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What is an Intervention?



For leftist academics in the U.S., Canada and Western Europe, 2016 was a pretty shit year. Yes, there were important victories, but for now, they are overshadowed by emergent formations of a nativist, racist, sexist, heterosexist, transphobic and ableist right across Western democracies. These developments come on top of a host of problems that existed when even more liberal or centrist parties were in power in the west: capitalism, colonialism, environmental destruction. One palpable result of these setbacks—at least in my milieu—has been a general sense of helplessness and despair, accompanied by a great uptick in leftist (and even liberal) academics’ anxieties over what, exactly, they are doing as scholars. What is our responsibility as intellectuals, as people who have positions in universities, as people who have chosen to study the intersection of culture and power?

It is always healthy for us to reflect on the political implications of our work—and not only at moments of felt crisis. Here, as in so many other areas, turning to the work of those who went before us is particularly instructive. In this essay, I turn to an idea from Stuart Hall. Hall was always a thinker of the moment, deeply concerned with both his own national and international context, while *also* committed to long-term intellectual work that did not have an immediate political payoff.

One term in Hall’s oeuvre is of particular interest for thinking through the “what can we do” question: *intervention*. Hall used the term *intervention* regularly, and yet, as far as I can tell, he never explicitly theorized it. This brief essay is an attempt to give more concrete propositional form to the term *intervention*, drawing on Hall’s ideas (but also taking license with them), to help give shape and forward motion to the idea that as scholars we can do something—regardless of our positions in

relation to academic institutions, regardless of whether we are in tenured or contingent positions. So here is a provisional definition, to foreshadow my argument:

An intervention is simultaneously a political and intellectual act. It can be individual or collective. It is undertaken with intent, with consciousness of context and possible outcomes, and from a specific institutional and cultural position. It is itself theorized though it may not appear to be. Interventions have expiration dates, and while they can move from place to place, they are never universally applicable. They are conjunctural. Interventions do not come with guarantees.

Every single person reading this essay is positioned to make many different kinds of interventions. As you read this essay, I hope that you will think about what kinds of interventions are possible from your particular position, and how you might undertake one of them.

I.

In the spring of 2012, students at many of Québec's universities went on strike over a proposed 70 per cent tuition increase over five years. The scale was spectacular—first tens, then hundreds of thousands of people in the streets protesting any increase at all to tuition. The protests were so effective that the provincial government passed a law banning all public gatherings over fifty people that were not first cleared with the police. In response, the protests only grew. Every night around 8 p.m., in neighborhoods across Montréal and Québec, you could hear the din of clanging pots and pans in *manifestations*.

The protests went on into the summer and eventually led to an election that toppled the provincial government. It was an example of what sustained political organizing could accomplish, and alongside movements like #Occupy, which were happening at roughly the same time, it provided a sense of hope and possibility to many who were involved. Although five years later the student movement's larger political promises are mostly unrealized and the provincial liberals are back in power, Québec tuition remains quite low, and higher education is thus more accessible here than in many other areas of Canada and the U.S.

My role in all of this was tiny. The student protests were student-led, as they should have been. Initially I participated in the *manifestations* as a citizen joining a protest, and not as a scholar. But when Canada's Anglophone media started denouncing the student movement as entitled students and hooligans, I co-wrote an opinion piece in the *Globe and Mail* with Natalie Zemon Davis, one of the major cultural historians of her generation (Sterne and Zemon Davis 2012). We argued that the casseroles were part of a long history of *charivari*, a noisy practice of banging pots and pans in the street, in opprobrium and resistance to corrupt authority. Of course they were more complicated than that, especially if one reads the work on rough music (Zemon

Davis 1975; Thompson 1992; Greer 1993), all of which ties rough music to mob justice and enforced morality. But Québec's *manifests* captured the collective outrage without the collective violence. And our piece, though limited by space and genre, at least provided an alternative to much of what the press was saying. A couple weeks later, I was asked by *Times Higher Education* to write a piece on the student protests. This time I co-authored with Lilian Radovac, a historian of public protest, herself an experienced labour organizer as well as a scholar, and we focused on the importance of syndicalism and Québec's union tradition for understanding the success of the protests (Sterne and Radovac 2012). Again, it was just an op-ed, but it is a contribution to public debate beyond the usual channels of academic discourse.

These small interventions were partly the product of my own privilege and good fortune. A tenured professor at a research university writing an op-ed in the middle of massive social unrest is nothing to get excited about. But as a historian of sound, I had expertise that I could claim that was relevant to the noisy and musical protests; I was able to stop my own work long enough to research and write the first piece and the follow-ups; and we now live in a period where schools like mine are so excited to get professors into the press that they introduce us to editors and *almost* don't care what we say when we get into print. (I say "almost" because as the firings of Steven Salaita and Melissa Click show that in the U.S., free speech still can have consequences.) Many of us are in positions of privilege. Many scholars not in privileged positions also stage interventions. We rarely talk about it; Stuart Hall did.

