Revisiting Edward Said's *Representations of the Intellectual*: a Roundtable for Perspectives on Academic Activism

ABSTRACT

In this roundtable discussion we revisit Edward Said's *Representations of the Intellectual* (1993) as a departure for examining how and where academic activism can take place. This is situated both within and apart from existing public struggles, including #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) and other current movements. Academic activism will be explored as an intellectual project that may at times problematise notions of the public, the intellectual, and the activist.

We will examine how academic activism contributes to activist projects, while also interrogating how "public" representational claims are made. This includes important questions around who is responsible for publics that are not yet constituted as such? What voices are not yet heard, seen, or understood? And what is the role of academic activists in relation to these? This in turn raises ethical questions of how to represent and be accountable to the disadvantaged and/or subaltern.

In addressing these issues, the roundtable will explore activism both inside and outside the classroom, offering various figurations of academic activism. The discussion will draw on the participants' experiences of university teaching and popular education within local contexts, as members of staff at Birmingham City University in the UK.

Keywords: publics, intellectual, academic activism, neoliberalism, pedagogy, postcolonialism.

Contextual Preamble

The Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research (BCMCR), at Birmingham City University (BCU), was established in 2009 and its remit is to produce distinctive, collaborative research within

the field of Media and Cultural studies. This roundtable originally took place as part of the BCMCR

seminar series in December 2020, where a range of interdisciplinary scholars addressed the

problematics of academic activism. All the participants are based at BCU, a university with a

predominantly working class, ethnically diverse student population. These BCU academics range in

position from lecturer to reader. This article is based on the transcript of the roundtable. We

collectively developed the questions in order to provoke discussion, responding to the political and

educational climate of the UK in late 2020.

At the time of the roundtable, some of the key focal points of activist public discourse in the UK

(within and beyond academia) were the Black Lives Matter movement, decolonising the university,

and critique of the government's stance on strands of Social Science and the Humanities. Late 2020

was marked by populist politics (in which knowledge emanating from universities were seen within a

suspicious light, consistent with a generalised distrust of experts within political discourse). This

coheres the anti-intellectualism inherent to neoliberal approaches to education and a legacy of

neoliberal education policy within the UK (including, but not limited to, former PM Margaret

Thatcher's educational policy and political rhetoric). The academics in this roundtable, and the issues

they discuss, operate within the context of the neoliberal university, wherein both staff and students

are expected to work at increasing speeds with a focus on measurable increases in performance and,

of course, economic gain. This is often, it can be argued, to the detriment of the liberal university as

a space for open and critical thinking, developing transformational knowledge and experiences.[1]

Furthermore, 2020 was a moment when social movements, including Black Lives Matter and the

Covid-19 pandemic, raised questions about the nature of knowledge production, the limitations of

liberal institutions conventionally associated with knowledge production, and the relationship of

knowledge to activism. Whilst the context has altered since December 2020, we believe the

---

[1] Igea Troiani & Claudia Dutson, 'The Neoliberal University as a Space to Learn/Think/Work in Higher Education', *Architecture and Culture*, 9:1(2021), 5-23.

aforementioned issues have only been exacerbated. The following discussion on academic activism is situated in relation to these continually pressing issues and contexts.

In our roundtable we discuss how academic activism has been, and can be, advanced in our contemporary moment - guided in part by Edward Said's *Representations of an Intellectual*. His lecture series was delivered in 1993 and navigated an empirical context removed from ours. Yet his arguments are a point of departure and dialogue for us. We ask: how is humanism and the 'we' being reconfigured through assemblagist and transversal understandings of public life? How is posthumanist thought activist? How do intellectuals position themselves in relation to struggles that claim a progressive mantle? Are they merely repeating and recoding injustices for professionalised audiences? These issues raise questions about how the intellectual is to advance or stand apart from dominant knowledge-power configurations, which academia has relied upon to critically engage with public issues. BLM is one conduit that we utilise for examining this problematic. Moreover, within the classroom novel ways of conceptualising reflexivity, practice, postcolonial pedagogy, and critiques of job market-oriented education are re-crafting what it means to be an academic activist. By exploring these concerns, the figure of the intellectual engaged in academic activism gains renewed clarity.

