

Academics, with the proverbials... | Mary Grace Vella

Academia often comes under attack for being naïve about the reality on the ground, and rightly so. Academic activism bridges this gap, it provides relevance and applicability to knowledge – from the abstract to the tangible – from theory to practice

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Graffiti activists march to the Comino coastline in protest at deckchair concessions. Photo: James Scicluna

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In 1996, during the ceremonial mass commemorating the opening of the University scholastic year, Moviment Graffiti – of which at the time I was and still am an active member – unfurled a banner from atop the roof of the University administration building.

Dignitaries and members of the academic staff were hearing the rector's speech, as down came the banner that read – *'Intelletwali Bla Bajd'*

intellectuals without balls).

The banner was considered offensive by many. And beyond the crude wording, it struck a negative chord with many of those in attendance: it was the apathy and indifference of the intellectual class to voice itself for progressive social change.

But at that age, driven by idealism, change seemed not only easy and desirable, but also possible. Now with more maturity and jaded hindsight, one can better understand how the forces of change are hampered and thwarted by multiple vested interests, and how the mess of a world we live in, benefits some and not others.

Some would argue that the role of academia and that of the activist are incommensurable – the role of academia being that of knowledge generation, that of activism of promoting social change.

But can knowledge ever be an end in itself, a value-free objective pursuit without any impact on the real world?

And what is the scope of generating knowledge, if not to create a better world for the benefit and wellbeing of all? That is, unless one is happy with the status quo!

In and of itself, pedagogy is a pivotal site of activism. It helps foster critical thinking and reflection, position oneself, and mobilise action towards just causes.

However, the significance of pedagogy goes beyond the lecture room and the transfer of academic knowledge to students, as if they are empty vessels waiting to be filled. By empowering through knowledge, it becomes part of a wider process of transformative change.

From a critical and liberation perspective, pedagogy does not take place in a vacuum but is itself imbued in ideological contestation. Its scope is that of producing knowledge for the promotion of economic, social and environmental justice; a pursuit which necessarily entails challenging the status quo – a status quo which that is inherently unjust; elitist, racist and xenophobic, sexist and misogynist. A neoliberal system which values profit over people, animals and the environment. A bi-partisanship system which favours cronyism and nepotism over meritocracy and the national interest. A system which is unfortunately corrupted on both the national and global level – waging war in the name of peace.

In these circumstances, the role of the academic becomes that of asking questions, revealing and raising contentious and disturbing issues which might not be welcomed by those who benefit from the status quo. It ultimately demands taking a stand and striving for change!

The production of knowledge through action research and contribution in policy debates may help inform progressive or regressive change. It may be used to challenge dominant political and corporate discourses and interests, advocating on behalf of oppressed and disadvantaged groups, or else utilised to safeguard and consolidate the interests of those in power.

Yet, most academics still tend to bask in the 'objectivity' of science, shying away from positioning themselves, and in the process – inadvertently or not – becoming another cog in the machine, a tool to further consolidate the commodification of education and culture, the fuelling of populist discourse over evidence-based practice, and the justification of repressive and unsustainable political and corporate agendas.

Academia often comes under attack for being naïve about the reality on the ground, and rightly so. Academic activism bridges this gap, it provides relevance and applicability to knowledge – from the abstract to the tangible – from theory to practice. It forms part of the practical solutions to conveniently disregarded issues, pressing challenges, unjust laws and unsustainable practices. Whether by acting within or outside, yet ultimately against the system, it challenges the status quo and attempts to offer a more viable alternative.

And that's in my opinion the intrinsic value of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing! It acts as a collective of academic-activists who are engaged and committed – through critical pedagogy, action research, policy formulation and grassroots activism and campaigning – in this call for transformative change.