INTRODUCTION

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CHANGE

The humanities and the social sciences have developed several influential theories of social reproduction and social stability. We can, for instance, explain with reasonable accuracy how some essential vectors of social stratification remain impervious to critique and contestation. Yet, we have precious few theories of social change, despite the string of classical categories that make up the core of any politological lexicon: reform, revolution, adaptation, adjustment, etc. This lack is interesting, as one would expect societies to have devised the kind of epistemic tools by which they could explain their successes to themselves. Thus, in a nicely paradoxical fashion, theories of desirable and successful social change might make change more consistently reproducible.

There are several reasons why societies oriented towards goods they explicitly value often fail to derive theories of how best to attain them. Notably, changes in the normative structure of societies usually depend on incremental microadjustments to the way social actors perceive their own interest, enunciate the import of their political wills, form pressure groups to obtain and secure them, elaborate practical ways to materialize and institutionalize them, and voice criticism to revise and readjust them. In fact, isolating efficient modes of social change from the thick historicity and contingency of political action usually entails highly specified, painstaking scholarly work. In turn, the complex material that is commonly extracted from such work does not easily lend itself to grand theoretical abstractions. As such, historical accounts of *longue durée* normative transformations – of precisely the kind that justly support the history of Modernity as a progressive one – usually depend on the elision of colossal amounts of archival material and of a fundamental facet of political life: participation, understood as a concrete agential practice anchored in concrete social settings.

To complicate matters further, the notion of participation itself has been the object of frequent misunderstandings throughout the development of democratic politics. While legitimate forms of political participation are usually codified in constitutions and ingrained in political habits, and while illegitimate forms of political participation are usually framed by civil and penal law, more ambiguous ways of taking part in organized political life are often legally precarious and conceptually ill-defined.

ACTIVISM

The term "activism", the first of the two concepts that make up the title of this collection, is an eminent case in point. Its prevalence in both colloquial and professional political discourse is deceptive, as the term came into common usage much later than any of the other great concepts mentioned above. Emerging not during, but *after* the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s,[1] it made it possible to

1 Mancur Olson: *The Logic of Collective Action*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1965); Charles Tilly: *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Reading, MA: Addison Wesley (1978).

take stock of the vast reorganization of political life that had occurred since the end of WWII and to distinguish "activists" from the related social roles that had characterized the 19th and earlier 20th century.

First, it allowed for a fuzzier understanding of participation that reflected the growing social acceptance of political contestation in democratic societies. "Activism" could now include merely occasional or strictly symbolic participation in the politics of contestation in a way that concepts such as "protesting", "organizing", "demonstrating", or "campaigning" never could – to say nothing of the influential rhetoric of late 1960s "radicalism": "enemies", "threats", "tactics", "targets", "attacks".[2] Hence, from the perspective of older generations of engaged social actors, "activism" stood at the intersection of the democratization *and* deradicalization of social protest.

Secondly, "activists" tended to have an increasingly ambivalent understanding of the way the "cause" on whose behalf they acted related to overarching political frameworks. "Activism" made it possible to think of impassioned political engagement in a way that did not necessarily implicate the whole political fabric. Quite the contrary, in fact: social actors could now pour their heart and soul into acting towards particular ends while staying clear of objectively risky involvements with more all-encompassing forms of political negation. Historically and synthetically, "activism" can hence be thought of both as a belated consequence of the disciplinary effects of cold-war political repression and as the earliest forms of what would soon become a fully legitimate social activity, itself soon to be differentiated into (sometimes lucrative) subactivities: activism, artivism, hacktivism, etc.

This volume takes "activism" to be the most recent evolution of what has always constituted politics as seen from the perspective of the politically dominated.[3] In doing so, this volume presents essays that explicitly do not match the contours of current activism, but rather those of previous forms of popular participation. We historicize, theorize, and sometimes criticize what has become the dominant horizon of political dissatisfaction. In doing so, we reflect on the different elements that constitute the arena of contemporary protest and public controversy.