Introductory Thoughts

Zaki Nahaboo: Activism is geared towards redressing a perceived injustice by demanding or enacting a transformation to a set of political, legislative, juridical, cultural, ecological, or economic relations. Activists speak for the constituency experiencing an injustice and sometimes claim to be part of the group themselves. Academics occupy the role of an intellectual concerned with activism when developing knowledge that: substantiates a grievance, identifies an unacknowledged inequality, contests the terms of engaging in a public issue, or prescribes novel means of redress.[2] At times, they assume the role of an activist through their solidarity with existing struggles – often expressed

---

[2] Nuraan Davids and Yusef Waghid *Academic Activism in Higher Education: A Living Philosophy for Social Justice* (Springer: Singapore, 2021).

via media outlets, lobbying, consultation, physical protests, and pedagogy in the classroom. In other words, they take a side. They seek to reach an audience beyond their own academic class. Conversely, academic activism may involve contesting the very solidarities and publics where political sympathies lie. Academic activism need not be a mouthpiece for an existing struggle. Academics can set themselves apart in order to carve a space of critical enquiry that transforms or profanes the objectives of a movement. As a lecturer in sociology - specialising in postcolonial theory, imperial history and migration studies - I find myself dipping in and out of the latter approach to academic activism. Edward Said's writings are of particular interest to me for exploring the question of academic activism in further depth, a sentiment shared by fellow participants on this roundtable.

Edward Said's *Representations of the Intellectual* offers us theoretical coordinates to think through these issues. We do not aim to systematically apply his arguments to a present circumstance or exclusively focus on his work. Instead, we discuss how certain themes raised in his Reith Lectures enter our diverse trajectories of engaging with academic activism. Before thinking with and beyond Said's writings, it is worth outlining how he viewed the intellectual as a disposition. For Said, the role of the intellectual is to 'speak truth to power'.[3] The difficulty lies in ascertaining the medium for speaking truth, who is being spoken to or for, and by what criteria can one identify the efficacy of truth. These entwined issues become less opaque the more one reflects on how an individual locates herself in relation to the publics she imagines herself addressing. Said finds Julien Benda and Antonio Gramsci's position on the intellectual instructive for navigating the aforementioned issues. Gramsci's traditional intellectuals, such as 'administrators' and 'teachers', reproduce professional knowledge - doing the 'same thing from generation to generation'.[4] A critical intellectual departs from this practice. Benda lauds the intellectual as a 'cleric': one who stands apart from society, yet holds a

---

[3] Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 97.
[4] Ibid, 4.

passionate interest in dictating ideals beyond "his" embraced ivory tower.[5] Here, intellectual elitism and distancing are pivotal for generating erudite knowledge that can contest authorities and lay sentiment - prescribing new visions of the public good. In contrast, Gramsci's critical intellectuals are 'organic'.[6] These intellectuals are inextricably enmeshed within, and embrace, existing social relations. They do so to generate transformative class interests; knowledge produced is supportive of new social relations. Organic intellectuals, when arising from and speaking for their claimed constituency, can develop a counter-hegemony that revises what counts as common sense. Whether intended or not, all intellectuals are 'representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public'.[7]

Said establishes conceptual grounds for us to think through the positionality and purpose of academic activism today. He raises the ethics of speaking truth to power as a necessarily contested practice. This problematic revolves around attempts to assert 'that "our" values (whatever those may happen to be) are in fact universal', which in turn depend on the 'exclusion' or contestation of others.[8] To navigate the issue in a democratic manner, the alignment of an academic's objective and that of a wider public constituency can be brought into a nourishing dialogue. This particular 'life of the mind' is exemplified in the work of Cornel West and Noam Chomsky.[9] Through this, academic activism can also generate an ambivalent relation to expressions of 'thinking politically' by engaging in 'thinking about politics'.[10] The latter may entail analyses of the knowledge and practices that legitimises the naturalisation/disagreement over what counts as a public good, the ranking and ordering of public issues, and the boundaries of public/private governmental regulation. The

---

[5] Ibid, 5.
[6] Ibid, 5.
[7] Ibid, 11.
[8] Ibid, 92.
[9] Nicholas Blomley, "Activism and the Academy", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 12, no.4 (1994): 385.
[10] Ibid.

academic activist occupies a distinct role of utilising existing political discourse and problematising its construction.

What is the role of the intellectual today and what are our ethical responsibilities?

Poppy Wilde: My research focus is posthumanism and posthuman subjectivity. As a lecturer in media and communications, I also draw on critical posthumanism throughout my pedagogy, working in more rhizomatic and non-hierarchical ways. Considering this question, I therefore initially thought about intellectuals being facilitators - opening the door to new ideas. From this perspective, the intellectual's role is very much about the utilisation of skills around critical thinking – rather than necessarily thinking about the intellectual as *possessing* one form of knowledge, instead thinking about knowing many perspectives and being able to introduce those to others. I believe that the fact that critical thinking is a part of our role comes with the ethical responsibility to nurture critical thinking in others, especially in the ways that we teach our students; to utilise our skills in terms of informing others how to engage in literacy, evaluation, and analysis, and to therefore question taken-for-granted norms and assumptions.