II.

In the film *The Stuart Hall Project*, Hall repeatedly uses the word *intervene* to describe his political-intellectual practice. So too in the older *Representation and the Media* video from the Media Education Foundation. Here's an example of a typical Hall usage of the term, in relation to stereotypes:

The most common strategy is what is sometimes called "positive representation," where you have a negative field of stereotypes, and you try to intervene in it to represent the negative group in a more positive way; you try to reverse the stereotypes. (Hall quoted in Jhally 1997)

Or later:

If you want to begin to *change* the relationship of the viewer to the image, you have to intervene in exactly that powerful exchange between the image and its psychic meaning, the depths of the fantasy, the collective and social fantasies with which we invest images, in order to, as it were, expose and deconstruct the work of representation which the stereotypes are doing. (Hall quoted in Jhally 1997)

Consider the function of the second-person singular here. The “you” is doing different things in these quotes: in the first, it is someone who is going to put forward alternative representations. In the second, it is someone who might be a writer, a teacher, or an artist, who is trying to undermine the affective investment in stereotypes. All of these actions are by definition small and somewhat local. They will have an expiration date, and they may or may not work. But they show how, for Hall, the critique of representation must be tied to the project of its transformation.

This is the essential insight: for Hall, critique exists in relation to projects of cultural and social change—both in terms of actual relations and institutions, and in terms of how we imagine them. In *The Stuart Hall Project*, he uses the term “intervene” to describe his own appearances in the press and on television—“to intervene in debates”—but also to describe his written work in *New Left Review*. So interventions might come from different positions, and they might take different forms.

To my knowledge, Hall never theorized in writing his own use of the terms *intervene* and *intervention*. If I want to argue that all of us are poised to intervene, Hall might not be the best model because his story is so specific: an immigrant who was marginalized in England because of his race and political affiliations, but with access to media outlets and public platforms because of his elite Oxford connections. And he knew how to use them. Hall’s cultural studies reflected on the left, to challenge and extend its analysis and practice. Though Hall’s work was political, it was not activist in the sense we might use the word today. At least in Canada and the U.S., I do not think radical intellectuals today have the luxury of avoiding activism. Sooner or later we will be forced into something like a fight. We don’t have to identify as activists in the core of our self-definitions. We will simply be put into positions where we must act.

If, for Hall, the university was a space to which academics retreated in order to pursue “politics by other means” (1990: 12), today, for us, it is something different. In its best moments it is a space for deep reflection or retreat from the urgency of politics, but it is not a neutral space. Any transcendence we get is, at the end of the day, a funded transcendence, and a temporary one. We should fight to keep that, to extend it to others, but also to acknowledge that it is itself a fantasy: scholars of colour still struggle to get into positions to set intellectual and institutional agendas; people with physical disabilities and those who do not gender conform experience hostility from the very forms of our built spaces; a booming debt industry saddles our students and our colleagues; and states and governing boards shift from understanding higher education as part of the common good to something more akin to goods and services.

III.

So what does it mean to intervene? While capacious definitions are good, we need to begin with some limits in terms of what counts. Clearly, we should not normalize the neo-fascist discourse that has flourished and gained visibility on Twitter, on Facebook, in the mainstream press, in bathroom stalls, on leaflets that mar our cities and campuses. But in giving into a sense of urgency, we risk allowing ourselves to smuggle in a dangerous and increasingly common political gesture among left academics: the denouncement. Denouncements are dangerous when they become performances of politics that substitute for other kinds of political action.

Scholars are good at denouncing. But we do too much of it, we care too much about it, and we do it to one another far too often. The elegant or spectacular denouncement is the academic's equivalent of a vote in electoral politics: too many people confuse it with the end of political action when at best it is a beginning. Denunciation is also depoliticizing because it is a performance for insiders. As Maisha Z. Johnson writes, call-out culture is too often about "'performing activism'—when we're more worried about how we look to other activists than our larger vision of what we're trying to build together'" (2016). Indeed, when academics take political stands, they can easily degenerate into nothing more than performances for other academics (Barney 2010). Denunciation is predicated upon assumptions of shared knowledge and agreement where they may not exist, overriding the messiness and complexity of lived conjunctures. We are supposed to analyze, describe and reimagine those conjunctures. Or as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten put it in *The Undercommons*, "Will we be in on the joke now that we all know governmentality so well? We can all read it like a book" (2013: 52). In a political-intellectual practice built on Gramsci's insights about shifting alliances and the contingency of political formations, we should be very wary of a politics that begins by sorting into "us" and "them." This is not a call for empathetic dialogue with racists, but rather a demand that our politics must not, in the first instance, be about naming friends and enemies.

