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VINCENT B. LEITCH

LETTER ON SCHOLACTIVISM:
TO GRADUATE STUDENTS AND YOUNG COLLEAGUES

As I try to define “scholactivism” for myself, I’m immediately mindful of the distinction between the master versus the specific intellectual, sometimes loosely coded as the traditional versus the organic intellectual. The one is a spokesperson for and to humanity; the other addresses issues within his or her competence and milieu. On this occasion I’m addressing activism as a scholar in the context of the American university and the academic profession during my lifetime, the post-Welfare State period (1970s-2010s).

The neologism scholactivism brings to my mind an array of personal experiences inside academe. Some of these skirmishes are one-offs, some enduring struggles, some local, others national and global. A number involve engagements with professional organizations like the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Modern Language Association (MLA). Others concern the particular universities where I have worked a decade or more, namely Mercer University, Purdue University, and University of Oklahoma.

I spent fifteen years as an AAUP activist during the 1970s and 80s. In retrospect, several instances of scholactivism stand out. As a new tenure-track Assistant Professor, I had my small family qualified for food stamps and went very public with the news. It was a solo rogue operation on the part of this green local AAUP chapter officer (secretary-treasurer a.k.a. organizer). The purpose was to publicly protest low pay, but not to become a lightning rod, which I inadvertently did. When one summer the State Board of Regents suspended a scheduled faculty pay increase, the state AAUP Conference hired a lawyer and successfully sued. As state treasurer, my job was to raise funds from professors at dozens of higher education institutions across the state. I did that with an eye toward not only present salary matters, but also future contracts. In these and other events, I discovered for my self that solidarity works better than solo stunts. Alone you’re vulnerable and risk becoming a scapegoat. Organization generally trumps spontaneity. My rule of thumb: go in packs and don’t allow yourself to be singled out. Behind the scenes I also learned the value of organized media relations, public demonstrations, and legislative lobbying.

What drove my AAUP activism was commitments, first, to unionization of workers and, second, to shared decision-making. In my experience, activism requires continuous maintenance work, for instance, organizing meetings, recruiting sympathizers as well as members, raising funds, and being spokesperson. Scholactivism is time-consuming and emotionally draining. This is why solidarity and organization, essential support structures, matter.

Over the decades I have served on a half dozen MLA national committees and another half dozen regional MLA committees. From time to time I have found myself in the position of advocate. Early on as an executive committee member of the newly formed Society for Critical Exchange (established 1976), an organization of autonomy-minded literary and cultural theorists like myself, I arranged for formal affiliate status with the South Atlantic MLA. Affiliate status ensures regular sessions on the programs of the annual conventions. This was a pilot program that led eventually to formal affiliate recognition at three other regional MLAs, plus at the national level. In those days, stand-alone theory was an embattled emerging field. So I was positioned as an advocate and to my surprise, for some anti-theorists in power, an unwelcome agitator.

During this period, feminists and multiculturalists were mounting parallel challenges advocating for space in professional organizations and in university curricula. Theory was and remains a well-known fellow traveler of such radicalizing projects. For scholars, classrooms, as well as professional organizations, are sites for advocacy and activism. Starting in the 1980s and continuing today, U.S. culture wars underscore the point. Because theory and the new social movements—for instance, postcolonialism and LGBTQ rights—share commitments to cultural critique, they bear activist missions inside and out of the classroom. Like many professors, I welcome advocacy but not indoctrination. Today’s activist teachers stand in a long line of educator advocates starting with Socrates.

In the 1990s I was elected to the 180-member MLA Delegate Assembly. Shortly thereafter I got elected as a member of its organizing committee and then as chair of this committee. People tell me I’m a good listener (a mixed blessing). In the latter role, the main tasks entailed setting the agenda for and managing the annual three to five-hour contentious convention meeting. *Roberts Rules of Order* became my little red book, not by choice. It is the academic system’s go-to conduct book to try to ensure order and civility; it requires much study of byzantine parliamentary processes. As it happens, a handful of the formal motions I had to make as committee chair were ones I did not personally agree with and voted against. I have experienced this contradiction while serving as chair of other committees. Being spokesperson, you are occasionally silenced. If you decide to take a solo or minority position against a committee consensus, you have to step aside as chair. Over the years I have learned not to seek or accept chair positions. In part, it reflects the anarcho-socialist in me. So, no surprise, I have come to appreciate outspoken “fringe elements” for pushing the consensus away from the inevitable complacent center. Dissidence has an important but underappreciated role to play in committee-dominated higher education. In this milieu, rules of order are a necessary evil open to manipulations, positive and negative. However, on this occasion I won’t count the ways to play the parliamentary game.

I want to pause to highlight the range of emotions that, in my experience, accompany scholactivism. The realities of activist affects rarely get addressed. Among higher-ed faculty members there is more or less continuous anger at low wages and fear of punishment for speaking out (despite tenure guarantees). The anger can range from disappointment to moral outrage, while the fear spans from mild anxiety to dread to paranoia (sometimes justified). Successful protests bring relief, joy, and reenergized solidarity. Discouragement accompanies failed ones. Resentment at disengaged or timid colleagues is a recurring temptation. Feeling oneself in the vanguard risks arrogance. So, a lot of emotional “balancing” is required especially for the long marches, for instance, how to unionize all faculty (adjuncts included), or how to

persuade the public and politicians of the benefits of low-cost or, better yet, free public higher education on the model of the K-12 system. Major emotional liabilities of activism include stress; burnout; and depression, edging into resignation, cynicism, or defeatism. Panic attacks are not uncommon. Long-term activism, I have found, depends on, as well as generates, emotional intelligence, endurance, and perseverance.