In many ways, this extends Said's work. He states that we should be 'thinking of the intellectual vocation as maintaining a state of constant alertness of a perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received ideas steer one along'.[11] Rather than steering "one" along, this must be a collective, and collaborative, action. Braidotti makes exactly this move, redefining 'the subject of knowledge and power without reference to that unitary, humanistic, Eurocentric and masculinist subject'.[12] Taking this as a provocation, I believe that the role of the intellectual today becomes one almost of a troublemaker; we're there to disrupt those taken-for-granted norms and engage in that form of

---

[11] Said, *Representations*, 23.
[12] Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 43.

critical inquiry that unsettles and interferes. It is our ethical responsibility that these positions should not be singular.

Part of that project is about the consideration of whose voices are being heard. This, for me, draws on the contemplation of how a posthumanist discourse can help to decolonise power, knowledge, and value. This, again, links back to our relation to those publics that Zaki mentioned. It is common knowledge that certain skillsets are (unfairly) valued more than others (see Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*).[13] Despite precarious working conditions, unmanageable workloads, and the neoliberal structures of the university, the time that we have as academics for *thinking* puts us in a privileged position in many ways. We need to acknowledge that the value system in which intellects are ranked higher than other workers is problematic. Braidotti[14] claims that at universities we should 'take the chance of complexity against populist over-simplifications [...] to think with and for the world'. I really like that idea of the intellectual having a particular skillset and role, and this comes with particular responsibilities to give back to the world. Our ethical responsibility is to have diversity in our thinking and to provoke the ideas and skills for questioning and critiquing different perspectives.

How can the figure of the intellectual be reimagined and reconceived in the context of BLM?

Kirsten Forkert: I'm in the Institute of Media and English, and my teaching and research are based primarily in Cultural Studies. Beginning with my own positionality, I'm not racialised as Black but am also not racialised as White. This manifests itself as a sense of being an outsider within academic institutions - a 'body out of place'.[15] To some extent this means a disidentification with academia and other liberal institutions. However, I don't share some of the specific experiences of racialised

---

[13] David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster).
[14] Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 150.
[15] Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders*: *Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (Oxford: Berg Books, 2004).

oppression as some of my Black colleagues or students. Based on this, it's important to be reflective about our positions in relation to larger structures of power and knowledge which shape who gets to study or work in higher education and in what types of institutions. This also means asking some difficult questions about how those hierarchies are racialised and replicate global inequalities of power and knowledge. Universities don't exist outside power structures; they are deeply implicated. BLM has asked us to recognise this. However, if we return to Said's caution about the uncritical celebration of social movements, it's important to question some of the responses we've seen from both academic institutions and corporations, including major brands. These have largely been performative symbolic responses and top-down exercises, which don't meaningfully engage with communities or constituencies. In the absence of such engagement or commitment it's unclear to the extent to which this will lead to real change, particularly in the long term when race equality slips out of the media headlines. As academic activists we need to critically interrogate the commodification and institutional co-option of BLM and consider the risks of how this might shut down more fundamental questions about structural racism or limit more radical change.

How can BLM cause us to reflect on whose voices are heard, whose are not, and which publics are not yet constituted?

Zaki Nahaboo: Said argued that 'there is no such thing as a private intellectual, since the moment you set down words and then publish them you have entered the public world'.[16] His usage of "entered" can be substituted for "enacted". The practice of making oneself responsible for a public, and accountable to a public, is performative. Publics do not pre-exist their representation. Claims-making and an assembly is what enacts a public. In other words, publics have to be done. It is acts of

---

[16] Said, *Representations,* 12.

'summoning', 'mobilization', and 'mediation' that engender publics as constitutive discourses (as opposed to constituted entities).[17] We should not forget this because so often, populations, publics, and demographics become conflated. For instance, whatever terminology is being used to constitute "communities" (e.g. minority, dominant, ethnic, civic, queer, disabled) the bodies that make a particular community are sometimes deemed to pre-exist their naming and are anticipated to express a predictable political agenda. Yet when individuals get identified as part of the named community, regardless of intersectional attentiveness, that doesn't make them into a public. The public is a political activity of representing and vocalising a group interest, in turn specifying lines of redress. A public - whether performed as a physical "movement", a governmental policy initiative, or through mass media content - is represented by those who assert authority to make a claim for, or about, the interpellated group. This aspect of a representational claim is difficult to avoid, especially when putting forward a programmatic agenda.