This is one area where ideas that were prevalent during Hall's generation of cultural studies will need some revision. Cultural Studies' pragmatic orientation, like many of our models of intellectual work, was developed in another context. In Britain, the existence of an actual communist party led New Left intellectuals to argue for suspending some aspects of normative thinking, especially in opposition to the party's problematic vanguardist tendencies. In the U.S., the ongoing influence of pragmatism and institutionalized anti-communism also led many critical scholars to avoid normative thinking as part of their work. Of course, some old politics endure. So long as racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, transphobia and capitalism persist, politics still register—violently so—through differences that are inscribed onto bodies. In an age of big data and mass surveillance, who could disagree with Gramsci's adage that the role of the intellectual is to know more than

the other side? In a context of a fractured left and multiple causes vying for our attention and time, who could disagree with Foucault's attention to location or Hall's calls for modesty in our pursuits?

But that was then. We are in a different moment, where a terrifying new set of norms is being pushed by both far-right parties and mainstream institutions. As part of challenging them, we will need to abandon previous generations' anti-normative impulse. It served cultural studies well in prior moments, but we need to imagine and support alternative cultural formations, and alternative constructs of justice. We can and should take our cues from activists: there is serious and engaging work happening in movements such as Idle No More and the Movement for Black Lives. But one luxury academics have is precisely the institutionalized demand to reflect, and this time and space for reflection—however conditional or limited—can be used as an aid to imagination.

Drawing from Chicana feminist scholarship and her own experience as a survivor of sexual violence, Lena Palacios has contrasted the desire for revenge with the broader goal of transformative justice, whose practice is “driven by the formation of radical, oppositional models of justice, redress and response—namely the creation of transformative systems of accountability” (2016: 94). To be sure, a lot of our practice will fall short of the feminist, anti-racist, intersectional and anti-carceral goals Palacios sets out. And yet, this broader programmatic sensibility ought to guide even the most limited forms of intervention, because if we lose sight of the transformative goals of the left project, we will ultimately lose our political and moral footing. It is at that moment that political gestures get transformed into professional gestures, and that the left's politics begins to resemble a program of sorting out friends and enemies. As Agamben (1998) says in his critique of Carl Schmitt, we cannot exclude *some* life from the rule of law. The effect of denunciations is to cast out, and in the context of social media, this tends to produce an unremitting economy of shame (see Ronson 2015). Taken together, these reasons are why denunciations—even when they might be part of a larger political program—cannot count as an interventions. As often as not, denunciation is depoliticization that wears the mask of political action.

While movements like the *manifs*, #Occupy and #BlackLivesMatter have their own theoretical bases, as scholars we can help advance them by allowing them to influence how we think and talk about what we do. Today we live in a world of leaky media, where statements in one area flow easily into another. Social media and means of transmission are different than when classic cultural studies theories like subculture, encoding/decoding or the theory of articulation were developed. Local struggles can find one another more easily; they already collaborate to represent systematicity. As scholars, we can make use of this aspect of social media by finding ways to describe systematicity. In a moment when movements are finding one another, we can help that process along by showing the connections between

different struggles. But those connections are radically contextual—it is our job to do the work of research and analysis, to bring the conjuncture to bear on what we know, rather than to bring what we think we already know back to the conjuncture over and over. We do the work of understanding, we do the work of description.

IV.

This will inevitably mean extending some of our cherished cultural studies ideas and letting go of some others. It will also mean looking beyond cultural studies for models of intellectual intervention, meeting and respecting activists on the intellectual grounds they set out. The goal of this piece is simply to raise the topic, to suggest that we all can and should do something or some things, and that interventions can be part of our regular academic and political practices without necessarily consuming them or superseding them. To that end, here is a provisional typology of interventions, offered as a starting point for discussion. Feel free to revise or replace it as it fits your needs:

1. Develop intellectual responses to social and cultural movements and the problems they raise. This is the core of cultural studies as an academic practice, from *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978) to Simone Browne’s recent book *Dark Matters* (2015). Analyze, historicize, draw on the insights of activists, but also work at a more abstract level. In Browne’s case, for instance, the book is a history of race and surveillance that at once posits Black experience as central to our understanding of surveillance and builds on insights developed by generations of Black writers and activists. It can be read as an intellectual response to anti-racist activism within the scholarly domain.

