

INTRODUCTION

Engaged Anthropology and Scholar Activism

Double Contentions

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This special issue explores theoretical and methodological issues related to activist and engaged scholarship. Combining scholarship and activism involves the (collaborative) production of knowledge that contributes not only to understanding the issues research participants face, but also to the social change they envision (Kirsch 2018; Hale 2006; Rasch and Van Drunen 2017; Rasch and Köhne 2016). Often, this entails a process of double contention. Activist scholars might be involved in social struggles against inequality and exclusion beyond the production of knowledge, engaging in solidarity work, supporting court cases, and co-strategizing for actions (see for example Bringa 2016; Grasseni 2014; Hale 2006). At the same time, they are often involved in processes of contention related to the metrics-oriented neoliberal university, as well as to its underlying positivist, eurocentrist, and colonialist structures (see for example Datta 2018; Mountz et al 2015).

The combination of scholarly work with activist and political engagement in this process of double contention raises several questions regarding activist and decolonizing approaches within anthropology, but also about ethical and practical questions, such as how to participate in a movement while at the same time studying it; how to gain room to maneuver for doing activist anthropology in the context of the neoliberal university; how to contribute to social change by bearing witness, reporting on political processes, or otherwise; how to deal with diverging expectations of being a “good” activist and an “excellent” scholar; and how to overcome the divide between academic and activist spaces through co-production of knowledge. These questions have inspired the contributions to this special issue.



All contributions explore the idea of “double contention” that brings together the experiences of contestation and involvement in struggles for social change inside and outside the university. In so doing, we seek not only to deepen our understanding of activist scholarship and its possible contributions to social justice, but also to explore options and ideas for how we can embody the change we want to see (Chatterton et al. 2010).

This introduction proceeds as follows. First, we discuss what scholar activism and engaged anthropology (can) mean. We go on to discuss three core themes that have come to the fore in the contributions to this special issue as being important elements of creating the future university in the present: care, horizontality, and slowness. We close with a brief reflection on writing engaged anthropology.

Scholar Activism and Engaged Anthropology

Activist scholarship can be broadly defined as politically engaged scholarship that aims at furthering justice and equality of various forms (Lennox and Yıldız 2020). This is constituted by a “shared commitment to basic principles of social justice that is attentive to inequalities of race, gender, class and sexuality and aligned with struggles to confront and eliminate them” (Hale 2008: 7). Activist scholarship seeks to bridge the divide between theory and practice, as well as between researcher and research participants, and between academic and political domains. In research, this might be reflected in diverse methodological approaches that emphasize direct engagement with the research participants in each phase of the research, including the production of research directly for activists and not only with them. The literature about scholar activism tends to focus on such forms of activist research, whereas many activist scholars dedicate more than half of their time to teaching. Activist teaching, as will also be explored in this special issue, is not only about teaching critical thinking and tools for activism (Hytten 2015), but also includes developing horizontal relationships between lecturers and students, and making space for reflection, care, and emotions (see also Rasch, this issue).

Within the broad field activist scholarship, scholars have developed different categorizations to get a grip on the many different shapes that scholar activism can take. The Autonomous Geographies Collective (ACG 2010) observes three trends in scholar activism. The first one combines activism and research, which often entails working closely

together with social movements and reflects a desire to contribute to the social change that these social movements aspire to (Duncan et al. 2021). This might involve a direct link to or alignment with a social movement (Hale 2006; Piven 2010). Such an approach does not necessarily involve using participatory and collaborative research methods. The second approach is participatory research or the use of methods that enable horizontal research relations and the co-production of knowledge (Routledge and Derickson 2015; AGC 2010). This approach focuses on greater involvement of research participants in the research process. It is important to note that, although scholar activism is often associated with participatory research methods, participatory research is not inherently progressive (AGC 2010). A third strand of scholar activism that is addressed by the AGC is policy research. In doing so, it follows Pain (2003), who argues that policy research might be traditionally seen as “top-down” and “reactionary” but “can also be a viable strategy in critical action research” (Pain 2003: 654). This strand has, however, received less attention in the literature on scholar activism.

