

# Introduction

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## 1

The most concise articulation of theory and activism remains Karl Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it". Marx's challenge still echoes in universities around the world, urging, if not simply a move beyond the library, at least a new way of understanding the work done there. It can, however, generate anxiety and resentment: after all, what is wrong with interpreting the world? And there seem to be also many ways of getting side-tracked in the apparently difficult passage from theory to activism.

At its utilitarian worst, Marx's connection between ways of describing the world and ways of changing it has found an echo in research funding calls, in which research in literary studies must somehow move so far away from itself as to need to think of its contribution to areas such as green transport or leadership in new industrial technologies when trying to obtain funding aimed at research on De Quincey's "The English Mail-Coach" or Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*.

At its activist worst, Marx's dictum has been occasionally misread as a dismissal of theory – airy and abstract – in the name of practice, of doing and acting out, in a historical suspicion of bourgeois intellectuals in left-wing circles.

At its intellectualist worst, Marx's thesis has led to a scholasticism of revolutionary ideas, an elaboration of oversubtle reasons to account for why the outside world does not conform to the enlightened bubbles of higher education.

## 2

In the work done by members of the Frankfurt School, the expression "critical theory" acknowledged that a positivistic description of the world serves an ideological function: "The new ideology (...) exploits the cult of fact by describing bad existence with utmost

exactitude in order to elevate it into the realm of facts. Through such elevation existence itself becomes a surrogate of meaning and justice” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 119). The neutral duplication of the world strengthens it, making it seem too vivid for change to be imaginable. Historically, the Frankfurt School suffered from a perhaps unexpected contradiction: by tracing in equally vivid manner the ways in which it had become impossible to live rightly a wrong life (cf. Adorno 2005, 39), it described its own practical paralysis, in residence at what Georg Lukács called the “Grand Hotel Abyss” (1971, 22).

This is also because, as Guy Debord writes in *The Society of the Spectacle*,

It is obvious that ideas alone cannot lead beyond the existing spectacle; at most, they can only lead beyond existing ideas about the spectacle. To actually destroy the society of the spectacle, people must set a practical force into motion. A critical theory of the spectacle cannot be true unless it unites with the practical current of negation in society. (Debord 2014: 111)

In Debord’s *détournement* of Marx and Engels, he adapts another version of the idea behind Marx’s thesis, in which Marx and Engels state the materialist obvious, that “Ideas *cannot carry out anything* at all” (Marx & Engels 1975, 119). Abstract critiques, however clever, may end up as little more than classroom exercises in courses of cultural studies. On the other end of this, and assuming that the transition between theory and activism is a settled matter, is the apparently simpler problem of how to get *it* done. The practicalities of juggling academic and activist work – sometimes the same thing, often not – are dealt with by Michael Flood, Brian Martin & Tanja Dreher (2013) in pragmatic manner: what can and should be done towards achieving a goal. And yet the union of critical theory with a “practical current of negation in society” has been fraught. Although activism has increasingly become linked to theoretical work produced in institutions of higher education, to the satisfaction of intellectuals who find assurance that their work has social impact, this link may need some fine-tuning as well as some perhaps-not-so-fine-tuning soon, if it is not to lapse into the ingrained habits of each side.

### 3

In the contemporary moment, at what seems perhaps the moment of greatest symbiosis between theory and activism, by which activism is more informed than ever by theory, whereas activist work is increasingly a part of what academics do and think, the danger may come from precisely this greater connection,

taking different forms at both ends, as well as at their more impassioned junctures. The following points mean to address a small series of present dangers:

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In the study of literature, an attention to progressive contents may lead to an examination of a text as the expression of a cultural theme. By privileging the expression of a specific content – a testimony of oppression or the celebration of an identity – such scholarly work sometimes overlooks the formal indigence of many of these primary texts. To come back to Adorno, in the culture industry, a progressive content does not redeem a formulaic expression; instead, in is in the domain of form that some of the greatest subversion still resides. An activist attention to literature and literary theory should, therefore, be aware that form is too important to be left to formalists.

