

# Radical Theory and Academia

A Thorny Relationship

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This article is about radical theory, in particular its relationship with academia. We, the authors, have been involved in relevant discussions for many years. We have academic training and we use academic sources and methods in some of our work. But we do not have academic careers. We are interested in theoretical questions because we want to improve political practice.

If we take a historical perspective, the impact of academics on radical theory has been marginal. The development of radical theory was carried by militants, that is, people involved in struggles on the ground as activists and organizers. Needless to say, clearcut distinctions do not exist. There have been militants with academic backgrounds, and academics who have been involved in struggles on the ground. But while it was militant experience that dominated the development of radical theory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is academic contemplation that does today.

Overall, the relationship between struggles on the ground and academia is a complicated one. There are barriers in both directions. We meet academic arrogance as much as vulgar anti-intellectualism. At times, it seems that we are dealing with two parallel worlds with very little interaction and no common political commitment. Yet, collaboration between “theorists” and “practitioners” would certainly benefit radical movements. There can be no viable radical theory without the personal investment and first-hand experience of the militant. At the same time, theoretical reflection and scientific analysis help us to better understand the conditions of our struggles.

## Some History

Marx was an academic. He held a PhD in philosophy. This is reflected in his approach to political theory. His economic theory was based on the critique of academic paradigms and scientific investigation. *Capital* puts just about any doctoral thesis to shame. But Marx dedicated his life to politics, not academic credentials. He wanted to change the world, not collect titles. As a result, he became a political refugee, first leaving Germany for France, then France for England. He never had the financial security that an academic career provides.

Lenin went to law school. He continued to spend much time in libraries, and much of his writing is based on academic studies. But Lenin had no intentions to pursue an academic career either. He was a professional revolutionary. His most influential texts were clearly political, such as *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, or *State and Revolution*. For Lenin, the most important question always was: “What is to be done?”

In the early twentieth century, Marxist theory was developed by politicians with academic backgrounds. Rosa Luxemburg held a PhD, and so did Karl Kautsky, Rudolf Hilferding, and Eduard Bernstein. Mao was educated as a teacher, worked as a librarian, and pursued university studies part-time. His class analysis and philosophical writings were always closely tied to political practice.

Anti-colonial theory was largely developed by liberation movement leaders with academic training, including Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, and Amílcar Cabral. All of them were first and foremost revolutionaries who prioritized their political goals.

Many of anarchism’s historical figureheads were self-taught militants. Very few had academic training, and none an academic career.

## A Shift Occurs

Particularly in North America and Europe, a major shift occurred in the 1970s. As a consequence of the student and youth rebellions, radical theory became an academic career path. The decade saw a boom in the publication of academic books and journals edited by Marxists. Even when the overall appeal of Marxism decreased in the 1980s, this trend continued, as a significant number of Marxists had entered the ranks of academia. Today, this is true even for anarchists who were almost entirely absent from academia until the 1990s. Today's two best-known anarchists, Noam Chomsky and David Graeber, are both academics. Only in the Global South does the personal union of militant and theorist still exist, exemplified by the likes of Subcommandante Marcos or Abdullah Öcalan.

The last time there was an uproar concerning “radical academics” in Europe was in the early 1990s, when an increasing number of students embraced so-called poststructuralist theory as an alternative to orthodox Marxism, which seemed discredited after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Gilles Deleuze, or Félix Guattari were condemned as threats to rationality, humanism, and the enlightenment tradition. But one of the main reason for the hostility these people encountered from both academics, politicians, and conservative pundits was that many of them were militants for whom theory was tightly connected to political practice. Unfortunately, a fair of number of Marxists – perhaps unwillingly – contributed to the exclusion of political agitation from academia by questioning the poststructuralists' scholarly credibility.

It is no coincidence that the conflict ended with neoliberalism finalizing the distinction between *struggling* and *thinking about struggling*. Neoliberalism turned universities into market places of self-promotion rather than terrains of intellectual growth. The history of the academic reception of poststructuralist authors is a case in point. Foucault and his peers have long been integrated into the academic canon, with books, courses, and conferences dedicated to their names. But their work has been depoliticized and reduced to a source of embarrassing intellectual showmanship or mundane academic quibbles.

When academia takes control, theoretical work shifts form and content. Today, the term *political* is almost an antonym to the term *scholarly*. Academics fear that political engagement discredits them. They write exclusively for a small circle of other academics. The question of “What is to be done?” is no longer raised, let alone attempted to be answered.

## The Academic-Industrial Complex

That academic institutions have become integrated into neoliberal capitalism is not groundbreaking news. It is expressed in how these institutions are funded and administered, in how they define their purposes and ambitions. Inevitably, this has an impact on academics and their work. Careers are determined by the number of publications, the status of the presses and journals that print them, and by how often they are cited by others. So, what will academics study and write about? How will they do it? And for whom?

