

Thank you for having me here today! I will try to share a few key insights I learned from my research on scholar-activism during my PhD.

We are living not in a world of a single crisis, but in a polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2024). As the planet is heating up, we are witnessing the failure to abide by human rights in all corners of the world, and yet another genocide. We are witnessing multiple interlocking sets of systemic crises in ecology, economy, politics, and social justice. The scale of today's challenges is truly horrifying.

Many of us had hoped that by now, institutions, especially global policy mechanisms, would move us toward justice and sustainability. Instead, we seem to be witnessing a retreat from those very ideals. Crisis is becoming increasingly a closer lived reality for all life on this planet. It is on the news, it is walking with us on the streets, even in the corridors of our universities. Sometimes sitting in front of us in our classrooms.

And therefore, a natural response is to ask *how should we react* and *how can we change the circumstances?* This is particularly important questions to be asked from within academia. Academia seems to become increasingly a contested political space. But Universities and intellectuals who inhabit it, despite their limitations, still hold influence. Intellectuals have historically been forces of changes in their societies. According to Antonio Gramsci organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971), those who becomes part of a movement, can lead and guide social movements. One indication of the intellectual influence on societal and political change might be how they are viewed as threats in authoritarian politics and the number of scholars imprisoned in many countries, including my own home country Iran. Prisons are becoming universities, some say.

### **We're seeing two simultaneous forces at play:**

On the one hand, academic freedom is being attacked by authoritarian politics (Weingarten, 2025; Rangel, 2020). On the other, there are growing calls, some from within, some from civil society, for scholars to step beyond the traditional boundaries of research and teaching and engage more directly with society (e.g. Derickson & Routledge, 2015; Kuhlmann & Rip; 2018).

But the relationship between academic research and activism (as a form of societal engagement) seems to remain uneasy and contested. Some argue that activism threatens the autonomy and norms of science, what Robert Merton (1973) called its disinterested, universal character. Others see activism as a moral obligation, especially in times of crisis.

But what is activism? In the field of social movement studies, activism is conceptualized as individual and collective resistance; actions that emerge from marginalized spaces, challenging dominant power structures (Tarrow, 1998). This includes a wide range of tactics:

- Direct action: like protests or occupations.
- Public awareness campaigns
- Coalition-building
- Civil disobedience: often nonviolent, but disruptive.

- And, at times, more radical strategies, including sabotage and militancy.

Academia, by contrast, is often associated with privilege, institutional power, political detachment, and incompatibility with partisan politics. One academic shared with me in an interview: “*when people think ‘activists,’ they see this hooligan that hides their face and throws rocks and for me, it was a very unacademic way of living.*” when we talk about *academic activism*, there seems to be incompatibilities at least in stereotypical perceptions of the terms academic and activist.

Amidst these tensions and contradictions, many scholars attempt to reconcile these two realms and form a relatively balanced union between these two roles. This isn’t a new phenomenon. Throughout history, intellectual traditions have offered different models of engaged scholarship:

- Edward Said’s public intellectual, (1996)
- Antonio Gramsci’s organic intellectual, (1971)
- Michael Burawoy’s public sociology. (2005)

These frameworks differ by context, but all challenge the idea that academics exist outside of politics.

The field of Science and Technology Studies has long explored how science is shaped by society and politics. STS scholars have shown how movements influence scientific agendas and vice versa. For example:

- AIDS activism reshaping medical research (Epstein, 1995),
- Activists self-experimenting with diabetes treatments or psychedelics (Jansky, 2023; Söderberg, 2022),
- And 20<sup>th</sup> century’s countercultural movements reshaping fields like quantum physics or ecology (Cramer, 1987; Kaiser, 2011)

**In my own work**, I define *Scholar-activism*, as practices that leverage academic capacity/means-teaching, research, networks, funding, and credibility- to advance particular social and political causes. I identify three key domains of scholar-activism: activist research, activist teaching, and activist collaboration.

- **Activist research** is often associated with using critical methodologies such as participatory and action-oriented research methods or critical theories. But also producing research that is relevant to the struggle.
- **Activist teaching** draws on transformative pedagogy fostering students’ critical consciousness and viewing them not just as learners, but as potential agents of change.
- **Activist collaborations** involve long-term, trust-based relationships with movements and activists outside of academia but also with actors within academia itself. This involves sharing resources, skills, and forming solidarity.

These are the forms that scholar-activism takes when acted out. But scholar-activism doesn't emerge in a vacuum. Another part of my research attempts to understand the underlying conditions that impact the practice of scholar-activism.

