Academic work as an extension to activism

Today I will present a thought process I am going through this spring. What I am interested in is the relation of activism and academic work. And my point of view will be that of an activist. The question is whether academic work is a risk to ones activism, not the other way around.

I am about to speak about activism, academic work and their connections, and a little bit about the misrepresentation of the deep ecology movement. I will argue that activism and academic work have more in common than one might think. They both build upon their fundamental freedom. In conclusion, I will state that for an activist academic work is a natural extension to their activism. The academic practice may be a justified means for action for an activist.

There are some lists of keywords present to help you follow my speech. In addition, there is my email included in case you come up a great comment or a hint on an article afterwards.

But, I will start with the deep ecology, which is a term you all know of. In the early 70’s Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess formulated a proposal for a model for one of three great movements, as he called them: peace movement, human rights movement and his favorite ecological movement. The proposal could be used, with the appropriate changes, as a general model for any goal directed movement.
Deep ecology is a movement, not ecosophic philosophy although it is often misrepresented as such. Naesses proposal is a four-tier structure of which the so-called deep ecology principles are the second tier. The first tier is a person’s philosophical belief system. For Naess it is his ecosophy T, a form of holistic environmental philosophy stressing the importance of minute things, and the interconnectedness of all things, big and small. However, the belief system might be something else. For example, sentientist, either holistic or individualistic, philosophy, or some developed form of religious ethics.

The principles are the second tier of the structure consisting of eight principles. The principles of deep ecology movement speak about the importance of the flourishing of all life and the danger human everyday action poses to life, and the need for a major change. Nevertheless, what is the most important principle for this discussion is the last one: “Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes”.

The important words are obligation and participation, which connect the platform to activism and to academic work. If you agree that the change is needed, then you must try to make it happen, in your civil action and in your work, if applicable. I will come back to this in a minute.

The third tier is the normative tier where the possible ways of action and the justification for the possibilities are defined. The fourth tier is the level of action according to the guidelines defined at the normative level.

In short, the structure of Naesses proposal works as a model for any kind of movement. Only the platform principles need to be modified according to the needs and overall aims of the
Now, what is activism? For me, activism is to influence current policies through civil activity. The forms of activity are variable. Some equate activism with civil disobedience or direct action, but this connection is not necessary. Civil disobedience is breaking some law in protest. It may be direct civil disobedience as in the classic example of New Yorkers jaywalking: it is said that in New York people have a strong sense of having a right to cross the street wherever it is the most convenient. So, they break the rules of crossing the street only in crosswalks. They directly break the law they protest.

Another example of direct disobedience is the total objection, where a person liable for military service refuses to join the army for ethical reasons.

Indirect civil disobedience is breaking some other law than the actual target of the protest. For example, blocking a road to a mining site is a protest against the laws regulating mining permits. People sitting on the road do not protest driving trucks. The effect is indirect.

Both previous examples involve direct action, though. They are both active hands-on protests against some experienced wrong. Direct action in turn does not necessarily involve disobedience. Organizing or partaking in demonstrations or protest rallies are not civil disobedience, albeit they are direct action.

I stated neither civil disobedience nor direct action are necessary elements for activism.

What else is there, obedient passivism perhaps? Obedient passivism is a thing, but it actually is the complete opposite of any activism. Obedient passivism is to live one’s life without the feeling of a need to try to make an impact in the world. That is, living a so-called normal life. One studies, works, gives a vote on every election, but one does not really question the
ability or competence of those who are in power, nor the justification of the *status quo*.

In short, activism is an effort to try to make a chance in the world. And this effort is done through civil action, outside or at the edges of the institutionalized political apparatus.

Now, to proceed I have to explicate what I mean with the term “academic work”. After which I will conclude with the final remarks about the compatibility of academic work and activism.

Academic work is action that tries to generate new knowledge, or to clarify the existing knowledge, and it is done in an academic framework, following academic practise. Notice that this does not include all the research. Some research is done outside academia, and it might as well be done using other ways of work than is academically conventional. By this, I do not imply the research outside academia is done poorly. Following academic practice is not the same thing as following the responsible conduct of research, which is expected to be implemented in all the research.