The question of "whose" voice gets a platform in a BLM organisation, and is heard by significant others, leads back to critical debates on hierarchies of voice and included/excluded bodies. An interrogation of representational claims can help reveal how a BLM organisational agenda authorises a particular form of political life. In particular, it is a demand that a life of formally held *rights* be respected. The voice of the public is liberal and militant. Yet it's worth asking what "Black Lives" are practiced or demanded that cannot be vocalised or heard through a liberal register of political life? Can there be political "Black Lives" that do not fall back onto the entanglements of publics and populations, *bios* and *zoe*? The questions of voice that I'm raising are not dismissive of academics who want to be a mouthpiece for an existing movement's stated agenda. Instead, I'm emphasising that the academic activist may also have another role, which is to problematise. The avenues posed,

---

[17] Janet Newman, 'Public leadership as public-making' *Public Money & Management*, 31, no.5 (2011): 315-322.

though certainly beyond the remit of this roundtable, suggest a reframing of marginalized public voices that elides the dominant discursive frames of identity politics.

Jason Huxtable: When Said states the intellectual must possess the 'vocation for the art of representing', representation of things and "others" is central to this ethical project.[18] But who should be represented? Said is unequivocal that the intellectual must belong 'on the same side with the weak and underrepresented', those with 'subaltern status, minorities, small peoples and States, inferior or lesser cultures and races.'[19] We need to assess our own capital, agency, and potentiality; using our skills and unique knowledges to represent those peoples that, as Said says, are 'routinely forgotten or swept under the rug'.[20] For example, within my own area of specialism, as percussion and pedagogy tutor at BCU Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, I collaborate with percussionists in Haiti to bring their underrepresented percussion culture to a wider global community through dissemination of online resources to be used by student percussionists.

How do power hierarchies and colonial legacies persist in academia and the classroom, and how can they be challenged?

Kirsten Forkert: Learning from BLM means critically interrogating the intellectual structures where we're located and their implication within racialised power structures. For academia, this also means examining the concentration of research funding, prestigious institutions, and high-ranking journals within wealthy countries. BLM has asked us to question the origins of this wealth. It's also important

---

[18]Said, *Representations*, 13.
[19]Said, *Representations*, 22.
[20]Said, *Representations*, 11.

to examine the conventional expectations of professionalisation for us as academics. How do these orient us towards the wealthy and prestigious institutions, funding sources, and journals within wealthy countries – thereby perpetuating knowledge inequalities? Said cautioned against this by asking how we might heed C. Wright Mills' 1944 warning about the dangers of intellectuals acting as an elite group of insiders within organisations who make important but unaccountable decisions.[21]

I'm trying to grapple with some of these issues through a funding application involving collaboration with academics in several countries in the Global South as well as the UK. We have discussed how many academic journals are expensive for those outside of wealthy institutions in wealthy countries, and so we've made a political decision to prioritise Open Access journals to make knowledge publicly available for those elsewhere. That said, it's important to be honest and reflexive about my own position as someone who's based in the Global North; the measures we're putting in place might mitigate the situation but not change those fundamental inequalities.

In relation to teaching, it's important to consider how to deal with the effects of the education system. One of these is the lack of critical perspectives on imperial legacies. I teach a module on race and the media and, in this context, I've asked students about how Empire was discussed in school and they have said they've been presented with a very rosy picture. More fundamentally, the school system streamlines students into particular subject areas and discourages them from others. There are also some structural questions around who goes into the Arts and Humanities, and who can succeed within these fields and how this relates to racialised, gendered, and classed power hierarchies. One way that the effects of the school system manifest themselves in the classroom is through lack of confidence, making it difficult for some students to have conviction in their ideas and their intellectual curiosity, or to conceive of themselves as intellectuals. Despite the interventions of Said and others, we still conceive of the intellectual as primarily white, male, and middle class. In the

---

[21] C. Wright Mills*, Power, Politics, and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (New York: Ballantine, 1963) cited in Said, Edward. *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996). 20.

face of this, it's important to be encouraging and positive so students can believe in themselves and their intellectual curiosity.

Jason Huxtable: I think it's important to recognise universities' role in reinforcing colonial narratives and epistemology. In *Decolonizing the University,* Bhambra states that the Western University has been, and is, *'*a key site through which colonialism and colonial knowledge is produced, consecrated, institutionalized and naturalized.'[22]

I'm quite interested in what Said was saying about language: 'each intellectual speaks and deals in a language that has become specialized and usable by other members of the same field.'[23] This poses the question: who is excluded? If language is coded towards shared communication 'within the field', how does the language of the institution marginalise and exclude, creating a discourse that is effectively 'unintelligible to unspecialized people'?[24] Said states the primacy of language as a vital tool for intervention, 'knowing how to use language well and knowing when to intervene in language are two essential features of intellectual action.'[25]

We can look to specialised forms of language as a mechanism for hindering confidence and communication; the language of Western Harmony as an elitist, exclusive, and excluding language. There are debates raging currently about whether Music Theory is racist. An objective, scientific, analytical defence is countered by a clear link between modes of language attainment, which are heavily dependent on significant quantities of both economic and cultural capital. Especially within the context of a crumbling state music education provision, attainment and conversance of this language is only for the privileged few.