These approaches to scholar activism are closely related to, but not exactly the same as, engaged anthropology. According to Ortner (2019), “many sociocultural anthropologists, perhaps even a majority, have now taken what might be called the ‘engaged turn,’ the decision to formulate research projects in such a way as to critically engage with important issues of our times.” She considers that the engaged character of anthropological research projects can become manifest in three different dimensions: 1) the ways in which studies are grounded in critique(s) of asymmetries of power: racism, sexism, militarism, capitalism, colonialism; 2) the methodologies employed, and the extent to which they push methodological creativity in new directions; and 3) the way the research is reported: strategies of representation, including styles of writing, the use of visual materials, and other aspects of the text (Ortner 2019). This approach broadly coincides with Hale’s proposal for an activist anthropology that is also focused on anthropological research and entails collaborating, discussing, and engaging with research participants in all the phases of research—from designing the research project, to doing fieldwork, to sharing research findings (Hale 2006) as a way of transforming the traditional, vertical researcher-researched relationship.

A special issue on engaged anthropology in *Current Anthropology* from 2010 offers a broader scope on anthropology and engagement, including everyday forms of sharing and support; shared commitments to social justice in the research field; teaching (classroom teaching,

community outreach, training, workshops, among others); social critique; different forms of collaboration with research participants in the field; advocacy; and activism (Low and Merry 2010). Engaged anthropology can include forms of public anthropology, which is focused on sharing research findings with the greater public, but not necessarily aiming at transforming research power relations. It often uses collaborative research methods that might transcend vertical research relations (Lassiter 2005). Although “public anthropology” and “collaborative research” are in some cases used interchangeably with engaged anthropology, these approaches do not necessarily aim at social critique or serve a greater political or social change goal. Engaged anthropology, then, brings together different elements of what scholar activism can entail within its disciplinary framework.

What discussions about engaged anthropology and scholar activism have in common is that they mostly do not include explicit critiques of the neoliberal university that we work in, nor do they link to activism that questions the commodification of knowledge, students as consumers, and the precarious position of non-tenured university employees (see Strathern 2000). As the AGC (2010) observed (already in 2010!), scholar activists often “continue to focus on supporting and writing about the struggles of “others,” without making a connection to how “we” uncritically support the university and are therefore small but significant actors in creating or perpetuating that injustice AGC 2010: 250.” This is remarkable, because, as the different contributions of this special issue also show, doing scholar activism within the neoliberal university often entails an implicit or explicit critique of that neoliberal university. In this special issue we explore how this tension impacts our work as scholar activists and how we contest, embrace, and negotiate this in a process of double contention. In so doing, we follow Suzuki and Mayorga (2014) when they say that “it is not that we want the academia to ‘count’ our activism within its pre-existing value system, but that we need to make our own activism count by making the academia more of our home (Suzuki and Mayorga (2014: 17).”

The contributions in this special issue all show how the practice of activist scholarship in research and teaching produces double contentions. They also demonstrate that scholar activism is not “only” about research design, methodology, and the dissemination of results, but also entails enacting the university as we want it to be in three different ways: centralizing care in our academic relations; engaging in horizontal relations; and slowing down. In the following sections we briefly discuss these three dimensions of activist scholarship.

Care

An important element of scholar activism that comes to the fore in the articles of this special issue is “care.” Care is considered in terms of an ethics of care: the (political) act of taking care of students, colleagues, and ourselves within the context of the neoliberal university (Lawson 2009; Mountz et al. 2015). Extending the ethics of care to doing research and teaching in the university makes it possible to, in the words of Lawson, “engage in radically open, democratic and transformative practices for change” (Lawson 2009: 212). A feminist ethics of care calls for attention to *how* we work together and interact with one another (Lawson 2009) and advocate for a feminist ethics of care to disrupt the neoliberal university (Conesa 2018).

