



## Guest Editors' Introduction: Scholar-Activist Terrain in Canada and Ireland

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### Introduction

Post-2008 economic crisis, academics are enduring and combatting greater corporatization on their campuses, the casualization of scholarly labour, more fervent pressure by administrations to demonstrate teaching 'outputs' and monetizable research 'inputs', and, in some cases, threats to their academic freedom (e.g., Bailey & Freedman, 2011; Côté & Allahar, 2011; Hanke & Hearn, 2012; Lynch, Crean & Moran, 2010; Mercille & Murphy, 2015; Nussbaum, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Tuchman, 2011; Turk, 2014). Moreover, when combined with family and other personal obligations, the publish or perish ethic of the profession means that a commitment to activist-oriented endeavours which promote social justice is often difficult to sustain (e.g., Few, Piercy & Stremmel, 2007; hooks, 1994; Napoli & Aslama, 2011; Rodino-Colocino, 2012; Smeltzer, 2012; Ward, 2005). Nevertheless, scholars at all levels of the tiered academic system continue to engage in myriad forms of activism on campus and within their respective local, regional, and international communities (Flood, Martin & Dreher, 2013). Indeed, given the conditions of neoliberalism and the educational and societal repercussions of a deteriorating welfare state, many scholars feel a stronger pull than ever to engage in activism that aims to make a difference in the lives of others (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2004; Holborow, 2012, pp. 32-33; Smeltzer & Hearn, 2015).

The overarching objective of this special double issue of *Studies in Social Justice* (SSJ) was to bring together scholar-activists from different disciplinary backgrounds to explore and discuss the relationship between

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scholarship and activism within this shifting landscape.<sup>1</sup> As the guest editors of these back-to-back issues, we asked authors to critically consider the rewards and challenges, successes and drawbacks of pursuing activist endeavours inside and/or outside their home institutions. Specifically, the articles examine the ways in which Canadian and Irish academics negotiate their pedagogical, research, and service obligations with a commitment to social justice. The impetus for this collection grew out of a series of semi-structured interviews conducted by Sandra Smeltzer with 19 scholar-activists from five Irish universities in 2014, which in turn were based on similar interviews she conducted in 2013 with six academics from three universities in Ontario, Canada.

We distributed a Call for Papers exclusively to Canadian and Irish academics, requesting that submissions be theoretically driven *and* self-reflexive. The response was overwhelming: we received abstracts from 127 scholars, representing 19 universities in Canada and Ireland, which speaks to the salience of this subject matter in both countries. As would be expected, we found it extremely difficult to winnow down the submissions to the pieces that appear in these issues. Our decisions were, in large part, informed by our strong desire to facilitate a wide spectrum of perspectives regarding how scholars negotiate the tricky terrain of contemporary activism in both locales from a range of institutions, disciplines, viewpoints, linguistic backgrounds, and topics, and to represent voices from across the academic system's hierarchical labour system.

### **Canada and Ireland**

Canada and Ireland are not a common choice for comparative scholarship; they are more often compared to their neighbouring superpowers, the US and UK respectively. There are, however, grounds to explore the similarities and differences between Canada and Ireland in relation to scholar activism, thereby bringing into focus trends shared by the two countries and the potentially distinctive circumstances in each locale.

To begin, there is a long history of Irish migration to Canada, with roughly 14 per cent of Canada's population claiming Irish ancestry (Statistics Canada, 2006). This has helped foster positive working relations between the two countries based on key cultural affinities. English, for example, is the first and dominant language for the majority of the population, with both countries

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<sup>1</sup> In their articles, many of these authors use the terms 'academic', 'researcher', and 'scholar' interchangeably. For present purposes, the difference for us is the institutional setting. An academic is usually based at a university or other higher education or research institution, whereas a researcher or scholar, while often equally qualified in terms of academic qualifications or experiential knowledge in a research discipline, may be institutionally independent.

boasting another strong, state-supported official language (French and Irish). They also have a shared history and a unique relationship with the UK, which is intimately intertwined with colonization and varying degrees of decolonization. As well, Canada and Ireland share the historical impact that religion has played in the development of their respective educational systems with Catholicism being the majority religion in both countries. Despite the vast differences in size, Canada and Ireland have a similar level of GDP per capita and identical UN Human Development and Education Index rankings of 0.96 and literacy rates of 99 per cent (UNDP, 2012). Of particular relevance to our discussion, Canada's and Ireland's tenured university systems are comparable with faculty members possessing relative, if increasingly jeopardized, academic and pedagogical freedom in comparison to many regions of the world. Finally, at the macroeconomic level, Canada and Ireland, in line with global trends led by American industry, are witnessing diminishing welfare states under unfettered global capitalism; a trajectory that may encourage more academics to engage in social justice-oriented activism to help fill the gaps left behind.

