

Bridging the Ivory Tower and the Streets: Academia and Activism in Times of Crisis Ordinarity

Conference
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Università Ca' Foscari, Venice

In his seminal 1967 essay, Noam Chomsky argues that ostensibly “responsible” intellectuals’ self-serving views and “failure of skepticism” have dominated public discussions on American interventionist politics, especially in the context of the war in Vietnam. Nevertheless, he insists that academics “always have a choice” and encourages us to engage more critically with governmental decisions.

Since then, much of the political, economical, social, and environmental circumstances have, of course, shifted. In the midst of global pandemics and the threat of collapsing healthcare systems, fake news, racism, queer- and transphobia, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, economic crises and exploitation, continuing American interference in the Middle East, the rise of fascist rhetoric and governments, the ongoing effects of (neo-)colonialism, environmental disaster and destruction, intense hostility against refugees and migrants, however, Chomsky’s analysis still strikes an apt chord.

Within this climate, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” has lost nothing of its urgency: which kind of “intellectuals” are we? Are we “responsible” in holding up current systems of power, or do we rather become “wild men in the wings”?

Chomsky clearly spells out the necessity of using academia’s privileged position “to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions.” In opposition, philosophers like Thomas R. Wells have argued that activist academic activity undermines academia’s credibility as “an independent truth machine.” Yet in the age of polycrisis, or even “crisis ordinarity,” the increasing distrust of expert opinions and the triumph of economic concerns over all else, the question arises if we are not long past a point in which academia can and should be invested in a monolithic conceptualization of truth.

Moreover, if “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” as Audre Lorde famously stipulated, can we as academics engage in dismantling work from our privileged position within the ivory tower at all? And if so, how?

This conference seeks to interrogate the relationship between academics and activism and the particular relevance of the resulting questions to American Studies and the humanities at large.

Possible objects of investigation and perspectives may include (but are not limited to):

- The concept of scholar-activism in general
- Activism in the university classroom and activist pedagogy
- The position of experts in today’s political climate and crisis ordinarity
- The imagination of academia in contemporary discourses
- Observations on the role of activism, power structures, and responsibility in one’s own research
- Reflections on personal positionalities within the academic complex
- Activist and academic collaborations in the streets and in the digital sphere
- The future of the humanities and their engagement with the public