The articles in this special issue show that such an ethics of care is also often extended to the ways in which we do research and teach as scholar activists. Starting from an ethics of care can help us to solve the methodological dilemmas that we face in the different dimensions of doing and thinking about engaged and activist anthropology, as well as aligning our research practice with other elements of “being a good academic.” It also makes it possible to engage in open, transformative practices for change (Lawson 2009: 212). In many cases, care and careful relations also allow for emotions to be and become part of teaching and research.

An ethics of care in research and teaching can take different forms. A first form of care in scholar activism is caring about the phenomenon that we study and the people that are involved in our research projects. In their respective articles, Júnia Marússia Trigueiro de Lima and Michiel Köhne both describe how they were motivated to develop scholar activist actions because they care about the damaging effects of oil palm plantations (Köhne) and about the Mexican Indigenous social movement known as Modevite (Lima). Köhne engaged in writing an academic letter to support an activist campaign and Lima sought to assist the knowledge making processes of the social movements that she engaged with through “free media” communications work.

In the articles by Hanne Bess Boelsbjerg and Lina Katan, Elisabet Dueholm Rasch, and Floor Van der Hout, care becomes part of the way they enact the university and academia as they would like it to be. Van der Hout writes about how she makes caring for research participants and her relationship with them central to her research methods through accompanying female territory defenders and providing room for affect, emotions, and deep listening. For Rasch, as well

as for Boelsbjerg and Katan, care is a central element in their activist teaching practice, engaging with students' motivations, identifications, and wellbeing by way of doing check-ins and making time for sharing feelings and emotions. In all cases, horizontality and slowness are part of careful relations.

Horizontality

The second aspect that comes to the fore in the contributions, as a central way to enact scholar activism in the daily practice of being an academic, is "horizontality." Horizontality as a concept in social movement studies refers to the constant struggle to transform vertical structures of oppression that facilitate exploitation and injustices (Holloway 2010) and to make the non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian social "creation of new worlds" possible (Sitrin 2006: 19). Within social movements, horizontality is often enacted through inclusive decision-making processes (Holloway 2010; Sitrin 2006) and by challenging vertical power structures through direct action (Marcus 2012: 58).

The contributions to this special issue illustrate how horizontality can be a way of resisting unequal power relations through anti-authoritarian creation and prefiguration (Yates 2020). This entails pursuing research practices that are more horizontal as a strategy to transform existing power imbalances in society, creating the future in the present. Rasch, as well as Boelsbjerg and Katan, strive for more horizontal relationships between lecturers and students in academic teaching. Rasch shows how sharing personal experiences, helps to create a safe space where both teachers and students allow themselves to be vulnerable, which facilitates the personal reflection needed to engage in activism outside the walls of the university. In Boelsbjerg and Katan's course about methodology, students and lecturers engage in bridging academia and activism together, both using lived experiences and personal passions as starting points.

Horizontality can also transform vertical research relations, as the contributions of Van der Hout, Lima, and Köhne demonstrate. Van der Hout explores how she intends to decolonize and horizontalize relationships with research participants through a methodological approach that focuses on walking alongside and listening. Such non-hierarchical knowledge production is at the same time a way of resisting the hierarchies and workings of neoliberal academia. Lima and Köhne practice horizontality in their work by giving form and content to solidarity with research participants. They engaged in more horizontal

and solidary relationships with their research participants by participating as activists in the struggles that they studied as researchers, and through the production of more activist forms of knowledge. Domitilla Olivieri speaks out for slowness as a mode of attention that is more horizontal, as it provides a less hierarchical way of seeing the world, and because of how it speaks against dominant capitalist and colonialist ways of seeing. She also pushes for prefiguration, to either practice slowness as a mode of attention as individuals, or if that is too risky, to imagine its possibilities collectively.

