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Why We Don't Need an Academic Rebel Alliance

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Why we don't need an academic rebel alliance

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As an intellectual, the first duty of the academic who wishes to engage with society is on the level of ideas, writes **Eddie Brennan**. Trying to build a new society within the institutions, language and politics of the nineteenth century is hopeless; what is needed from intellectuals and academics is rebellious thought.

Universities may damage your ability to think. This was the thrust of an article in this month's *Le Monde Diplomatique* where Pierre Rimpert provocatively discussed the silence of French intellectuals in recent social upheavals. Essentially, Rimpert argues that the fact that most of the country's public intellectuals are also university researchers or teachers has effectively stifled French intellectual life.

French academic publishers are cranking out critical texts to a thriving market. Yet French academics, particularly in the social sciences, are nowhere to be seen as critical public intellectuals and, more importantly, as allies of workers' and students' movements. The article begs questions of academia as a supposed bastion of critical thinking. It also makes uncomfortable reading for us academics. Not only

may we not be as free in our thinking as we like to think, there is also the question of whether we have any relevance to society.

Academics are not intellectuals

It will come as no surprise to many that holding an academic job does not necessarily mean that you are a serious thinker. We rarely question how our own shortcomings and biases as thinkers, teachers and researchers are shaped by the cultures and constraints of the institutions we work in.

Before going any further, a full discussion of the limits of academic work needs to take stock of the downgrading of academic professionalism, the explosion of counter-productive managerialism, the softening up of universities for privatisation and so on. This, however, is another day's work. I am concerned here with the ways that academia, even on its purest terms, can limit critical thought.

Rimbert writes that today's revolutionaries need thinkers who are free from the 'norms of academic success and disciplinary straitjackets'. So what are the limitations of academia? Recognition is probably the most potent component of academic success. To be known, and to be taken seriously, is something that many academics value more than financial reward. However, building recognition involves politics as much as accomplishment. One must build affiliations and connections that are often based on shared theoretical viewpoints, research subjects or methods. This leads to the clustering of a small number of

dominant theoretical approaches. Rather than being tools of understanding then theoretical positions can become blinkers, serving as marks of allegiance.

Language, another marker of position, is often so specialised and obscure that it becomes a barrier to translation across disciplines. Ironically, it can bar the public from texts that deal with exploitation, power and exclusion. However, to write in plain English might suggest a lack of sophistication.

Academic writing often looks like a patchwork quilt of other people's words and ideas. It is difficult to say something in an academic text without demonstrating that someone else said it before you. This is part of academic rigour. It is a mark of respect to thinkers who have gone before us and it creates long debates through history rather than a cacophony of individual, isolated comments. It also makes the creation of new thinking torturously slow.

For Rimpert, academic discipline engenders quietism. A doctorate, for example, teaches analysis, a body of knowledge and so on. It also teaches 'propriety and precedence'. It 'encourages a willingness to surrender strong opinions'. Importantly, it encourages the 'view that things are "always more complicated" than they may actually be'. This leaves little room for rapid, passionate and committed critique. Rimpert puts it up to academics that while they may be critical in their thinking, they also have an apolitical bias built into the structure of their work. He says this as if it is a bad thing.

How should academics engage with politics?

The role of the intellectual is not to be a politician. While Rimpert's discussion is provocative and interesting he seems to assume that academics, as intellectuals, have a duty to ally themselves with 'anti-establishment' groups. He sees virtue in a 'rebel alliance' of academics, politicians and activists. I disagree.

Rimpert celebrates the idea of a 'rebel alliance'. While it evokes glamorous visions of May '68 (or Star Wars) it is not the automatic duty of progressive intellectuals to form easy alliances with trade union movements or activist groups. Behind this there is the danger of traditional, aesthetic posturing rather than effective contribution or critique. Historically, the lower middle classes have tended to build power through apparent alliances with society's underdogs. This is often unconsciously instrumental rather than altruistic. Academics often speak on behalf of the oppressed at conferences that the poor will never attend, and in journals that they will never read. Nevertheless, such alliances allow academics to feel good about themselves while building recognition.