The fact that *longue durée* accounts of social progress usually depend on the elision of activist work (understood in the rather narrow sense outlined above) does not mean that nothing can be known or said about this crucial social activity. In fact, activism is dependent on various *infrastructures*.[4] All of them are part of the archives of political history: the establishment and maintenance of communication and circulation networks, the organization of typical activist events ranging from marches to media campaigns, the collection of data among populations (grievances, demands, strategies, expectations), the development of a legal

2 Saul Alinsky: *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*, New York: Vintage Books (1989 [1971]).

3 Louis Althusser: *Machiavelli and Us*, London: Verso (1999).

4 Niklas Barth, Pierre-Héli Monot: "Negationen der Negationskontrolle: Eine Infrastrukturgeschichte polemogener Rede", in: *Medien der Infrastruktur*, ed. by Friedrich Balke, Bernhard Siegert, Joseph Vogl, forthcoming.

basis for specific demands, the accumulation of para-political arguments (notably statistical and historical data), and the consolidation of individuals into organized pressure groups. Ultimately, critical historical work can recover what is usually lost in the narrative arcs of the histories of progress, provided these infrastructures and the practices they entail are placed center stage.

HISTORY

Traditionally, narratives of social change typically contributed to producing histories with leading actors and specific moments of institutional development. Starting with the poststructuralist turn of the late twentieth century, such approaches underwent significant criticism. Human agency and individual historical actors were "decentered" and grand histories of progress and social change were questioned in efforts to undermine established narratives. The charge of "fictionality" was leveled against historical accounts deemed to be overly self-confident and homogenous.

Studying activist writing allows scholars to focus on the concrete practical and ideological transformations of social and literary history: we study history bottom up as a fundamentally contentious space. Historicizing activist writing means diving deep into sources that are often excluded from dominant or hegemonic discourses. Herein, we see activist writing both as a practice and as an archive for social change. As a practice, activist writers make claims, advance causes, and persuade or dissuade publics. Activist writers take stances on what they see as requiring change and position their work as a fundamentally political, non-institutional practice. As an archive for social change, activist literature mobilizes sympathetic or susceptible publics and, conversely, antagonizes resistant and antagonist ones – activist literature is efficacious not only in the moment in which it is written and read, but also through the stories this literature can later be used to tell.

This presents challenges, but also major opportunities which can enrich perspectives and studies on social change. Activist writing allows for incorporating non-institutional and marginal agents as drivers of historical change – either major or subsidiary, subversive or compliant, non-institutional or systemic.

Activists write in many ways. They write letters, like Émile Zola did in 1898 with his open letter calling out the French government during the Dreyfus affair. They write engaged analyses as the Combahee River Collective did in 1977, identifying systems of "interlocking oppression" and for the first outlining the concept of "identity politics." They make speeches, like Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman," in which she called out the treatment of Black women compared to white women; this phrase has circulated widely since 1851, even though Sojourner Truth most likely never uttered these precise words.

They write manuals, like Che Guevara's 1961 *Guerilla Warfare* that was intended as a how-to handbook for radical insurgents engaged in combat. They write declarations, like the "Declaration of Sentiments" by the women's rights

activists of Seneca Falls in 1848, or the "Manifesto of the 121" by French intellectuals opposing the war in Algeria in 1960. They write autobiographies, like Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1845. They write tweets, like Mesut Özil's 2018 viral statement that declared his resignation from the German national team and accused the German public of racism. They write programs, like Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale did in 1966 with "What We Want Now!, What We Believe: The Black Panther Party Ten-Point Platform" that outlined the Black Panthers' demands for African-American rights in US society. They write slogans, like those present in campaign flyers, brochures, and posters, whether for political campaigns, for war, or for revolution. They write manifestoes, like Karl Marx and Frederick Engel's 1848 "Communist Manifesto" that would become the cornerstone for communist political ideology in the following century as well as one of the best-selling books of all time. And they write pamphlets, a form in which all others may be subsumed.[5]

WRITING

Writing is perhaps the single most historically important type of infrastructure for activist politics in that it provides instructions for political actions and an archive of political confrontation. It is no surprise that focusing on writing comes with heavy theoretical baggage and recurrent terminological debates. Throughout this book, we emphasize the productivity of a central genre and practice of activist writing: the pamphlet. As a high-circulation, low-threshold format, the pamphlet displays a set of defining characteristics that bind the various subtypes of activist writing discussed above.[6]