There are also some key differences between Canada and Ireland, particularly in terms of geographical size and population. Of particular note is the discrepancy in terms of the number of educational institutions in each country and the overall size of their domestic academic communities: Ireland has seven universities, compared to 98 in Canada (Universities Canada, 2014). Perhaps the most significant manifestation of this disparity can be found in inter-personal academic relationships. To a large extent, and especially within disciplinary areas, Irish academics all know – or know of – each other in this relatively small community; this in turn impacts how much, in what ways, and with whom they engage in activism. As well, from the interviews Smeltzer conducted in 2013 and 2014, it was clear that on campus activism appears to be more prominent in Canada than it is Ireland, which may be related to the fact that Canadian universities tend to have more active unions of academics. Irish academics who identify as scholar-activists instead tend to focus their energies on engaging almost exclusively in activist endeavours outside the academy.

A final comparative issue to bear in mind is the impact of the global financial crisis and recession on academic labour and university resources. Both countries are facing greater neoliberalization in higher education with the result being that, as noted above, they are struggling with deepening budget cutbacks, swelling numbers of precarious labour, and a stronger emphasis on market imperatives, including pressure to adhere to publishing and funding metrics. The austerity measures pursued in Ireland by the Coalition Government in the aftermath of the bailout by the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and others, combined with the utilitarian, pro-market National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (commonly referred to as the Hunt Report), have had a particularly negative impact on university funding, academic salaries, job and promotion freezes,

student-faculty ratios, and the increase in casual and precarious labour within universities (Hunt, 2011; Labi, 2012; Mercille & Murphy, 2015; Shattock, 2010; Walsh & Loxley, 2014). We are thus witnessing:

the desire on the part of employers and the state to use the recession to implement a double-pronged strategy: to tie higher education more closely to the needs of capital and, also to entrench neoliberal ideology in what is taught and thought and in the way higher education work is done. (Holborow, 2012, p. 12)

The (recently ousted) Conservative government under Stephen Harper in Canada actively pursued similar austerity economics, including closing libraries, muzzling government scientists, discontinuing important services provided by Library and Archives Canada, and harassing non-governmental organizations both legally and financially (especially those critical of the government). Although Canadian post-secondary education has certainly felt the painful brunt of such austerity politics, which have also served to compromise academic freedom, the damage has not (yet) been as extensive as that experienced in Ireland (de Peuter, Cohen & Brophy, 2015; Hanke & Hearn, 2012; Turk, 2014; Wyile, 2013).

### **Key Themes and Fault Lines: The ‘Double Shift’ of Scholarship and Activism**

Notwithstanding a number of differences between the two countries, several themes related to scholarship and activism emerged over and over again during the Canadian and Irish interviews, which are also very clearly reflected in the articles that follow in these issues. We found general agreement across the board that engaging in activist pursuits is usually a liability in terms of employment, promotion, funding, and, for some, intellectual freedom. Not surprisingly, individuals in a precarious labour situation were particularly concerned that the time and energy they dedicate to their activist commitments would prove detrimental to landing a full-time academic position or securing tenure (see in this issue, O’Flynn & Panayiotopoulos, and Manning, Holmes, Pullen Sansfaçon, Temple Newhook & Travers; see also Flood, Martin & Dreher, 2013; Kezar & Sam, 2013; Madeloni, 2014; Smeltzer & Hearn, 2015). Relatedly, there was strong agreement that their home institutions preferred more sanitized forms of ‘community engagement’ over activism that might disrupt the political and economic status quo on campus (and presumably put at risk the institution’s ‘brand’) and off campus (jeopardizing funding from some of the institution’s sponsors and alumni donors) (Flood, Martin & Dreher, 2013; Hanke & Hearn, 2012; Smeltzer, 2015; Vogelgesang & Rhoads, 2003).

Many interviewees also discussed issues related to the feasibility, legitimacy, and/or difficulty of publishing academic material related to one’s

activism (see Khasnabish & Haiven, and Manning, Holmes, Pullen Sansfaçon, Temple Newhook & Travers, in this issue). Some commented on the struggle of trying to produce material that is useful to their respective communities, which requires different skill sets and consumes significantly more time to generate than most academics or activists recognize, as well as to fulfil their scholarly responsibilities of publishing peer-reviewed material (see Cox, and Petrick, in this issue; see also Napoli & Aslama, 2011; Rodino-Colocino, 2012). Of particular concern for some individuals is how academics might ‘use’ their activist experiences for their own benefit in terms of scholarly publishing, conference presentations, and grant applications, and the ethics related to appropriating others’ voices (e.g., Carapico, 2006; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Rodino-Colocino, 2012; Routledge, 2004; Smeltzer, 2012). Constant reflexivity is therefore of paramount importance even when one’s research is explicitly collaborative, participatory, and in solidarity (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; Dempsey et al., 2011).