Western notation and music theory is of the European tradition. They are the *lingua franca* of the elite music institution. There is a clear relationship between the "quality" of an institution and the

[22]Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, Kerem Nişancıoğlu *Decolonising the University* (London, Pluto Press, 2018), 5.
[23] Said. *Representations*, 9.
[24] Said. *Representations*, 9.
[25] Said. *Representations*, 20.

demands made on prospective students to demonstrate this elite language. I'm currently doing a survey of entry requirements of different music courses to see how criteria for acceptance relate to standards of traditional harmonic language. It is clear that the "better" the institution, the more traditional the harmonic and theoretical demands. This reinforces and narrows the view of what a "good" musician is and can be, a definition that excludes those who cannot have private music lessons for example.

One method to decolonise or question imperial notions of value is to ask: to what extent is Western music theory the only way in which we can analyse and explain music and musical objects? We need to dismantle the idea that there's an epistemological hierarchy where those using this specialised language are somehow more authoritative, granting them more power. This will be an important activity in creating an inclusive environment, especially in elite institutions, helping to build that confidence in those students Kirsten referred to.

Zaki Nahaboo: Calls to recognise imperial history, the situatedness of knowledge, and the need for educational reform have been entwined issues for several decades. Within my professional context, I'm wrestling with the question of how to teach colonial legacies in the classroom. I run a postcolonial studies module for third year undergraduates. The module introduces postcolonial theory and discusses its relevance for interpreting contemporary political developments. While Said's work is unsurprisingly central to the module, I broaden teaching beyond his disciplinary moorings. Said himself recognized that 'specialization' in intellectual enterprise makes academia a technical project, rather than one that should breach disciplinary canons and expand the horizons of how to speak with, and back to, authority.[26] A task of my module is to teach across a humanities and social science divide in order to expand an understanding of hierarchies produced by coloniality. In particular, the instruction focuses on imperialist and decolonial politics - as it relates to matters of territory, sovereignty, and rights. These concerns are vital for examining the possibilities and limits

---

[26] Said, *Representations*, 77-82.

of Eurocentric discourse. For instance, we explore the issue of Native Title in former settler colonies via First Nations claims.[27] In addition, postcolonial critique urges one to think about how diverse legacies of colonialism inform differentiated rights provisions. Migration rights granted to those of former dependencies and dominions are notable focal points. The politics of such issues can elicit variegated figurations of (anti-)racism and (anti-)Eurocentrism. In addition, we also need to recognise the limitations in language itself. Students expect to be taught in English and I am expected to teach in English. This limits the possibility of accessing academic knowledge and empirical sources that do not pass through this globally dominant language. Postcolonial teaching and learning require a reflexive engagement with these acts of translation and recontextualisation. Decolonising education involves, at a minimum, piecemeal attempts to understand colonial legacies in global-local contexts for the purposes of opening lines of redress to the forms of inequality that they give rise to.

One of the reactions to populist politics has been the resurfacing of positivist conceptions of objective truth or unproblematised ideas of scientific authority. How do we understand this and how do we respond?

Kirsten Forkert: The British education context is marked by perceptions of the Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities as separate categories of knowledge from the Sciences. This educational context is different from more integrated paradigms of *Wissenschaft* more common in continental Europe. In line with this assumed separation, positivist knowledge paradigms - seen to underpin science and technology-based subjects - are perceived as politically neutral. In contrast, the Arts, Humanities and

---

[27] James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key Volume I: Democracy and Civic Freedom*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Social Sciences are supposedly political and therefore potentially subversive. However, positivism is not outside of politics (considering for example the role of phrenology and other measurement systems within scientific racism and colonialism more generally). British universities are also marked by the legacy of former PM Margaret Thatcher's education policies; this involved sharp cuts to university funding, in connection with narratives framing academics and schoolteachers (particularly those in the Social Sciences) as indoctrinating students into "trendy" socialist ideas. This perspective persists today, particularly amongst Conservative politicians, as there are parallels with present-day perceptions within government of these disciplines as producing more "woke" voters. Thatcher also held a narrow view, consistent with neoliberal ideology, of the role of education as primarily providing skills training for the job market. Science-based subjects were perceived as both apolitical and better at providing employable skills. Rather than educational establishments as places to ask questions and think critically, job market-oriented education has increasingly become common sense amongst politicians and some university managements. If we remember Thatcher's famous dictum that 'there is no such thing as society', we can interpret this ideology as trying to stunt the sociological and the political imagination. Doing so perpetuates capitalist realism,[28] so that we might better ourselves as individuals through becoming more employable but would struggle thinking of alternatives to the current order.