**First**, we live in societies formed by different inter-related forces of history and geopolitics. The social realities for a scholar in South Africa might be different that one in Sweden. One scholar in South Africa told me once: "*it is difficult not to be a scholar-activist when you have hungry students sitting in your classroom*". Scholar-activism can be seen as a response to those major forces in our societies.

**Second**, Universities are increasingly shaped by market logics and managerial demands. Metrics and funding incentives often don't align with more critical or community-based scholarship that might not render the same outputs expected from these frameworks of impact. This is reportedly disincentivizing scholar-activism or making it like a double task. But also, for some in the Global South who have reported that they preferred to allocate their limited resources to what mattered on the local level than on international publications, this renders them international invisibility.

**Finally**, we must consider the role of organizational and disciplinary cultures. Different fields and organizations have different thresholds for what counts as acceptable political engagement. In some settings, scholar-activism is supported while in others it might face reputational risk or marginalization.

So where do these insights leave us? This shows the multiple worlds scholar-activists inhabit and the often contradicting demands they need to navigate. Fabian Dablander and colleagues (2024) explore the barriers of scientists' engagement in climate change: intellectual and practical barriers.

- **Intellectual barriers:** Is this my responsibility as a scientist? Do I agree with this strategy?
- **Practical barriers:** I don't have the skills, I don't know any other activists, I fear I might get backlash from my institution.

They also show that practical barriers remain more persistent than intellectual barriers. In my research, I show the three ways scholars navigate this contested landscape.

First, there seems to be an internal dialogue with oneself to be done, to understand "*Why do I want to engage?*" One scholar told me that for him engagement comes after his realization of being a political agent. This is an internal negotiation of one's role and political nature of academic work and helps to overcome the intellectual barrier of engagement. **This process, I call, critical and reflexive sense-making.** It involves sustained interrogation of one's own positionality, privilege, and theory of change.

**Then, there is the social negotiation of legitimacy.** According to Thomas Gieryn (1983), scientists constantly draw lines between science and non-science. These boundaries define legitimacy. In negotiating legitimacy, scholar-activists need to engage in blurring and shifting boundaries of legitimate knowledge to account for the political aspects of their work. But not everyone seems to be equally able participate in this boundary work. Those who benefit more

academic power and scientific capital can more easily negotiate boundaries. For example, one mid-career scholar shared from her experience that once they faced an issue with allowing activists on campus for an event they had organized. The director of their center who was a well-established professor and activist managed to use their power to negotiate with university administration and let the activists on campus. This mid-career scholar told me: “*When you are a full professor who’s been at an institution for a long time, you can pick up the phone to the VC... Whereas even when I was director at that same centre, I didn’t have those forms of privilege.*”

**And this bring us to the last one which is solidarity and acting collectively.** This involves relationships of solidarity both with activists and colleagues and students. This means, bringing in different capacities and skills to help navigate more diverse circumstances, like having this activist professor in the team helped get the activists on campus. Also, Dablander and colleagues (2024) argue that “*interactions between engaged and non-engaged scientists, for example, at conferences, can lead to increased understanding and motivation to engage*” So, Joining or forming activist-oriented communities are important for staying engaged. As Sidney Tarrow (1998), the social movement scholar argues: “*it is life within groups that transforms the potential for action into social Movements*” (p. 30)

### **Let me close with this:**

Staying active, does not have to look the same for everyone. And activism doesn’t have to look dramatic. Popular portrayals of activism often emphasize macho, high-risk, visible actions. This framing can be exclusionary. It reproduces hierarchies of who ‘counts’ as an activist.

Andreas Malm, the Swedish scholar and activist, in *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (2021), reminds us that almost all movements have included elements of sabotage or confrontation. But he also stresses that not everyone has to engage in these forms. Effective movements require diverse strategies, across varied capacities and temperaments.

In academia, this is especially important. Many of us struggle with whether it’s even allowed to speak out. Some fear losing credibility. Others don’t feel equipped for activism.

I see scholar-activism more as a journey, so taking the first step that one feels comfortable with can be as crucial as our path of becoming responsive scholars. It can be as simple as connecting with a scholar-activist that we admire their work, or exploring what potentials exist in one’s academic community for more direct engagement. Each of us, can ask: *Does our work open space for the change we wish to see? Or do our collaborations foster care and reciprocity?* (see Temper et al., 2018 as an inspiration for self-reflexive activity)

I want to end emphasizing that, in my opinion, scholar-activism is not *the* solution or a new orthodoxy. In times of polycrisis, no single response will be sufficient. What we need is a plurality of engagements. Scholar-activism is one of these engagements, but, at the current circumstances, it is the one we cannot afford to ignore.

Thank you!

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