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An attention to form and rhetoric might instil in theoretically informed activists (whether they are academics or not) a greater pragmatism and awareness of the effects of using a theoretical discourse in a practical situation. It is often the case that the byzantine language of academic theory can end up as a stilted jargon enforced by earnest activists, to the alienation of sympathizers. A greater consciousness of how to speak rhetorically – how to adapt discursive forms to different fora – might perhaps lead to an awareness of when it may be more effective *not* to respond to a Facebook comment or to an intervention at an assembly with a lengthy paraphrase of Gayatri Spivak, Pierre Bourdieu or Judith Butler.

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Miss Prism. Do not speak slightly of the three-volume novel, Cecily. I wrote one myself in earlier days.

Cecily. Did you really, Miss Prism? How wonderfully clever you are! I hope it did not end happily? I don't like novels that end happily. They depress me so much.

Miss Prism. The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.

Cecily. I suppose so. But it seems very unfair. (Wilde 2008, 501).

The return of earnestness brings us, “by a commodius vicus of recirculation”, to the Victorian context of much of Marx’s theoretical and activist work. In a contemporary moment in which some activism seems to be more a matter of individual

morality than of universal politics, practices like shaming and ostracizing others, while exhibiting the purity of one's beliefs, words, and behaviours, are becoming more prominent. As a means of enforcing a group mentality and policing its borders, such practices are as counterproductive as they were in nineteenth-century Britain, although they prove how attractive it still is to cast others as bad people, when it comes to reassuring oneself that one is good. At this point, it is perhaps not so much Marx but Oscar Wilde who may be of help in understanding a certain culture of activism, from the mouth of the "villain" of *An Ideal Husband*:

MRS. CHEVELEY. (...) Remember to what a point your Puritanism in England has brought you. In old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbours. In fact, to be a bit better than one's neighbour was considered excessively vulgar and middle-class. Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues – and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins – one after the other. Not a year passes in England without somebody disappearing. (Wilde 2008, 408)

Instead of trying to react to impossible – and constantly changing– ideals, with "virtue-signalling" as an inevitable shortcut, one of the challenges for activists might be to learn, like the eponymous character of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, that people cannot "be divided into the good and the bad as though they were two separate races or creations" (Wilde 2008, 377).

To understand this is, on the one hand, to accept the platitude that the world is complex and that there is more to people than their opinions on topics trending on Twitter. On the other hand, this should mean thinking about the politics – not the morality – of activism now, which is to ask: is the goal to affirm one's individual purity or to achieve collective gains? If it is to affirm one's purity and to police that of others, this will mean excluding many potential friends, ending in the usual fragmentation well known in the left and in university departments; but if the politics are firmly collective, demanding a broad front, this means overcoming "a culture of snitching, shaming and humiliation" (Dollimore 2018, 711), which tends to produce more enemies than allies. Because much of this culture thrives in universities, especially in Anglophone ones, they are a privileged place in which to find better ways to engage with others. The interplay of theory and activism might thus revolve around one of the most unresolved issues in both fields, that of using rhetoric to avoid divisiveness: what if, instead of bullying others into resentfully checking their privilege, one could simply try to persuade them to join the fight for the collective good?

This special issue can be seen as an attempt to persuade our readers to think and fight for the collective good. With this purpose on mind, it presents a selection of seven articles that try to answer a variety of intertwined questions: what is the role of academia in the long-term project of changing the world? What are the relations between – and how can one relate – theory and practice, and the literature classroom and the world? More specifically, how have literature and other art forms contributed to revealing ideas and new ways of critiquing that might eventually lead to or inspire collective movements and fights? And how does the study of aesthetics, the scholarly analysis of literature, in particular, add to the revolutionary movements of our era? This issue offers a polyhedral (and incomplete) perspective – not a final answer – in the hope that more and more colleagues will join us and continue the discussion in the near future.