Academic publishing has become a lucrative industry. Paywalls separate an exclusive academic audience from the rest of us. To read academic articles, we must “pay per view.” Alternatively, academic authors must pay up to USD 3000 to make a piece publicly accessible. This is particularly

odd if we consider that the salaries of academics, and the infrastructure they use, are largely paid for by the public. So, while the public is denied access to the work it has financed, private publishing companies cash in on poorly produced and heavily overpriced publications that collect dust on the shelves of university libraries. In order to publish in respected academic journals and presses, academics also have to agree to formal demands that further alienate ordinary folks. It is therefore not surprising that the vast majority of academic articles circulates among a couple of hundred professionals at best, satisfying only the economic interests of parasitic publishing companies and the reproduction of a self-involved intellectual elite.

There is an array of corrupting practices attached to this. Many books are published based on grants whose allocation largely depends on political networking, careerist talent, or simple nepotism. University administrations feel more obliged to companies that invest in the academic publishing industry than to taxpayers whose money they are entrusted to handle. Editors of anthologies prioritize their name on the cover over any meaningful content – it seems that even the most incoherent mix of articles will do, as long as some publisher sees easy financial gain in sending it to the printers. Then there is the unsavory practice of conference-hopping, where academics use travel scholarships to attend gatherings in order to extend their professional networks, meet old friends, explore new cities, and read out papers they could have simply uploaded on a web page.

## Radical Academics

It is difficult to raise these issues. We have good friends in academia. Maybe they think we are too harsh or lack insight. One of the reasons we don't know is that these questions are often sidestepped. People seem afraid of stepping on each others' toes. There is an *esprit de corps* in all social circles, academic ones included, and this affects even radical academics. No one dares to cast the first stone, because everyone sits in the same glass house. It is striking that people who passionately come to the defense of open access and commons against the norms and values of neoliberalism turn very pragmatic when their most immediate environment is concerned.

We have no detailed knowledge of the professional and personal situation of individual academics and cannot judge their choices. We don't know how much they resist the tendencies discussed above in their daily work. But there seems to be no concerted effort to name, denounce, and alter these tendencies, and, subsequently, very little collective resistance.

We understand that academics, too, have things to lose, and that, today, many of them work under precarious circumstances. It is probably no coincidence that one of the most outspoken radical academics of recent decades, Ward Churchill, eventually lost his job. Yet, throughout history, workers with much more to lose – and with much less ideological pretense – have found ways to protest. They unionized, they organized campaigns, they engaged in sabotage and direct action. Why is this seemingly no option for radical academics? A common response to anti-academic sentiments is that the struggle needs to be everywhere, also in academia. That is a valid argument – as long as there is indeed any struggle in academia.

Some radical academics try to solve the contradictions they find themselves in by separating their academic persona from their political one. They will, sometimes under pseudonyms, publish in movement publications apart from academic ones. This is certainly a contribution, and probably helps resolve their inner conflicts, but it is not boosting collective efforts.

Other radical academics have become prominent enough to act as celebrity supporters – or even unofficial spokespeople – of social movements. The above-mentioned Noam Chomsky and David Graeber are examples, and so are Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, or Vandana Shiva. Radical celebrities serve a purpose, and we are glad that the media grants them a platform to voice their opinions. But celebrities are by definition exceptions to the rule. They do not change the pattern. And, at times, they distract from the problem.

We believe that there needs to be more awareness and critical debate concerning the contribution of academics to radical theory and practice. As radicals, we are required to reflect on our position within the political systems we profess to oppose. No one is immune to their influence and the limits they put on what we can do considering our personal backgrounds. However, this only confirms that we need to develop forms of resistance wherever we are at.

## Outlook

We want to conclude with a list of practical points that would, in our opinion, lessen the gap between academia and struggles on the ground. Some of them might not strike readers as particularly original. That's fine. They obviously need to be repeated.

1/ There is no radical theory without practical experience. Theoretical work cannot be separated from movements against capitalism and imperialism. It must respond to the questions posed by struggles on the ground. We cannot afford non-activist theory.

2/ There is no radical practice without theoretical reflection. We must evaluate the effects of our struggles and reflect on our experiences. We cannot afford anti-theoretical activism.

3/ Radical theory must contribute to radical practice. Its purpose is not to understand things, but to change things. This requires the development of strategy and tactics.

4/ We must raise our view. The outside of academia is much more interesting and relevant than the inside of it. Radical theory must not be limited by academic conventions, disciplines, and norms.

5/ We must actively seek out non-academic sources. Many of them are excluded from academia due to geographical, cultural, or language-related reasons only.

6/ We must defy the formal restrictions put on academic work, since they confine the contents.

7/ We must change the academic environment itself. It must be freed from the yoke of both the state and capital. Academia must be seen as the institution of power it has become. Today, "academic freedom" mainly refers to relative personal privilege, not a space of free intellectual development.

8/ We must be aware of and counteract the impact that hierarchies of class, gender, and race put on the production of radical theory. This effort must be led by those affected by them.

9/ We must make academic work accessible to everyone. There needs to be free access to libraries and conferences, and free distribution of academic writing.

10/ We must establish counter-institutions, that is, places and networks that allow for scholarly work beyond academic restrictions.

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