Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

1-1-2015

Missing in action

Rowan Cahill
University of Wollongong, rowanc@uow.edu.au

Terence H. Irving
University of Wollongong, tirving@uow.edu.au

Recommended Citation

Missing in action

Abstract

'Marxist scholarship, already on the defensive for political reasons inside university economics faculties, often retreated into scholastic debates over texts or into abstruse mathematical calculations as remote from the real world as those of their mainstream colleagues.' So wrote Chris Harman in Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx (Bookmarks Publications, 2009). It was not just in economics that the radicals retreated; it happened in all the social sciences and humanities. And not just because of political timidity; they had been outflanked. Knowledge production had changed in ways that disadvantaged radicals.

Keywords

missing, action

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

2015

Missing in action

Rowan Cahill
University of Wollongong, rowanc@uow.edu.au

Terence H. Irving
University of Wollongong, tirving@uow.edu.au

Missing in action (19 May)

Abstract

'Marxist scholarship, already on the defensive for political reasons inside university economics faculties, often retreated into scholastic debates over texts or into abstruse mathematical calculations as remote from the real world as those of their mainstream colleagues.' So wrote Chris Harman in Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx (Bookmarks Publications, 2009). It was not just in economics that the radicals retreated; it happened in all the social sciences and humanities. And not just because of political timidity; they had been outflanked. Knowledge production had changed in ways that disadvantaged radicals.

MISSING IN ACTION?

'Marxist scholarship, already on the defensive for political reasons inside university economics faculties, often retreated into scholastic debates over texts or into abstruse mathematical calculations as remote from the real world as those of their mainstream colleagues.' So wrote Chris Harman in *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx* (Bookmarks Publications, 2009). It was not just in economics that the radicals retreated; it happened in all the social sciences and humanities. And not just because of political timidity; they had been outflanked. Knowledge production had changed in ways that disadvantaged radicals.

This happened as universities ceased being elite institutions variously producing educated and research elites. They transformed and morphed to become business institutions producing masses of highly educated graduates for an ever increasing array of employment situations, and specialist researchers for their own use, conducting their operations and accountability processes on models adapted/adopted from the corporate and business worlds.

While the numbers of academics needed to service these institutions dramatically expanded, this did not lead to the democratisation of knowledge and research, nor to the creation of an intellectual commons. Instead, academic jobs and career advancement, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, came to rely on knowledge production in specified quantities (amounts varying between and within institutions) gifted to and published in a hierarchy of journals of varying status and prestige, some more preferred than others, most of which ultimately were, or came, under the control and/or ownership of huge multi-billion-dollar global publishing empires.

These publications tended to have their own preferred styles, genres, and content ranges, their editors/editorial boards in effect acting as intellectual conditioners and gatekeepers. In the affluent world, in whatever country, in whatever institution, as this process gathered pace the role of academic/scholar as 'researcher' and 'thinker' became that of vassal labourer, reliant on the multinational-billion-dollar scholarly publishing empires for employment/career advancement.

Mostly funded by public monies, the items the vassals produced as part of their labour were handed over for free to private enterprise where, with the development of cyber technologies, they were locked up behind the paywalls and liberated on a user-pay basis, a one-way financial process that totally excluded/excludes the original creator/producer. The scale and extent of this sort of intellectual production is immense. While reliable figures are difficult to come by, estimates of the number of peer-reviewed papers published globally place the figure at around 1.5 million items annually.

The cost per download of an article under this system often approximates to the cost of a mass-marketed paperback book, hence the huge profits generated by academic publishers, it being a necessary part of the academic research model to mine and trawl within the relevant empires of published research. Scientific scholarly/academic publisher Elsevier, for example, reported revenue of $US3.5 billion, and a profit of $US1.5 billion, in 2013.

Further, the accountability processes adopted in the business model of university tended to demand not only production as *quantity*, and as *publication*, but also *evidence* that this material had been used/utilised, which came to rely on referencing and citation and use in the same or related outlets as the original material appeared in. This in turn was conducive to the creation of gated intellectual communities, encouraging and perpetuating discussions and the framing of ideas in genres of writing and language that could only be understood by, and therefore attract the interest of, niche and specialised audiences of similar ilk. The *success* of a piece of academic/scholarly came to be measured in terms of its circulation within the larger world of gated intellectual communities, that being the *audience* sought, it never being the aim of the process to engage in a democratic way with the public in general, to reach beyond the *niche*.