Fabio Rojas (2013) contends that “activism and academia don’t mix”, arguing that the former is about promoting social change, whereas the latter focuses on knowledge generation. With the exception of two individuals, none of our interviewees or authors have agreed with this perspective (which is also championed by the likes of Stanley Fish, Jim A. Kuypers, and Richard Vatz). Instead they operate from the premise that the primary aim of scholar activism is to disrupt dominant discourses and challenge economic, political, and cultural power relations (e.g., Fuller & Kitchin, 2004; Speed, 2006). This position, with which the guest editors concur, is embedded in a “social justice sensibility [that] entails a moral imperative to *act* as effectively as we can to do something about structurally sustained inequalities” (Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz & Murphy, 1996, p. 111, emphasis in original). However, we did find notable discrepancy in terms of *how much* time and energy interviewees thought academics should dedicate to being an activist. Certainly, as Kamilla Petrick discusses in her article for this issue, the availability of time, as well as intellectual and emotional space, to engage in academic or activist work is often determined by the ebbs and flows of one’s personal life. Moreover, for some individuals, being an activist is their foremost objective, and an academic position provides the tools and resources that can help advance social justice. Others see more of a balance between their scholarly and activist worlds, as one informs and supports the other. Still others argue that although they are committed to their respective activist endeavours, being an academic remains their priority and obligation.

Despite this discrepancy, most interviewees relayed a very similar message, which did not come through as strongly in the majority of the written articles (which may speak to a reluctance to discuss one’s limitations in print): on one hand, they often felt overwhelmed by the time and emotional energy they were investing in both their scholarship and activist realms, while simultaneously often feeling guilty that they were unable to dedicate more of

themselves to their chosen social justice pursuits. On the other hand, they clearly felt that their interventions were meaningful, that they were making a positive difference, and that this was, quite simply, their life's work.

Perhaps more contentiously, interviewees and authors often diverged regarding their preferred approach to engaging in activist endeavours. For some, the most effective methods of advancing social justice are the ones that challenge and modify, but do not necessarily attempt to upend, 'the system' (e.g., Pain & Francis, 2003; Shade, 2011; Smeltzer, 2012), whereas others have chosen to engage in activities that actively seek to abolish the dominant political and economic framework (e.g., Cloud, 2011; Hale, 2008; James & Gordon, 2008; Piven, 2010). These positions represent familiar reformist versus revolutionary/radical approaches to fomenting change (e.g., Croteau, 2005; Luxemburg, 2007; Panitch, 2008; Young & Schwartz, 2012); however, many individuals occupy viewpoints in the middle of the spectrum (e.g., Rowe & Carroll, 2014) and they alter their approach depending on myriad factors, including the issue at hand, personal obligations, and professional commitments.

These differentiations are also intimately intertwined with expressed opinions about what constitutes meaningful and strategic activism. Much of the tension resides in the distinction made between what we might call 'back office' activism that operates more behind the scenes and is thus less overtly public in nature, versus 'front-line' activism that is very public in its orientation. For us, although we believe that academics have a responsibility to act as engaged intellectuals within and beyond their university borders (e.g., Coté, Day & De Peuter, 2007; Giroux, 1991, 2015; Fuller & Kitchin, 2004; Smeltzer & Grzyb, 2009), how this plays out on the ground must be contextualized and is based on the individual, their capabilities, and on the specific issue of concern. Concomitantly, we recognize the value in a multi-pronged approach to advancing social justice (see Flood, Martin & Dreher, 2013), as demonstrated by the range of tactics described in the following articles.

## **Overview of Articles**

The seven provocative articles that appear in the present issue cover a diverse gamut of issues, including concerns about the working relationship between progressive academics, students, and left activists; academics and social movements; time as a limited resource for scholar-activists; activist media projects; and LGBT activism in relation to both refugees and the parents of trans\* children. Given the range of personal and professional challenges inherent in negotiating the relationship between scholarship and activism, we asked these authors to openly and critically discuss their practices (Brem-Wilson, 2014; Dempsey et al., 2011; Hale, 2008), which produced a broad spectrum of results in terms of how personal they chose to be in telling their

stories.

