SRHE Society for Research into Higher Education

Scholars in the Streets: Portraits of Disruptive Faculty Activism in 20th Century Social Movements

Research report or brief

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Executive Summary

This research used portraiture to chronicle five cases of collaborative and sustained faculty activism for social movement causes. Drawing on Piven's (2006) theory of distruptive and interdependent power, the study asked: how have postsecondary educators collectively engaged in a diverse range of disruptive activism within 20th Century social movements? Data came from oral history interviews with faculty activists and archival materials, and were analyzed using narrative and ethnographic tools to create portraits of each case. Across the portraits, findings reveal that postsecondary faculty have four primary types of interdependent power: power as employees, accreditors, recognized knowledge producers and authorities, and as bodies/people who can block or take up space. This research fills a gap in the historical record of postsecondary faculty activism and expands definitions of scholar activism, allowing today's postsecondary educators to imagine and enact a wider array of possibilities.

Project Aims and Objectives

Histories of postsecondary educators engaging in struggles for justice too often hidden and over-simplified (Chatterton, Hodkinson & Pickerill, 2010, Engler & Engler, 2016; Piven, 2006). This research tells stories and expands notions of faculty activism. It asks: how have postsecondary educators collectively engaged in a diverse range of disruptive activism within 20th Century United States' social movements?

Many faculty activists are accused of being "too liberal" and are told to disassociate their professional work from their political selves (Boyte, 2014; Giroux, 2017; Pellow, 2012; Young, Battaglia & Cloud, 2010). Research on public scholarship and scholar activism legitimates how faculty have a rightful role in addressing social and ecological injustices (Catone, 2017; Checker, 2014; Colbeck & Wharton-Michael, 2006). However, this literature often positions scholars as individual actors who make change through institutionally sanctioned channels (Casey, 1993; Connery, 2011; Franklin, 2015; Hart, 2005; Kezar, 2010; Marshall & Anderson, 2009). This individualistic and institutional thinking is a (neo)liberal maneuver that weakens faculty capacity to act in solidarity (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005). Seeking other possibilities, this study turns faculty activism that uses collective, interdependent power.

Everyday people have access to interdependent power; it comes from leveraging one's non-cooperation upon the institutions and norms that *depend* on that cooperation (Engler & Engler, 2016; Piven, 2006; 2017; Sharp, 2010). Examples of interdependent power range from strikes, to boycotts, to "women… who refused their role as sexual partners," or "riots, where crowds break with the compact that usually governs civic life" (Piven, 2006, p. 21). Historians assert that the activation of interdependent power is at the heart of major instances of social change, from overthrowing dictators (Sharp, 2010) to "great moments of equalizing reform" (Piven, 2006, p. 21).

Methodology and Timetable

This study combined three modes of inquiry: portraiture, archival research, and critical oral history. The overall methodology is portraiture: a narrative and ethnographic approach to research that merges the "systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 6). Placing portraiture as the primary methodology meant that I collected stories and artifacts from several cases of faculty activism and my analysis resulted in the creation of detailed, accessible, literary portraits of each case. My use of archival and critical oral history approaches led me to focus on the voices of faculty members directly involved in the collective activism, creating a "people's history" of the events (Casey, 1993; The Popular Memory Group, 1982; Thomson, 2007). Together, the portraiture and critical oral history approaches push me to make the results of this study democratic in authorship and accessible in its presentation.

I used several criteria to determine which educator groups to research. Primarily, groups needed to demonstrate collaborative use of interdependent power. Additionally, I sought diversity in coalition configurations, tactics, social movement affiliations, type of postsecondary institution, location, and timeframe. A final consideration was whether there was sufficient archival data available.

I gathered data from in-person and/or digital archives at five postsecondary institutions. I collected and analyzed photographs, newspaper articles, meeting minutes, fliers, brochures, union resolutions, and letters/memos. I conducted five oral history interviews with faculty from the University of Michigan and utilized 15 digitally archived oral history interviews with faculty activists from other postsecondary institutions. I found that many faculty involved in the cases I studied have passed away and/or already participated in digitized oral history interviews about their activism, meaning I could not or did not need to conduct as many of my own interviews as I initially anticipated.