On how to stay committed to righteous causes, I have some personal testimony. Belonging to sympathetic organizations, alternative and mainstream—such as the Society for Critical Exchange (SCE), MLA, and AAUP—is very helpful. I take a break now and then for what the military calls rest and relaxation to indulge some hobbies. Based on my experience, subscribe to like-minded periodicals. In my case this includes general interest magazines and specialist scholarly journals, ranging from *The Nation* and *New Left Review* to *Critical Inquiry* and *Works and Days*. Such media help foster a supportive daily atmosphere. As a citizen, I listen to BBC and NPR centrist radio news plus MSNBC television. They provide reality checks. There are many, seemingly endless, news outlets in print and online. By my count I subscribe to a changing list of several dozen periodicals (editors come and go) and hold memberships in a dozen or so professional organizations. What I don't do, which some activists do, is pay careful attention to opposing media, for example, Fox TV news. I find this approach is not good for my blood pressure, or complexion. But I admire those who study the opposition attentively and day-by-day. The most I can manage is occasionally reading *The Economist*, among the better news magazine disseminating global capitalism's "commonsense."

Activist commitments sustain as well as shape academic research and publication. Let me cite a few quick examples from my own work. My *American Literary Criticism Since the 1930s* (1988; 2nd edition 2010) was the first panoramic history of criticism to accord four of its thirteen chapters to the New York intellectuals, existential phenomenologists, black aestheticians, and U.S. cultural studies, all engagé schools and movements. As general editor of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001; 2nd edition 2010), a collective project involving six editors, I take pride in the anti-theorists' view of it as a Trojan Horse carrying into the classroom all manner of radical material as, for instance, selections from fifteen feminists, eleven queer theorists, and seventeen Marxists. On one occasion I dared—or possibly shamed—the editors of *Critical Inquiry* into publishing my article "Work Theory" (2004) by complaining in my letter of submission that not once in three decades of publishing had they addressed the job "market" crisis, particularly the massive expansion and exploitation of adjunct faculty in U.S. higher education, which stands at 70% of the workforce today. It was 20% when I started. On a smaller scale and from time to time, I have written scholactivist letters, signed academic petitions, organized alternative conference sessions, participated in protest colloquia with graduate students, and served on editorial boards of committed journals. Such small professional acts of public resistance, often opportunistic and altogether diffuse, model scholactivist behavior and make a difference. Scholactivism happens in the classroom, to be sure. Like many English professors, I teach critical thinking and cultural critique along with close textual analysis in the context of literary and cultural studies. And like others, I take advantage of the ongoing project of opening the canon. My syllabi systematically encompass texts, popular as well as canonical, that reflect race, class, and gender issues. In my Introduction to Poetry, for example, Shakespeare and Plath share space with radical rap and slam poetry. I'm an unregistered soldier in the cultural wars, as are so many faculty members in the triumphant neoconservative U.S. In addition to critical literacy and critical pedagogy, I advocate, when occasions arise, critical citizenship in order to challenge the notion "my country right or wrong." There have been many

stupid, illegal, and immoral U.S. wars, a point worth registering inside as well as outside the classroom.

In my repertoire of regular courses are two popular ones on great books of contemporary scholactivist theory. First, Late 20th-Century Cultural Theory examines Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*; Said's *Orientalism*; Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment*; Butler's *Gender Trouble*; hooks' *Outlaw Culture*; Jameson's *Postmodernism*; and Hardt and Negri's *Empire*. Second, The 21st-Century Cultural Theory seminar covers a changing cast of engagé works, among others, Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Hardt and Negri's *Multitude*; Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*; and Bousquet's *How the University Works*. To consolidate inside the classroom the ongoing theory revolution, my associate editors and I keep the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* up-to-date. We're working on a third edition for publication in 2018. Last but not least, the more seasoned I get the more I lean to participant-oriented classrooms that minimize monological authoritarian lecture formats. Such interactive pedagogies are gaining renewed cogency day-by-day in the context of the corporate university's championing of impersonal massive open online courses not to mention its growing post-committee managerialism.

I imagine some colleagues will judge the stance and practices I advocate here to amount to aggrandized mainstream professional activity and bourgeois self-maintenance. Because I have always taught in anti-union right-to-work states and conservative institutions, I have found myself often on radical fringes. To use stereotypes, you can think of it as a Yankee in Georgia-Indiana-Oklahoma. I had parallel experience during the 1980s and 90s with the MLA, a very staid professional guild hostile at the time to political activism. Contexts contour behaviors and options.

Let me conclude with some advice from an elder. What I call "going on the record," which I have relied on over the years, is a useful tool of scholactivism. It's a survival technique for me. I recommend it to you. Use as needed. When I'm about to lose a debate or a vote at an academic meeting, large or small, I stand my ground without anger, coolly rehearsing my key points. Why? I have a professional obligation to speak the truth. Not incidentally, this practice brings peace of mind, minimizing sulking, self-recriminatory second-guessing, and withdrawal. Also it reduces the chances of positioning colleagues as enemies or of colleagues casting you in that role. Finally, it's a way of doing the right thing in unpropitious circumstances without losing emotional stability and without sacrificing personal well-being. It's best to live to fight another day. A better U. S. higher education is possible.

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