Learning from experience is the basis of Alex Khasnabish and Max Haiven's article, which explores the possibilities for leveraging the complex and fraught privileges afforded to academics in order to create resources for activist movements. It focuses on lessons learned from the Radical Imagination Project, an experiment in politically engaged, ethnographically grounded social movement research the authors have sustained in Halifax since 2010. Through this project Khasnabish and Haiven developed a practice of working alongside the small but energetic and diverse activist movements in the city. In their conclusion they argue that the value and success of social movements cannot be ascertained only by their ability to achieve concrete social change; rather, we need to learn from how movements operate themselves and how they can offer (sometimes unintentionally) alternative forms of social reproduction.

Laurence Cox also looks at scholar activism from the perspective of social movements in his article, particularly within the Irish context. He begins by arguing that many progressive academics have not embarked on the political learning curve necessary to effectively participate in social movements. Cox contends that this isolation from transformative agency translates into a belief that existing institutional frameworks can be pathways to meaningful social change. Based on his extensive involvement in a range of movements, combined with the various facets of his academic position, he concludes that the criterion for activist scholarship should be the extent to which scholars manage to reshape institutional structures on and off campus. Moreover, Cox argues that critical reflection is insufficient without praxis geared to changing that situation and creating more radical relationships that actively challenge the political and economic status quo.

Micheal O'Flynn and Aggelos Panayiotopoulos also focus their attention on academia and activism in Ireland, especially the complex relationship between scholars and practitioners. Specifically, the authors examine their own efforts to draw together different strands of the left, reflecting on the reciprocal relationships that have developed between progressive academics and students, trade unionists, and activists. Evaluating these initiatives, which have included reading groups, educational seminars, the publication of a quarterly paper, and the organization of precarious workers in higher education, O'Flynn and Panayiotopoulos conclude that there is indeed space for activism in academia and space for academia in activism. Similar to Petrick and Manning et al., the authors also highlight the difficulties precarious academics face in trying to engage in activist endeavours both on and off campus.

The pertinent issue of time is the focus of Kamilla Petrick's article, which looks at the capacity of scholar-activists to engage in collective action under the tightening constraints of the neoliberal university. Petrick explores this issue through semi-structured interviews with Canadian scholar-activists and finds that academics across disciplines face increasingly severe time

pressures. While dispelling the argument that lack of time excuses academics from activist involvement, she argues persuasively that the changing political economic paradigm of the university negatively affects one's capacity to engage in reflective thought, and can dampen the extent to which 'public intellectuals' are able to fully participate in social movements. Petrick concludes, like Khasnabish and Haiven, by stressing the importance of balance and self-care in one's chosen avenue of activism.

In their article, David Skinner, Robert Hackett, and Stuart Poyntz explore the ways in which the different imperatives of academic institutions and activist organizations incorporate scholarly participation into progressive media projects. Discussion focuses on the authors' direct experiences with three particular projects: Media Democracy Day, Open Media, and NewsWatch Canada. In reflecting on what enables and constrains participation in these activist media projects, they argue that despite limits and pressures the case studies demonstrate that the fields of activism and the academy can be woven together in ways that produce key resources and energies to promote progressive media reform.

The last two articles in this issue are concerned with the relationship between academia and LGBT activism. Katherine Fobear's article looks at storytelling as a resource for speaking about social injustice and how it can be deployed by LGBT refugees to validate their truths and bring their voices to the fore in confronting state and public violence. She focuses her attention on three contexts where justice and injustice intersect in refugees' storytelling: the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board, public advocacy around anti-queer violence and refugee rights, and oral history research. Drawing on her own experience of working as an oral historian and a Vancouver-based volunteer and advocate, Fobear argues that by being able to share their stories in a range of venues, LGBT refugees contribute to critical policy issues around inequality and immigration, which is an important step toward their protection and settlement in Canada.

In their deeply personal article, Kimberley Ens Manning, Cindy Holmes, Annie Pullen Sansfaçon, Julia Temple Newhook, and Ann Travers explore the particular affective and ethical issues they face as parents, scholars, and activists seeking to understand and undo structural transphobia within the broader contexts of ageism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism in Canadian society. The authors argue that allyship with their respective children does not imply that they have become 'courtesy members' of a marginalized group; rather, they occupy a position of liminality in which they live a commitment to their trans\* children regardless of the discrimination they face in advocating for their loved ones. The article examines how their scholar activism assumes complex configurations of privilege and vulnerability, contending that without the institutional security that academic tenure affords, their capacity to continue to engage in activism remains in flux.

These articles have begun a conversation, which will be continued in the forthcoming second part of this special double issue that addresses an even

wider range of topics and perspectives. We wish to sincerely thank David Butz, the journal's Editor-in-Chief, for encouraging this idea for publication in *Studies in Social Justice*, and for his editing work to bring these issues to fruition.

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