UK education is marked by this legacy, but also by recent developments in response to populist politics and the power of the tech giants. The first is a call to return to objective and impartial conceptions of knowledge, truth and expert authority, despite roughly 50 years of critical opposition from within the Humanities and Social Sciences. The desire to jettison the legacy of critical opposition and claim that politics can arrive at a singular positivist truth comes out in some of the pronouncements that postmodernism or poststructuralism "created" Donald Trump. The argument

---

[28] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist realism: is there no alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

is that returning to objective knowledge - unquestioned ideas of expert authority or impartial news media - will bring politics back to some pre-Trump normality. This argument can possibly be interpreted as a more contemporary version of Benda's vision of the intellectual as cleric.[29]

The second phenomenon is a kind of naïve positivism around data, and particularly big data. That approach represents data as politically neutral self-evident truths, meaning interpretation and analysis are subjective and therefore flawed and unnecessary. In *Automated Media,*[30] Mark Andrejevic asks, who needs understanding and interpretation when we have correlation of datasets? In connection with the legacies mentioned earlier, this explains the UK government's antipathy to the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences as not only anti-intellectual but anti-interpretation; they also don't want to deal with the ethical and epistemological questions around the collection or use of data.

However, in response to both post-truth politics and the reassertion of positivism, we can't hide the fact that science and academia in general have never existed outside of politics and power relations, even if they were perceived this way in the past (to return to Said's critique of Benda). There is also a wider crisis of liberal institutions at the moment (universities, governments, media organisations, etc.). BLM, #MeToo, the climate emergency and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic have exposed how these institutions are fraught with hierarchies and exclusions. Furthermore, these situations and movements have revealed the problems with certain liberal notions of impartiality. We need to challenge populism and post-truth politics without reasserting old paradigms of objectivity, impartiality, and the unquestioned authority of prestigious institutions. This means recognising the power relations shaping knowledge production. It also means acknowledging the dangers of a commercial media model (including both social media and legacy media), which profits from self-

---

[29] Said, *Representations,* 5.
[30] Mark Andrejevic, *Automated Media* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

appointed 'contrarians' to provide clickbait - as well as the temptations for academics to act as contrarian pundits for immediate media attention.

How do questions of ethics and responsibility play out in the classroom?

Poppy Wilde: Firstly, to return to the question of who publics are, it's important to make the point that students *are* publics. Yes, they represent a very specific form of public. Nevertheless, we have to consider ourselves as working with those students (i.e. publics) to open doors so that they are able to take that work to the publics that they go on to embody and inhabit in future. For me, this is our responsibility: acknowledging and treating our students as thinkers, publics, and "activists" themselves. This also links to the idea of academics as activists. When we think about activism as "being on the streets" and more extroverted politics of activism, we miss much of the nuance that happens within activism behind closed doors. If activism is campaigning for change, then there is great activist potential in conversation and criticality, and these have further potential for inciting change through the chain-reactions in both thought and action that they cause. Positioning ourselves as allies and bringing critical activist thoughts, actions, and conversations to our classrooms enables us to fulfil our responsibility to our students through acknowledging their knowledge, choices, and experiences. For example, a very simple assignment brief I have set previously is an annotated bibliography, where students also include a photograph of the authors that they cite. This brings visibility to students' consideration, and highlights issues of race and gender in academia. This allows students to recognise the power relations shaping knowledge production. It's not about me dictating what students do, but suggesting that they look at the people who they are citing to facilitate their own awareness in an active and reflexive way.

If we consider ourselves as gatekeepers to different forms of knowledge or skillsets, the importance of pluralities that Zaki mentioned earlier becomes even more significant. Our responsibility is to recognise and acknowledge our own positionality, as well as to introduce and offer a diverse set of knowledge, skills and worldviews. Alongside this, it is also our responsibility to expand our own knowledge, skills and worldviews *through and from the students that we teach*. This is, however, somewhat in contradiction to many of Said's suggestions of the intellectual as a figurehead. In Said's work I would question where is the consideration of student/audience as intellectual?

