



## Are We All Activists?

Organization Studies  
2023, Vol. 44(1) 159–162  
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DOI: 10.1177/01708406221133507  
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For sure! We scholars cannot be other than advocates of certain values and ideals. Is it good? It depends on what we endorse, openly, tacitly or covertly. You may already be raging against me, ‘accusing’ all scholars of being value-driven activists. But consider, if you are reading these lines, they have passed the rigorous scrutiny of Meyer and Quattrone who recently (2021, p. 1379) wrote in an editorial that it is ‘perilous to conflate’ the roles of researcher and activist. I defend instead here the view that these roles are conflated *by design* and it is rather perilous not to be aware of our (implicit) activism and the values that guide it.

As I need to convince the editors (and you), let me use their own words to legitimize my claim. In their editorial they state that ‘no knowledge claim is value free [ . . . ] all knowledge is “worldly” and, in this sense, political’ and at the same time that ‘[a]cademic journals are the fora wherein we engage with our peers’ (pp. 1378–1379). Hence, if the two premises are right, the logical, possibly disturbing, conclusion is that in academic journals we engage politically with our peers. This needs some qualification: To preserve scholarship we should, as in Habermasian discourse ethics, construct a πόλις [pólis], not engage in power politics, being aware of our onto-epistemologies, but also of our axiologies – the ethical underpinnings and values guiding our scholarly praxis.

Let me elaborate. Some of us would agree that knowledge has to be seen ‘as a vehicle to help people lead better lives’ (Wicks & Freeman, 1998, p. 124) and that we should ‘join our communities [ . . . ] in visibly making local and immediate differences’ (Simpson, Harding, Fleming, Sergi, & Hussenot, 2021, p. 1785) – striving for a better life and fairer society is indeed eminently a political endeavour. And I doubt that many would oppose the statement that the very legitimacy of (social) science is rooted in pursuing a better life for a society made aware of ignorance, prejudice and exploitation in order to overcome them – despite the risk of such knowledge being misused as social engineering. Indeed, since the Enlightenment, and although aberrations are always possible (like the questionable Manhattan Project), science is, ideally, an activist endeavour to promote these values against obscurantism and fundamentalist religious prescriptions. But, while there has been a resurgence of work on values as empirical phenomena, we have marginalized an open reflection on *our own* values due to the encroachment of unreflected positivist ideals into social science – evident in the emphasis in papers on theoretical contributions intended to be of universal nature and the weakness of contextual practical implications. Furthermore, we can also observe progressive values being increasingly put in danger by developments like algorithmic manipulated

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public discourse, increasing economic inequality and the reemergence of quasi-feudal predatory and techno-oligarchs. In addition, some of the values of Enlightenment reaching back to the Renaissance are themselves rightly criticized for fuelling some of humanity's grand challenges. Hence, we risk drifting into dangerous waters, where our scholarly praxis may become a force for preserving an unquestioned status quo rather than a force for good.

What are the implicit or covert values that we should ethically scrutinize? Here is a tentative answer. First, if we were asked to reveal them, our espoused values would probably include the advancement of knowledge for a better life and fairer society. But organization studies are also inherently embedded in an overall societal project of rationalization, either because we believe in the need for order and rationality in human affairs, or because we theorize its diffusion without explicitly devoting enough attention to its effects. As a consequence, apart from some valuable exceptions, we organizational scholars have tended to disregard other forms of social organization based on families, tribes, communities, networks, guilds or anarchies, that may well help confront some of the challenges ahead. Our 'values-in-use' have hence an optimist stance towards formal organizing being a solution rather than a problem to humanity's wicked problems. This has led many to assume that any study producing knowledge on more effective or efficient organizational forms, those that survive or are able to carve a new niche in whatever 'market', are valuable per se regardless of the limits of organized actorhood as a form of social organization. Second, in some branches of our disciplines we have gone a step further and made the understanding of efficiency, effectiveness and profitability of 'the organization' for its immediate stakeholders (or even only the owners) our scholarly mission. I am not saying that these are all necessarily bad values (while some for sure are), I say that these, if not reflected, may become bad by contradicting the 'implicitly espoused values' (if you allow the oxymoron) of justice and a good life for all. Or even our survival as a civilization as I argue below, drawing on the philosopher Hans Jonas (1984).

