Struggling within and beyond the Performative University: Articulating activism and work in an "academia without walls"

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synopsis

In many regions, the past decade has been characterised by significant transformations of models of organisation and evaluation of academic work. These include processes of extensification, elasticisation and casualisation of academic labour, and the institutionalisation of regi .sc6.7(3)-418.2(o)16.6(2012). These interacting trends are having significant impacts not only on academic working conditions, but also on opportunities for sociopolitical intervention outside the academy. This article draws on an ethnography of Portuguese academia, and on debates about the "toxic" (Gill, 2010) and "careless" (Lynch, 2010) nature of contemporary academic cultures, to analyse the current (im)possibilities of articulating activism and academic work. I argue that in the present day "academia without walls" (Gill, 2010) this articulation is extremely difficult, but we must reject conceptualising that difficulty as an individual challenge, and reframe it as a structural problem requiring – urgently – collective responses.

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Introduction

It is extremely likely that at this precise moment you are feeling 'exhaust[ed], stress[ed], overload[ed], (…) anxi[ous], [a]shame[d]' (Gill, 2010, p. 229) — that is the key finding of several recent reports of upds11pu8,o0(,)]..-396.4(1(o) 0 TD -.0137 Tc [(Gi53('4(2)0(4.7xse)-34p1(o) 0 (ts)-25(n)0(g)en[)19e)2([d)280.6(r614.3(n)

> claim because they are activis ts of a particular political or ideological orientation. Of course political activity isn't as much of a problem when they're situated in the more mainstream political groups and in the government parties, because that's seen as more acceptable and respectable and less biased. It's worse if your political activity is in less mainstream sectors. The cri ticism I get is that I mix up research with politics and act ivism, and so my work is seen as too contaminated by activism, and dismissed on that basis. "

According to these quotes, some (though not all) forms of political participation carry the risk of epistemic disqualification. Thus, many scholars in Portugal feel that they have to carefully manage the nature, frequency and visibility of their involvement in activism, in order to minimise disqualification. These efforts become especially significant and crucial for those scholars in junior or insecure positions, or doing less conventional work, because being seen to do "too much", or the "wrong" kind of, activism can further jeopardise their already precarious institutional or epistemic positions, at a heavy cost.

However, this institutional repudiation of the scholarly value of extra-academic social and political intervention has begun to shift in recent years, as the models of governance and evaluation of academic labour have changed, not just in Portugal but throughout the world. Against the backdrop of broader discourses of "austerity", it is increasingly argued in many countries that investment in higher education and science must provide the best value for tax-payers' money, namely by engaging with, and having effects on, communities and sectors outside the academy (Bellacasa, 2001, 2002; Collini, 2012; Santos Pereira, 2004). In Portugal, this has resulted in scholars being encouraged – indeed, in some institutions, expected – to be involved in so-called "extension" activities beyond the academy and to become more pro-active in engaging with relevant stakeholders, policy-makers and other interlocutors. In the UK, a country where these trends are especially pervasive, these principles are reflected particularly clearly and centrally in the changes made in the 2010s to the cyclical nation-wide research assessment exercise, which evaluates institutions' research performance and serves as the basis for the allocation of funding in subsequent years. In the latest round of this exercise, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (2014), "impact"

worker loses any capability to distinguish between the labour market [and] self-improvement " (2007, p. 87).

All of this has impacts on academics' subjectivity (Leathwood & Read, 2013; Shore, 2010). According to Sarah Amsler,

> where the worth of work is judged according to how much surplus economic or cultural value it generates in competitive commodity markets, all workers are haunted by perpetual threats of devaluation, exclusion and "redundancy". Under these conditions, academics labour to prove that we are not unproductive, unprofitable and unfit for purpose, often being pressed into competing against or disregarding each other in order to do so. (…) [It] is exhausting and divisive labour.
>
> [2014, §3]

Ball considers that in these kinds of working cultures "[we] become ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing

“resilient adjustment ” to academic and institutional change, often organised by our universities.

There is no doubt that changing our practices and behaviours

often too distant or too busy to have meaningful conversations with colleagues, scheduling regular meetings can remind us to keep the structural nature of these problems in full view and create the conditions to discuss and develop collective responses to them.

But such conversations cannot be limited to these kinds of "safe" spaces.. In our everyday interactions with colleagues, line managers and students, we must make the effort to regularly articulate the unsustainability of the current workloads and working practices, verbalise the unachievability of "normal" expectations of productivity, and voice the importance of creating walls around academia and of nurturing a "care-ful" – as opposed to "care-less", in Lynch's (2010) sense– life beyond it. It is easy to dismiss this sort of talk as ineffective, self-centred whining, or as a potentially risky exposure of one's own weakness and incapacity to "keep up". However, I would argue that naming these issues – in PhD supervision sessions, department meetings, annual reviews, conference papers – can have profoundly transformative effects, because it works to interrupt the normalisation of ludicrous expectations of productivity and to puncture the illusion that this is, and will

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