Braidotti[31] suggests that subverting 'the binary teacher-student relationship allows the bypassing of individualism and a broader ensemble to emerge', which I would argue is a decolonising practice. In the classroom, our responsibilities and our ethics are not only to facilitate other worldviews, but to listen to *our students'* worldviews and interpretations. This means creating space for students to know that their voice is being heard, whilst also encouraging them to hear and listen to each other. A practice that I've developed of "networked reading" operates by dividing a reading between students - a few pages each, rather than all reading the entire piece - and asking students to each summarise the pages they read. You go round in order of pages creating a networked summary and drawing on the hive mind. This is about building and facilitating trust between others in terms of allowing students to work together to share their knowledge; thinking about that knowledge not as something that they need to humanistically defend as their own, but something they can pool together. Starting this practice with a specific reading, the hope is to build towards this same level of sharing and listening with their own thoughts and ideas too.

How can we use self-reflexivity in our teaching?

---

[31] Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 142.

Esther Windsor: I would agree that Braidotti's subverting of the binary teacher student relationship is a decolonising practice, one which allows a reflexive relationship and facilitates the unpicking and making of new knowledges. Said speaks of reflexivity in the role of the intellectual:

> There is therefore this quite complicated mix between the private and the public
>
> worlds...there is always the personal inflection and the private sensibility, and
>
> those give meaning to what is being said or written. Least of all should an
>
> intellectual be there to make his/her audiences feel good: the whole point is to
>
> be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant.[32]

In Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's work,[33] they speculate on thinking through the skin of teaching towards a collective orientation to the knowledge subject, a future project, and a commitment to a prophetic organisation. In my own teaching, in Fine Art and Critical Theory, I adopt a critical, reflexive pedagogy, using materials from my own past activism. This includes: squatting, setting up artist led spaces and studios, actively critiquing a political economy of art, leading housing protests, and making deputations to a local authority Council Chamber.

Demonstrating this activist work allows students to see lived experience as valuable knowledge and to bring their lives and bodies into the room. This may include being a mature student, a parent, a teacher in Further Education or school, first in their family to Higher Education, not originating from European Education, working in industry, being Queer, or having alternative knowledges. I encourage students to activate theory in their practice-based research and respond to their own contexts. Incorporating experience, and framing it through endorsed intellectual texts, allows positions of power and activism to be adopted.

---

[32] Said, *Representations*, 12.
[33] Fred Moten, Stefano Harney "The University and the Undercommons". *Social Text*, 22, no.2, (2004): 102.

For example, an MA Fine Art student Remi Andrews set up Temporary Autonomous Zones in Birmingham School of Art, representing work with homeless and outreach groups, using maps, tents, and story-based installations. This later became a student collective, activating different concerns or groups by using Temporary Autonomous Zones including: pubs, music venues, studios, and abandoned public spaces. Olivia Sparrow, for example, made a live, online map of Birmingham's Queer Cruising Zones and Jack Miles and George Caswell performed an institutional critique of market-based higher education, as a band.

This approach to academic activism uses theory and methods from my practice-based PhD, which included activating political subjectivities and curating archival art practice (1970s-90s). In 2014, I worked with Martina Mullaney and Enemies of Good Art,[34] a group of artists and parents, who staged actions and events at public venues including Tate Britain and Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) London, which addressed the invisibility and difficulties of parents as artists. A programme of radio shows on Resonance FM also ran, with critics, intellectuals, and academics offering resistance to specific silencing and absences in Fine Art. I see knowledge originating in lived experience, which, in meeting intellectual tools, can enable creativity, to model new realities.

Jason Huxtable: I wanted to draw on some of the themes that Esther referenced, questioning how we can use self-reflexivity and how we can develop a more nuanced activism, a listening activism; an inward activism. This idea of self-reflexivity really connects with Critical Pedagogy and the work of Paulo Freire. Freire outlines his theory of praxis as an alliance between reflection and action as a means of transforming the self and the world.

Freire talks about Activism within *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,[35] where activism is a result of a one-dimensional approach where praxis is reduced to only action at the expense of reflection. Activism,

---

[34] Martina Mulaney, "Enemies of Good Art", *Enemies of Good Art*, (2021) http://www.enemiesofgoodart.org/
[35] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* (Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.; 30th Anniversary ed. Edition, 2001).

according to Freire, is just *doing* things, or doing things for others. Praxis, on the other hand, is action based upon critical reflection - making change through the critical awareness of our own situatedness as agents within society. We need to reflect on why we are doing things and for whom. Freire shows that reflection can lead us to a greater understanding of our intentionality and therefore who we are and who we want to be.

We can, and should, be academic activists inwards, towards ourselves first. We should aim to problematise our cultural assumptions and "common-sense" mythologies. A reflective approach can help us question our own complicity with the systems of oppression, and this is something that Said also prompts us to do as a process of 'unmaskings'.