There is also a danger that by entering existing political games one becomes enclosed and limited by them, and to them. The divide between 'left' and 'right' provides a perfect example of this type of limitation. Pierre Bourdieu, an engaged intellectual feted by Rimpert, pointed out that it is only possible to advance our conception of the democratic state by 'rejecting the usual alternative between liberalism and

socialism'. It is 'one of those damaging dualisms that impede thought' (L'Express 18 March 1993). Left/right offers a choice that is no choice at all. Both are materialist positions on how the economy should be managed. All other ways of imagining society beyond a system of financial exchange are foreclosed. The role of the intellectual is not to be 'left-wing' as Rimpert seems to assume. It is to transcend the assumptions, definitions and categories that are handed to us by society.

Losing our haloes

The role of the intellectual is to offer alternative visions of the social world. As Bourdieu saw it the engaged intellectual has a duty to train people in intellectual self-defence. To give people the tools they need to see through everyday misrepresentations of themselves and the world. To do this effectively, however, intellectuals must be able to see their own limitations and mistaken assumptions. Rimpert's article does a service by prompting academics to contemplate how their work limits their thinking. Academics also need to realise that they provide labour to capitalism like any other worker.

In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx wrote that the 'bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every activity hitherto honored and looked up to in reverent awe. It has transformed the doctor, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science into its paid wage labourers'. From this, Marshall Berman takes the point that 'nobody in bourgeois society can be pure or safe or free'.

Intellectuals must recognise the depths of their own dependence—spiritual as well as economic dependence—on the bourgeois world they despise. It will never be possible to overcome these contradictions unless we confront them directly and openly (Berman 1988: 119)

While academics may often feel that they occupy a place somewhere outside the grubby world of economics, Marx made it clear that we are only paid our salaries because we add to capital. Ideas from universities contribute to management, marketing, government policy and so on. Journal publishing, for example, is a transfer of academic and public resources to private capital. Specialised journals cost university libraries thousands per annum. Yet the internet has reduced distribution costs and content is provided for free by academics eager for publication. Academic publishers have been making millions from user generated content since long before Facebook or YouTube were dreamt of. Academics do not need to join the workers. They need to realise that they are workers.

So how should academics engage as intellectuals?

Rimpert points out Bourdieu's contribution to a rail workers' strike in 1995. An intellectual of Bourdieu's calibre can bring recognition and legitimation to a movement. However, we cannot all be Pierre Bourdieu, Noam Chomsky or Jurgen Habermas. In any case there are media bottlenecks. Only so many protests can be recognised and covered. Nevertheless,

academics as intellectuals can contribute to public discussion through the media.

Like politics, however, the media can enclose thought within a limited and limiting game. Contributions need to be timely. Opinion pieces need to be 'hooked' onto ongoing stories. As Rimpert points out intellectual contribution is often reduced to a static face-off between 'expertise and counter- expertise'. Programmes seek contributions on recognised concerns and rarely seek to raise those concerns beyond current definitions of politics and the economy. Meaningful intellectual media contributions should expand or lead, rather than follow, media agendas.

There is also a danger, given the academic thirst for recognition, that being a public intellectual will be conflated with being a publicised intellectual. We do not need media coverage or a political platform to engage with the public. It may lack glamour but our teaching and research are nevertheless a public engagement with our students. We can also quietly share our knowledge with communities outside the university through further education programmes, free public lectures and so on.

Academics have a duty to contribute their time and their intellectual ability to society. Rimpert asks if the alliance between 'ordinary working people and academics' could be reformed. Academics do not need to ally themselves with workers' interests because they automatically, but often unknowingly, share them. Nevertheless, academics will not necessarily best

contribute to workers' struggles, as intellectuals, by hoisting placards or chanting slogans. Nor should they be easy, unquestioning allies. Given the current domination of globalised finance and multinational capital, intellectual interventions are as important in dispelling the false perceptions of local business owners as they are to helping employees. Intellectuals should not be 'right' or 'left' but should aim instead to transcend categories that obscure our view of the world.

As intellectuals, academics' social contribution should be on the level of ideas. To make this contribution, we must think beyond, and outside of, existing political and media games. The changes that are needed in the twenty-first century require new ways of imagining and describing life, society and governance. We cannot build a new social world within the institutions, language and politics of the nineteenth century. We need intellectual rebels. We do not need a 'rebel alliance'.