

Academia Pro Bono

Jonathan Sterne

University of Pittsburgh

This essay argues that academics should develop a “pro bono” ethic analogous to the manner in which doctors and lawyers donate their time to causes they support. This labor should be given freely and not used for scholars’ own professional advancement, and it should be directed toward making the university’s resources available to groups that otherwise might lack access to them.

Keywords: public intellectual; cultural politics; academic labor; cultural studies

For American academics, it is easy to feel depressed in these times of revived U.S. imperialism. The Bush administration shows utter contempt for democracy abroad, world opinion, and the truth itself. Their domestic policy—combined with a weak economy—effectively puts the squeeze on academics. The talk around universities is that every aspect of our work will receive less funding next year: smaller raises; fewer new jobs; less money for libraries, resources, and travel; fewer research grants; larger classes. It is a gloomy time for progressive academics whether our scope is political or merely professional. Our plight is shared by progressive organizations of all sizes and orientations: labor, antiracist, feminist, environmental, disability rights, and antihomophobic organizations, to name but a few, and all feel the same financial pinch that we do as scholars. It is easy to feel helpless in these moments. But the truth is that some of us, at least, control a precious resource that could be of tremendous use to the causes we support.

Our time.¹

In both law and medicine, professionals routinely donate a portion of their time, along with their resources and expertise, to projects they find important and worthwhile. These volunteer efforts are often coordinated by organizations dedicated to that purpose (check out, e.g., <http://www.probonoinst.org/> for one example in the law field). This is an especially powerful tool when teams of professionals work together on a project.

It is time for progressive academics to make “pro bono” part of our ethos, part of our professional culture. Some of us already do volunteer our time. But why not systematize it? An interdisciplinary organization of academics dedicated to making ourselves useful to progressive organizations would serve two purposes. First, it would provide those organizations with types of knowledge

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies, Volume 4 Number 2, 2004 219-222

DOI: 10.1177/1532708603262724

© 2004 Sage Publications

they currently lack the resources to assemble. Second, it would force us, as scholars, to move outside the comfortable spaces of our profession—to cross boundaries of class, race, and other modes of differences, and to encounter fields of knowledge where the stakes may be completely different. Pierre Bourdieu (1999, pp. 607-626) and his collaborators remind us of just how important such encounters are. The organizational part is particularly significant because it would allow us to build connections between academia and activism that outlast any particular individual or set of personal relationships. An organization would also help pool our limited resources and work at a truly national and international level.

It is nothing new for people in the human sciences to pursue nonacademic projects as part of their calling. Social science scholars have, for a long time now, worked on policy matters in a variety of roles. In addition to almost all the traditional social sciences, there are strong traditions of policy work in women's studies, disability studies, public health, and many other interdisciplinary fields. Cultural studies has a small policy tradition of its own: Tony Bennett and the cultural policy studies school have called upon scholars to be engaged in the derisory world of policy-making alongside the necessarily abstract world of theory (Bennett, 1997; Miller, 1998). A movement to organize and promote pro bono academic work would necessarily draw on all these traditions—and cultural studies scholars could learn a lot by looking to other fields with more established critical policy and application traditions.

Ideally, an academic pro bono movement would also push beyond policy research and “applied” scholarship as it is currently conceived. Policy is an important world in which we can engage. But policy tends to be a privileged site of political engagement for academics. We are rewarded for “mattering” in policy circles or in corporate circles. And so we need to be careful about our choices of engagement; we should not assume a harmony between our professional and our political interests. As Jerry G. Watts (1993) wrote of advocacy for the urban poor, so it would be for many forms of pro bono political research: “There is no career reward within the academy for work of this intensity” (p. 247). We will need to look beyond the policy horizon and beyond our professional horizons to all corners of the messy world of politics and culture with which Leftists routinely engage. We will need to make it part of our professional ethos to sometimes bracket our professional aspirations. C. Wright Mills (1959, p. 185) famously wrote that social scientists who believed in the ideals of reason and freedom should address themselves to three publics: those who have power and know it, for they need to be held accountable for their actions; those who have power and do not know it, for they need to be made aware of and accountable for their actions; and those who do not have power and need to better understand the ways in which their personal troubles are connected with

broader social problems. A pro bono movement could work at all these registers, depending on the problem, the project, and the people involved.

Most Left organizations are underfunded and understaffed. The Right created its many think tanks in part because they believed the Left controlled academia. This may or may not be true. But for the moment, we cannot expect funds to come down for a Heritage Foundation of our own—even if the former Clintonites manage to get their think tank together. For those of us who do have academia, we must make use of the resources at our disposal—time, libraries, computers/software, travel—to help forge a new balance of power between Right and Left in the world of ideas. We should not expect a professional reward for this behavior, and it should not be a substitute for our regular scholarship. Conversely, our regular scholarship is not a substitute for other forms of political action. We are not the “organic intellectuals” that Gramsci hoped for, that the early Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies hoped to be (Hall, 1992, p. 281). But we can make a difference. When Gramsci wrote that the first function of the political intellectual is to know more than the other side and the second function is to share that knowledge (cited in Hall, 1992, p. 281), his hope was that intellectuals would make a vital contribution to a Left political movement. As academics, we can help make the contribution, if we are willing to make—and give—the time.

Note

1. Not all academics are in the same boat. Your control over your time depends on your career stage, what kind of job you have, your family status, and a host of other factors. So this call is for those of us relatively privileged enough to assert some control over our time. You know who you are.

References

- Bennett, T. (1997). *Culture: A reformer's science*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bourdieu, P., Accardo, A., Balazs, G., Beaud, S., Bonvin, F., Bourdieu, E., et al. (1999). *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society* (P. Parkhurst Ferguson, S. Emanuel, J. Johnson, & S. T. Waryn, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hall, S. (1992). Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural studies* (pp. 277-294). New York: Routledge.
- Miller, T. (1998). *Technologies of truth: Cultural citizenship and the popular media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Watts, J. G. (1993). Reflections on the Rodney King verdict and the paradoxes of the Black response. In R. Gooding-Williams (Ed.), *Reading Rodney King, reading urban uprising* (pp. 236-248). New York: Routledge.

Jonathan Sterne teaches in the Department of Communication at the University of Pittsburgh. He is author of *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003) and has written widely on media, technology, and the politics of culture. He also helps produce *Bad Subjects*, one of the longest continuously running Left publications online: <http://eserver.org/bs>.