What we have, in effect, is the colonisation of scholarship and research and the creation by the *coloniser*, the academic publishers, of *metropoles* of learning/knowledge, within which there is enough room for creative manoeuvre and difference, but only within the *metropole*. It is a mode of intellectual work and production that is not inclusive, but parallel to and compounding for example, what Raewyn Connell drew attention to in the pioneering *Southern Theory: The global dynamics of knowledge in the social sciences* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2007): the systematic historical neglect by the affluent intellectual worlds of Europe and North America of the richness of social science understandings and insights from Africa, Latin America, Asia, and within these their alternative modes of intellectual activity and production.

For the radical/dissident scholar/academic with a passion for social justice, or with the evils of capitalism in her/his sites, the career questions have not been of the kind 'what social justice problem has your work been used to address?; what social movements, picket lines, barricades, revolts, insurrections, etc, etc, has your work helped inspire/inform?'; not 'what public forums, outlets has your work been referenced/appeared in?', but rather 'in what journal, what scholarly book (with a very small print-run, say 200 copies, and a huge price tag) has your work appeared in?, in which part of what multi-billion-dollar scholarly/academic publishing empire has your work been drawn upon/cited/referenced?'

Moreover, when it came/comes to the actual physical presence/participation of the scholar/academic in public affairs, forums, and events outside of the academy, there were and are constraints. Workloads are such that after teaching and administrative/bureaucratic responsibilities, including the huge bureaucratic process associated with the career prerequisite of competitively seeking funding and grants, have been attended to, and after research has taken place, there is little time for public affairs, especially if a personal life and rest and recreation are also the rights of the academic/scholar. Add to this the imperative to write and publish, and the *work* of the academic that has emerged in the modern *business* university is one conducive to life spent as an inhabitant of an institutional and intellectual enclosure.

It was and is a working/creative environment where the radical/dissident intellectual worker could come to view the production of a published scholarly/academic piece **as** a political act and **as** the engagement in struggle/contestation. The mode of intellectual production and its related publishing model in turn shaped the political/public behaviour of the university based intellectual worker.

 Given all this, it is easy, perhaps 'natural', to think that this is **the** intellectual/scholarly model, that this is the way academics/scholars behave, and should behave. No matter that a cursory glance

backwards shows that considerable thinking and ideas and understandings of great intellectual significance in the humanities and social sciences were given birth away from the academy, often in publications/formats that today would be regarded 'off limits' so far as academic/scholarly career prospects and advancement are concerned, and one only has to mention in regard to Europe, Gramsci and Benjamin to see the point.

Too often, university based intellectual workers, and those they train to be their future replacements, see themselves as *idea makers* and not *idea users* as well. The notion that there is more to ideas than just thinking them and putting them in journals or whatever in academic formats, that they have to also be part of life, has to be said and said and said again and again, so the *idea makers* actually **accept** as part of their brief and role that ideas and action and social transformations are all part of the one dimension, and are not afraid of or guilty or tainted by the thought.

A key part of this 'action' is seeking ways to go beyond the academic/scholarly format and conceiving of intellectual work as engaging democratically with more than niche audiences. It is not impossible. In Barcelona in 2012, trained historians and 'historytellers, historical agitators, artists, independent archivists, history groups, political archaeologists etc' came together to set up the **International History from Below Network**. As the document for its recent meeting in Manchester explains, the network aims to create a 'self-organized, do-it-yourself practice', an historical sub-culture of 'commoning and levelling, promoting the sharing of resources and countering the idea that history is solely the province of professional historians. We aim to find new practices and arenas for radical history beyond the austere mood and sensibility of the academic lecture and conference.'

If intellectual workers keep perpetuating the idea that writing a scholarly article is the political act and therefore the end of the matter, then they defraud themselves, disempowering and emasculating both themselves as idea makers and the possibilities for change.

ENDNOTE:

Radical Ruminations is at http://radicalsydney.blogspot.com.au/p/radical-ruminations.html

The **International History From Below Network** is at http://radical.history-from-below.net/

The **Manchester document** link is at http://www.hssr.mmu.ac.uk/hip/201415-events/aprilmay-2015-future-histories/history-the-new-punk

(All accessed 18 May 2015).

Rowan Cahill and Terry Irving

Wollongong University

May 2015