A great example Said provides us of praxis is his work with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra with Daniel Barenboim, which sought to bring together warring factions in the Middle East through music. This was activism deeply rooted within reflection: cross-cultural music making as a necessarily dialogic and humanistic process of "coming together" with a unified voice. The goal of praxis and education, as Freire teaches us, is to become human, to break away from the chains of de-humanising violence. Said agrees, 'humanism is the only – I would go so far as saying the final – resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history'.[36] Praxis, which necessarily contains reflection, is resistance against de-humanisation. It is an activist resistance.

As educators we can humanise ourselves, and our students, through reflection. Therefore, how we encourage self-reflexivity is important in arming our learning communities with the critical skills necessary to "unmask" their own realities.

---

[36] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin, 2003) xxii.

A tentative conclusion on academic activism

Eugene Nulman: As we have seen through the interventions above, there are a wide range of questions we must consider as academic activists. Firstly, what are we activists for? Drawing on Said's view of the intellectual, we can see how the intellectual has a split role of advocating for the interests of their 'social group' and defending truth beyond any political objective. Second, how do we use our roles as academics to engage in activism? In this roundtable we noted the role as teachers challenging their students, as researchers drawing attention to injustices, and as administrators who can provide space for other voices to be heard. Each approach comes with opportunities and challenges.

One obvious challenge is trying to find the balance between Gramsci and Benda's position. Said himself does not always present a clearly consistent view. In another Reith lecture, Said argued that the intellectual should be allied to the voices of the subordinated and later stated that the role of the intellectual is of 'disputing the prevailing norms'.[37] These two positions, however, can contradict. Amongst the proponents of populist and post-truth politics in pandemic times, the "subordinated" are those being forced to wear masks and social distance or being pressured into getting a vaccine. This example is, of course, only one of many not only within a context of rising right-wing populism but within academia as well. Given the subjective nature of subordination, the elucidation of *politics* is important, because not every critique is valid and not every voice is truly silent.

Our multiple roles as activists who are also academics enable us to engage in politics in a variety of ways. Beyond knowledge production, our skills and knowledge can allow us to represent others whose voices are (truly) silenced. However, we should also be cognisant of the fact that their truths were silenced systemically. Thus, we also have a responsibility to use our positions as academics, whatever form that may take, to actively overturn systems that not only fail to provide the space

---

[37] Said, *Representations,* 35-36.

necessary for self-representation of oppressed groups, but are also the cause of their oppression. As educators, we can speak to our students and share our knowledge with them. But at the same time our knowledge makes us aware that our student body is constructed through social forces; their education will likely lead to financial debt, etc. So, there is also a role for us to use our knowledge and academic freedom to design and promote alternative policies and systems. As a sociologist, I get the privilege to do this when teaching the sociology of the state and in my social movements module. I have the opportunity not only to teach about alternatives, but also explain how we can take action to make them a reality.

Finally, if values become central, then we should also be hesitant to make critique a value in itself. While critically evaluating and finding flaws is important to developing better ideas and policies, we must accept that nothing can be flawless. Yet that should not mean we do not take a stand for something. Critique, if seeking nihilism and apathy, should not be the driving force of our academic pursuits as activists.

Acknowledgements

References

Andrejevic, Mark, *Automated Media.* Abingdon: Routledge, 2020.

Bhambra, Gurminder, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *Decolonising the University.* London: Pluto Press, 2018.

Blomley, Nicholas, "Activism and the Academy", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 12, no.4 (1994): 383-385.

Braidotti, Rosi, *Posthuman Knowledge.* Cambridge: Polity, 2019.

Davids, Nuraan and Yusef Waghid, *Academic Activism in Higher Education: A Living Philosophy for Social Justice.* Springer: Singapore, 2021.

Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist realism: is there no alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books, 2009.

Freeden, Michael, *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001.

Graeber, David, *Bullshit Jobs*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018.

Moten, Fred and Stefano Harney, "In the University in the Under Commons: Seven Thesis", *Social Text*, 22, No.2 (2004): 101-115.

Newman, Janet, "Public leadership as public-making", *Public Money & Management*, 31, no.5 (2011): 315-322.

Puwar, Nirmal, *Space Invaders*: *Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place.* Oxford: Berg Books, 2004.

Said, Edward, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

Said, Edward, *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 2003.

Troiani, Igea and Claudia Dutson, 'The Neoliberal University as a Space to Learn/Think/Work in Higher Education', *Architecture and Culture*, 9, no.1 (2021): 5-23.

Tully, James, *Public Philosophy in a New Key Volume I: Democracy and Civic Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.