2. Describe systematicity. Generations of theorists have been doing this, but it can also form the basis of a more interventionist practice. For example, *Schools of Shame* was a project spearheaded by Hye-Jin Lee and Carol Stabile of the Fembot Collective.² It was an intervention in the ongoing struggle against the epidemic of sexual violence on our campuses, thereby building on the work of thousands of feminist activists. Lee and Stabile took Clery Act data, which notes sexual assault reports by campus, and compared it with White House statistics showing that an average of one in five women will be sexually assaulted during their undergraduate careers. They were thus able to offer a schematic representation of the degree of underreporting of sexual assault by campus. They then publicized the results via social media, winding up on *Jezebel* and in *Bitch* magazine, among other places. As an intervention, it worked at several levels: it was a contribution to the ongoing project of reducing rape on campus, it gave context and meaning to rates of reported sexual assault, and it was designed to circulate in online spaces where sexual assault was being discussed.

3. Undertake politicized research but do not reify topics. To reify a topic means to confuse the prestige or importance of a topic with the quality or importance of the work on that topic. Pierre Bourdieu (1988) noted the tendency long ago, and it remains a practice in both politicized and depoliticized corners of academia. Hall's imperative to work "without guarantees" means we cannot guarantee the significance of work before it is taken up. Often, topics become significant in unexpected ways. Politicized research means figuring out what a politicized sensibility demands of any and all topics of work, as well as a patience and respect for the intellectual labour required to carry it out properly. It means trusting intellectual impulses alongside political ones. The alternative is the instant opinion, the hot take—something economically necessary for commercial journalism and social media, but the bane of good scholarship.

4. Open and defend spaces within the university, including spaces for basic research; defend the academic enterprise itself. For instance, in the U.S., New Faculty Majority (<http://www.newfacultymajority.info>) is a group that advocates for the rights of non-tenure-track faculty members. As their name suggests, this population now makes up the majority of people teaching university classes. Writing on part-timers goes back at least to novels like Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954), and the academic labour movement has always had an intellectual component. But New Faculty Majority emerged as a result of extensive organizing and theorizing over the last twenty years. It descended from journals like *Workplace*,³ which theorized academic labour, as well as activism around contingent academic labour on individual campuses as well as in large professional associations. As part of their advocacy, they make policy proposals based on a transformative understanding of the university. Thus, they not only defend the academic enterprise against the forces that challenge it, they also envision an alternative, better future for it.

5. Intervene in conversations outside our immediate domain; translate ideas for people outside our fields. Historically, this has meant the kinds of media practice described in this piece—Hall's appearances on television, opinion pieces, and the like. Mainstream press engagement is a skill that can be learned and cultivated, as are social media skills. For any of these, scholars will need to think through how their own media practice may leverage the promotional cultures of media institutions and university administrations, without necessarily accepting their premises.

6. Democratize and support cultural practice. Hall's famous line about popular culture—that it is one place where socialism might be constituted and otherwise "I don't give a damn about it"—points to the significance of culture as a site of political struggle. As scholars and as teachers in cultural disciplines, we have a responsibility to foster greater access to all domains of culture. For instance, in heavily class- and gender-coded fields of academic music in the UK, Georgina Born and Kyle Devine have recently published a study showing the ways in which men and women are funneled into different areas of study, with material consequences

for students when they finish their programs (2015). All of us who study elites have a responsibility to describe how power relations are actively maintained and reproduced. Conversely, those of us who study traditionally minoritized groups have a responsibility to produce more sophisticated narratives that go far beyond cultural validation, to take seriously their cultural practices on their own terms, and to describe conflict and contradictions within them. Scholarship should never just be cheerleading for our side.

7. Imagine alternatives. This will be the hardest thing for scholars trained in the cultural studies tradition, because it offers relatively few resources for actually doing this. We may well, instead, need to take our cues not only from activists, but from artists, musicians and writers who are actively working to imagine and perform alternative kinds of community. Some of these groups, like the transnational sound art collective Ultra-red,⁴ already theorize their own practice, allowing scholars a point of entry at our own register and demanding of us to think laterally, rather than placing ourselves theoretically “above” cultural practice and activism.

V.

Any given intervention may partake of one or more of these acts. Some interventions take minutes; others may take years. None is enough on its own, and even taken all together it will never be enough without connection to broader movements outside the academy. Some of these interventions might bring professional rewards; many more may not. All of them require specific skills, some of which you may have, some of which you may have to learn, but any one of us can potentially undertake any kind of the interventions I listed above. Lawyers use the term *pro bono*—“for the public good”—to describe work they take on in addition to their regular practice, usually as the result of a set of political commitments. Perhaps *intervention* could take on that meaning for us, the cultural students. Go ahead: pick an intervention and follow through.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a plenary address at the annual meeting of the U.S. Cultural Studies Association, 22 May 2015. My thanks to Jaafar Aksikas, Lawrence Grossberg, Carrie Rentschler and Carol Stabile for comments on earlier drafts.
2. <http://fembotcollective.org/sos-map/>.
3. <http://ices.library.ubc.ca/index.php/workplace>.
4. <http://ultrared.org>.

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