I contended above that we as scholars are activists, i.e. advocates of certain values and ideals, given that we cannot avoid being such. The question then arises: What kind of activists or advocates do we want to be? On the one hand, we can follow our inner drive ('personal demons' wrote Max Weber) and engage publicly *outside* the domain of scholarship. This is what Weber, who coined the precept of value neutrality, did himself: he became politically active, ran for office and supported going to war. He acted as a private person, though roles are not always easy to separate. It is important to remember that, for Weber, value neutrality was mainly directed at scholars as teachers, that they should not impose their values on students who were discursively subordinate to their professors. However, Weber asserts, passion and commitment were central features of our calling: 'the contention that the university teacher should be entirely devoid of "passion" and that [s/]he should avoid all subjects which threaten to arouse over-heated controversies constitutes a narrow-minded, bureaucratic opinion which every independent teacher must reject' (Weber, 1917, p. 452). For him, the most insidious form of militantism is that exerted by 'pseudo value-free prophets' that introduce 'tendentious elements' pretending to be dispassionate but advancing very specific 'material interests' (pp. 457–460).

While I write, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is ongoing and war with its toll of deaths, destruction and immense suffering has reached Europe again. As a consequence, some intellectuals, such as Masha Gessen in a recent newspaper interview (*Der Standard*, 14.5.2022, p. A1), are requesting artists to abjure their Russian patrons. If this request is right (which is debatable), s/he could direct a similar request to us. To paraphrase Gessen's invitation to Russian artists, I wish we would finally take clearer positions on corporations that act immorally in front of the global challenges humanity is facing (most of them) and pretend they can exist outside of politics. And let me

add, this problem gets worse if we pretend that we ourselves are outside politics and untouched by ethics beyond our responsibility to be rigorous and trustworthy in our research procedures. Hence, (morally loaded) activism is unavoidable *within* academia on several levels: in the choice of research questions and objects (do we investigate shareholder value or the value of shareholders for society?), in the theorizing process (is it respectful of the Other or does it violate it?), in the methods (do we objectify persons as numbers or do we engage in empathic understanding and involvement?), in the goals (do we pursue emancipation, social critique, or functional improvement of the existing?). Most of these choices are legitimate if their founding values and their beneficiaries are in the open and debatable.

In what sense are we then activists for the good and not the bad? One option is advocated by Contu (2018, p. 285) for whom intellectual activism means working in the service of justice ‘in whatever way we can and in the issues that are most salient in the conditions where we live’. This involves considering research, teaching and outreach as a holistic project for emancipation and against domination by patriarchy, heteronormativity and elite power. The other option is supported by some who still see themselves as critical observers but, fearing to lose their objectivity in the process, prefer not to become ‘active’. They rightly contend that some form of objectivity or intersubjectivity of (social) science is important and should not be endangered by militancy. This is a valuable position, which also has its limits. Consider, for instance, the following thought experiment. Think of the laudable studies conducted after World War II on the organization of Soviet gulags and German death camps to better understand, in retrospect, the machinery of terror. Would similar studies have been just as laudable at the time of the events? Or today, studies on the formal organizational structure of re-education camps for Chinese Uighurs, or of oil corporations? Probably not. We should rather look at the most effective strategies to abolish or make redundant such organizations.

And now I come to the last related point. There are increasing voices in the scientific community that our Baconian system of exploiting nature is endangering the survival of our species and umpteen others. This has led Jonas (1984) to propose, as early as 1979, a future ethics of responsibility aimed at addressing the risks inherent in the economic-industrial system that emerged from the Enlightenment. Jonas’s philosophical reflection anticipated by decades the actual climate movement and can be summarized as ‘Don’t play with a matchbox, the house may catch fire.’ Now, however, the house has caught fire and we cannot be content to investigate the arsonists and make them even more efficient and legitimate. We must contribute to extinguishing the fire. But how?

The examples of two persecuted intellectuals, one Jewish, the other a communist, may help us. Leone Ginzburg, before being imprisoned, spent his time during fascism half-hidden, founding the publishing house Einaudi, and working on an edition of Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia*, in the most meticulous manner. *Ars gratia artis*, even in terrible times: a kind of paradoxical radical commitment to a world of beauty and goodness, symbolic activism facing evil. His example should spur us to ask: What beauty and goodness can we imagine through or beyond organizations? Antonio Gramsci, also persecuted by fascists, wrote from prison a critique of the hegemonic order of capitalism. Both were intellectual activists, but differently. Activism is inevitable, we are left only with the choice of how and for what. And while most of us are not (yet) living in fascist societies, I call on you to confront this encroaching scenario now that the climate crisis is further intensifying. How? Join a movement like Scientist Rebellion and follow the example of Leone and Antonio: engage in rigorous research that imagines not-yet-existing social orders and organizational forms as an alternative to the shareholder-centric or stakeholder-capitalist corporations that are consistently and spectacularly failing to address our existential challenges.

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