What is the most relevant part in this explication is the academic practise. That is of course a temporally changing thing. At some times it has been different from the current practise, and in the future academic practise will most likely be different from the current. Academic practice includes of course normative rules about how research should be done. But it includes also tacit knowledge and the common conventions. For example, blind-review process is a conventional, or agreed upon, way of trying to ensure the quality of publications. There is no necessary reason why the quality could not be ensured any other way. Or the seminars like this, these are quite common and if we are lucky, they might even be helpful’. However, they are only a conventional way of doing these things, and subject to evolve into something else in the future.
Important part in the current practice, for the purposes of this presentation, is its freedom. Academic freedom is deemed a value in its own right. When we are planning research, say our plans for doctoral theses, which is the most relevant form me at the moment, obviously, we choose our topics freely. Nobody tells us what the thing we must study is. For me it is environmental philosophy, value theory in particular. The topic was chosen purely because of my own interest.

It is a mere happenstance somebody else thought it to be worth spending some money. I was lucky to get funding for my project, but the things might have been different, but that would not have changed the fact that I am free to do as I please. Constraints like the funders willingness to fund some line of study are only weak constraints. They are not strong constraints in a sense of making the research impossible. We are still free to strive for our aims and interests even though that may be somewhat harder or practically impossible[vi].

This fundamental freedom and the existence of weak constraints are common to the academic work and to the activism. For an activist, weak constraints are present on the third, normative tier of the Naesses model.

When considering the possible ways of action and their justification presence and availability of the same minded works as a weak constraint to the action. It is easier to realize the overall aims if there is an association dedicated to the cause in the town. An example might be an activist who wishes to promote animal rights in Joensuu. If there are animal rights organizations present in this town, the activist could join them and start doing things together. If there were no such organizations present, the activist could start forming such a group[viii]. In case this turns out to be too demanding, they might turn to some other
organizations, say nature conservation association, and try to make an impact through that.

This brings us to the conclusion.

One important line of action for some activists is through research. Research may be a justified way to indirectly “participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes”, as Naess wrote.

By producing conceptual analysis or some clarified theory of value of certain objects and their relations to the human society, or by forming empirical knowledge about some phenomena, the activist may provide tools for implementing a more sustainable future or at least a more solid base onto which build the campaigning.

The freedom of both activism and the academic work give a chance to try to make this happen, and as discussed, the academic practise helps the activist to maintain research integrity at the same time.

Therefore, an activist could very well extend their activism with the academic work and it might be correct to say that the academic work is an extension to activism.

1 The risk that being an activist poses to the integrity of the academic has some serious considerations to be taken into account. Luckily these questions were present multiple times in the other presentations. However, in my treatment those questions are not in the focus. I take it that academic practice is the tool that protects the integrity, albeit mistakes do happen. The problems and the fear of connecting terms activist and researcher may have something to do with the distrust in academic practice. It may be we do not trust the tools we use. This is an obvious problem when there is a constant demand that the research should have an impact on the society while still being completely value neutral. As if the research should (and could) be done from the outsider’s view. The ideological burden of the positivism, of which we are not even actively conscious, might have something to do with this.

When using the term *necessary* I try to be quite careful. You should take the term to refer to the implication "if one obtains, then the other must obtain too" unless stated otherwise.

Jaywalking does not seem like a protest, and most likely those who do jaywalk do not count it as such. It is just walking across the street where it is the most convenient. However, it is also about holding on to ones *right* to do so. If this right is taken as a *positive right*, its violations (the current law) are deemed *wrongs*. And if it happened these violations were enforced, active protesting might ensue. Probably no barricades though in the jaywalking case, but rather angry writings in the internet and in the newspapers.

As just happened. This meeting gave me ideas for developing this line of thought. Also, I did not fail to inspire some thoughts in others as was confessed.

Impossibility refers to the logical impossibility. Practical impossibility refers to the unfeasible or ruled out options.

Maija Faehnle made a distinction in the keynote between the third and the fourth sector activism. Starting a group independent of the organized associations is an example of the fourth sector.