The volume begins with Christian Smith's "*The point is to change it: The Imperative for Activist Literary Studies*," a reflection on how the practice of literary criticism can lead to an imperative for activism. Smith explores Karl Marx's use of intertextuality in his critique of the harmful inversions caused by capitalism. As discussed by Smith, Marx's quotations from and allusions to literature – to Homer, Cervantes and Shakespeare, to name but a few authors – provides his writings with a new impulse. Likewise, and following Marx's logics, literary criticism may become a means to reveal the urgent need for change through action. The second article contributes a connected idea: an empowering narrative can be used to endorse the fight of a community. This is one of the main points of Martín Fernández Fernández's "Tracing Emmet Till's Legacy from Black Lives Matter back to the Civil Rights Movement", a paper that explores the infamous murder of Emmet Till – and others – as one of the core elements which binds together the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter in the US. Of course, a volume on the need for activism cannot indulge in believing that the cause of all evils is outside the academic institution; and this is why the third article, a contribution of Nurudeen Adeshina Lawal, "Chaos in the Ivory Tower: Postcolonial Representations of the Nigerian Academic Elite in Esiaba Irobi's *Cemetery Road* and Ojo Rasaki Bakare's *Once Upon a Tower*" adds an interesting surface to the polyhedron: the idea that certain members of the academic elite promote disorder in the polity and corruption in universities. Lawal points to these issues in Nigeria, showing the ways in which the playwrights Irobi and Bakare invite the academic elite to engage in critical self-interrogation, as well as genuine scholarly and community-based activities. The fourth article, María Consuelo Fores's "Shakespeare for Revolution: from Canon to Activism", returns to the idea – already described by Christian

Smith – that a canonical author such as Shakespeare, widely studied in universities all around the world, can provide us with a political impulse towards cultural activism. Indeed, the fifth article, Rosa García-Periago’s “Mickey B/ Macbeth: Bringing Shakespeare to Prisons and Academia via Film Adaptation” stands as testimony of this. García-Periago explains how the full-length film adaptation of *Macbeth*, filmed and created by the inmates of a high-security prison in Northern Ireland, Her Majesty’s Prison Maghaberry, has brought into focus the potentialities of community engagement and the interlinks between academia and what happens beyond the university walls. The author herself has both translated *Mickey B* into Spanish and conceived a project to work with socially excluded groups. The sixth article, Yolanda Caballero Aceituno and Aroa Orrequia Barea’s “English Studies and Literary Education in the Era of Media Manipulation,” discusses whether the current academic context is hospitable to a literary education that favours critical awareness that might lead to activism. Caballero and Orrequia have worked actively with a group of students of the University of Jaén (Spain) and concluded that, to encourage critical thinking, it is necessary to foster positive emotions and empathy in our literary lessons. This is, precisely, the aim of Juan José Bermúdez de Castro’s film workshop, which he organizes every academic year at the University of the Balearic Islands: to encourage students – and other spectators – to watch a selection of films and engage in discussion with activists and professors. In the last article, “*Aules Sense Armaris: Cinema LGBTIQ+ I*” [“Classrooms Without Closets: LGTBIQ+ Cinema”], Bermúdez de Castro provides his perspective, as a Literature and Cultural Studies professor, on how this type of experience may open not only the doors of many closets but also the doors of academia itself.

In a nutshell, the present volume intends to show the move from theory to activism: from Marx’s reflections on Shakespeare to the ways certain narratives have an impact on social movements such as BLM, to the critique of institutions such as universities through the discussion of politically-engaged plays and fictions, to the impulse that arises among many colleagues in academia working to raise awareness in places as inhospitable as prisons, or as fundamental as their own classrooms, to those who organise forums with activists or try to become active in the fight for freedom and equality.

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