Slowness

The speed of the accelerated neoliberal university (Vostal 2016) often stands in stark contrast to the slowness of the more ethical, horizontal, and caring approaches to research and teaching for social justice that activist scholars advocate. Neoliberal capitalism is built on and for acceleration, as speed and profit are closely interlinked (Rosa 2013; Sugarman and Thrift 2017). This pattern of acceleration is reflected in the contemporary workings of academia. In the neoliberal university, the adoption of neoliberal policies has resulted in a combination of narrowing time regimes and increased demands for productivity that renders research and teaching profitable. This acceleration comes at the expense of more ethical forms of doing research that require a different pace to pursue more horizontal relations and long-term collaboration (Grandia 2015; Mason 2021). Enacting “slowness” in our research can thus be a way of creating the future in the present, and at the same time contributes to the production of double contentions.

The temporalities of neoliberal academia are governed by a metric audit culture in which narrow understandings of “impact” and “excellence” are measured through quantifiable indicators, such as in the UK Research Excellence Framework, that leave little room for participatory and collaborative methods (Evans 2016) and thus encourage “safer short-term projects” (Mason 2021: 5). In the face of this acceleration of the rhythm of academic life, feminist scholars have advocated for slow scholarship (Hartman and Darab 2012; Mountz et al 2015) or slow ethnography (Grandia 2015) in line with a feminist politics of care (Mountz et al. 2015) that recognizes interdependence and vulnerability while resisting a “masculinized ideal of autonomy and competitiveness” (Conesa 2018). Others have pointed out that slow scholarship could contribute to the decolonization of North-South research (Tuhiwai Smith 2021; Grandia 2015).

Different authors in this special issue suggest that slowness can become a form of resistance to the temporalities of the neoliberal university. Olivieri's contribution explores how the slowness in observational-style documentaries could serve as a mode of attention and mode of resistance to the fast pace of the neoliberal university. Van der Hout suggests that slower research could make space for more meaningful and careful North-South research relations and thus has the potential to disrupt extractive colonial tendencies. In her contribution about activist teaching, Rasch shows how slowness in teaching by way of making time for reflection, feelings, and care contributes to transformative learning processes. Köhne reflects on how committing time to more-than-research activities in order to contribute to activist campaigns does not always fit with tight academic time schedules. In their auto-ethnographic piece, Boelsbjerg and Katan reflect on the lack of time for deep critical thinking and writing about transformational teaching practice within Katan's busy PhD trajectory. Slowness in academic production of knowledge does not always seem to work in favor of scholar activism. Other observations in this special issue highlight that the slow process of knowledge production in academic research is not necessarily compatible with the rhythms of activist campaigns and the immediate needs of social movements (Lima, Köhne in this issue).

Writing Engaged Anthropology

In the literature about scholar activism, a lot has been written about the different ways that scholar activists might give form and content to their contributions to social movements and grassroots organizations alongside publishing in academic journals. Such contributions not only include other forms of writing, like blog posts, reports, websites, documenting local situations and powerful institutions, but may also include (after Duncan et al. 2020: 879): facilitating meetings, teaching, helping with funding, conducting participatory mapping of community land claims, and offering expert testimonies in court, among others.

There are also other ways of writing engaged anthropology academically, like the dialogue presented by Boelsbjerg and Katan in this issue, inspired by Katrin Heimann's take on critical co-constructed auto-ethnography (Heimann et al., forthcoming; Cann and DeMeulenaere 2012), and the epistolary form (Carroll 2016). Such forms of creative academic writing might express care, horizontality, and slowness, not only because of what they are about, but also because of the form in

which they are written down. As editors, we tried to do the same in the process of making this special issue by taking the time for carefully reviewing, checking in with each other and with the authors. We experienced this as an enriching process of collaboration and mutual learning: as a way of doing scholar activism.

Double contentions

The ways that care, horizontality, slowness, and academic writing are practiced and experienced in scholar activism feed the double contentions that are explored in this special issue. Together, the contributions show that processes of double contention are about challenging and transforming unequal power relations on different levels, aligning ourselves with struggles against systems of oppression as well as against the ways in which these power asymmetries are reproduced within our institutions, holding us back from doing this work. We all try to do this by being the university we want to work in. Care, horizontality, and slowness are central elements in bringing activist scholarship into practice. They facilitate reflective and affective ways of doing research and teaching, while at the same time building relationships that enable challenges to the systems of oppression inside and outside the university.

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