007). Genes out of place: science, activism, and the politics of biotechnology. University of Wisconsin--Madison.
- Leavitt, J. and North, D. (unpublished). Good girl, bad girl: The catch 22 of being a woman taxi driver.
- North, D. (2013). Navigating Decisions, Transitions, and Transformations: How Justice Organizers Develop and Sustain Careers. (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.)
- North, D. (2004). Lattices to a better life. A 'Just' Redevelopment: Lessons from the Figueroa Corridor Coalition for Economic Justice. Community Scholars Program 2003-2004. Department of Urban Planning, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Piven, F. F. (2010). Reflections on scholarship and activism. *Antipode*, 42(4): 806-810.
- Roach, R. (2004). The scholar-activists of brown. *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 21(7): 26-31.
- Sinclair, L. (2015). American Africanists, academic activism, and US-Africa foreign engagements, 1958-1971 (Doctoral dissertation, New York University).
- Staggenborg, S. (2010). Feminist activism at a Canadian university. *Resources for Feminist Research*, 33(3/4): 95.
- Whitford, H. (2011). Student activism in higher education: A framework for learning.
- Williams, C. C. (2001). The angry Black woman scholar. *NWSA Journal*, 13(2), 87-97.