Our understanding of activist writing does not sit easily with approaches that have become prevalent in the humanities. First of all, "activist writing" is a stand-in category. It refers to an array of literary forms and social practices that political, protest-driven, non-institutional agents use to further their causes. This approach, which emphasizes the agency of authors, has largely become unfashionable in scholarship on political change and activism. More often than not, activism and the specific claims of activists are taken to emerge through and within public discourse. In these accounts, latent and seemingly individualized grievances aggregate into contentious discourses. They circulate without any significant agency of individual actors. These discourse-driven models emphasize transformations and routinely discard eruptive breakthroughs and the revolutionary longings at play in many activist texts. Seen in this light, social action is not only deeply influenced by, but also entwined with existing power structures which preclude the contestation of these very structures from the "outside". Individual authors are relegated to the status of nodes in a discursive web. Their concrete functions as

5 Many of these texts are included in our online anthology of polemical literature; see Pierre-Héli Monot (ed.): *The Arts of Autonomy: A Living Anthology of Polemical Literature,* Munich: The Arts of Autonomy, https://artsautonomy.hypotheses.org.

6 Pierre-Héli Monot: "Art, Autonomy, Philology: Research Parameters" in this volume.

participants in activist politics is declared to be at best irrelevant, at worst a mere effect of the discursive web itself.

With this volume, we want to offer different, more nuanced accounts of activist writing as a political practice and a literary-historical tradition. While the prevalent attention to discursivity and non-authoriality has provided essential insights into the logic of collective action, our take on activist writing presents an opportunity to break with ultimately dispiriting notions of political action. In fact, the practice of activist writing makes it possible for historians to relate political causes to the public sphere by focusing on concrete acts of confrontation and their impact on the public. Activist writing requires action and active agents. The burial of the author was premature; the author is alive and seems instead to be driven by a sense of autonomy and self-empowerment. Authors accuse those in power and claim agency. This entails the willingness to take the risk of being held accountable by those in power. In doing so, activist writers as individuals or collectives break through the surface of the social and political ordinary. They take on the responsibility of framing collective discontent as identifiable authors. Crucially, these authors are aware of their position within the social structure and act upon their insights as socially embedded agents. Driven by the aim of transforming these social relationships, of which authors are always a part, they become activists through their writing.[7]

Activists are communicators and writing is the practice with which they most clearly and concisely communicate their intentions and demands. Their messages are addressed to the general public in order to speak a "provisional constituency" into existence.[8] Activists are willing to take risks because they expect that their actions will lead to a better political future. Lucien Goldman's remarks about Marxists can be applied to activists of other ideological stripes: they are making a wager on a historical future which they need to accomplish by their own actions.[9] This commitment explains why activist writing can often be exclamatory, polemical, rude, brash, and accusatory. Ultimately, these characteristics embody the commitment of activists.

Thus, activist writing is a deliberate puncturing of the fabric of institutionalized politics and social life. It is an effort to demand change, to reclaim ground and steer into unknown but auspicious territory. It is the space where political agency seeks to undo political paralysis. Studying activist writing offers an opportunity to observe the moment when power is challenged.

This volume gathers a wide range of essays on the tradition and practices of activist writing. It was inspired by ideas discussed and exchanged by the authors during a conference on "Activist Writing," organized at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich in February 2022, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and at the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The authors of these essays

7 Walter Benjamin: "The Author as Producer [1934]", in: idem: *Understanding Brecht*, London: Verso (1998), pp. 85–103.

8 Janet Lyon: "Transforming Manifestoes: A Second-Wave Problematic", in: *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 5/1 (1991), pp. 101–127, p. 104.

9 Lucien Goldmann: *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the "Penseés" of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, London: Routledge (1964).

come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and employ a broad array of methods. Their perspectives on activist writing – and on activism itself – are heterogenous and contribute to a multifaceted historical understanding of what are defining political activities: writing, reading, contesting.