- Summer 2018 – Pilot research complete, SRHE award received
- August 2019 – Sabbatical commences, identified cases
- October 2019 – February 2020 – Data collection in archives & oral history interviews
- March 2020 – Travel plans to two remaining sites canceled; project goes on hold due to Covid-19 pandemic
- 2020-2022 – Remaining data collection and analysis
- Research Presentations:

    - November 2020 – NAU Sabbatical Talk
    - December 2021 – SRHE International Research Conference
    - April 2022 – AERA
- Febrary 2023 – Final report to SRHE
- Summer 2023 – Article submission to Studies in Higher Education

Portraits

For this final report, I share paragraph-length "portraits" of five cases of collective and disruptive faculty activism aligned with social movements in the 20th Century. I follow with an analysis of what these cases demonstrate about where faculty hold interdependent power.

Imagine teaching from 8pm through 8am the next morning.[i] Imagine 3,000 students showing up to your class.[ii] Boasting the first-ever "teach-in," faculty at the University of Michigan joined the nation-wide anti-Vietnam war movement in 1965 with this trend-setting form of teaching-as-protest.[iii] [iv] While the all-night teach-in was actually a concession, planned in lieu of a day-long strike,[v] it arguably had a more significant impact on the anti-war movement.[vi] Thousands were educated and engaged in heated dialogue on the Ann Arbor campus that night, the event spurred dozens more teach-ins across the United States, and the teach-in form continues today. The small group of faculty who came together to plan the teach-in called themselves the Radical College.[vii] They organized informally, as friends and colleagues.[viii] In 1966, these faculty refused to submit grades to the registrar in protest of the University's collaboration with the United States' selective service draft policy whereby students with the lowest grades would be involuntarily admitted to the US Army.[ix] Over subsequent years, University of Michigan faculty continued to disrupt business as usual, participating in collaborative anti-Vietnam protest through sit-ins, marches, refusals and leaking of classified military research.[x] [xi]

For five months spanning 1968-1969, students and faculty at San Francisco State University (SFSU) maintained the longest student and faculty strike to date in US history.[xii] Situated in the wider context of a society calling for racial liberation, SFSU faculty and students were striking against the termination of Black faculty member George Murray, the absence of a Black Studies program, and long-standing institutional discrimination against students and faculty of color.[xiii] The strike was initiated by students and joined shortly after by a radical, small, and non-institutionalized group of faculty.[xiv] Following "Bloody Tuesday," when police officers arrested and brutalized dozens of students on campus, the official faculty labor union voted to join the strike.[xv] Faculty began to see themselves not only as "scholars," but as employees who provide necessary labor.[xvi] They used their interdependent power by refusing to give their labor to the university and placing their bodies between students and police officers, and they set up cooperative funding and care services to ensure they could pay rent and carry on with their lives through the process.[xvii] [xviii] While some faculty lost their jobs or could not afford to maintain the strike, SFSU buckled under the pressure and met many of the demands from the Black Student Union, Third World Liberation Front, and faculty labor union, making this strike go down in history as a general success.

Kalama Valley, Hawaii was a fertile swath of land inhabited for decades by Indigenous and poor farmers.[xix] It is now home to a housing development for upper middle class, primarily white settler families.[xx] The struggle to perserve Kalama Valley did not succeed at saving the

Indigenous homes, land, and community that was there, but it is widely credited with spurring the Hawaiian Renaissance, a movement for Native Hawaiian sovereignty which has had widespread success culturally and materially (several successful anti-eviction campaigns followed Kalama Valley).[xxi] In the spring of 1970, when the Bishop Estate first put out an eviction order, a small group of Hawaiian faculty, students, and community members came together to resist.[xxii] Meeting in the University of Hawaii's campus ministry café, the group formed a multi-pronged approach.[xxiii] Faculty used service learning models to allow students to work with farmers and stand with them on the land. Protests, sit-ins, and marches unfolded. Most notable were the more than three dozen community members, students, and faculty who were arrested on May 11, 1971 for standing on the roofs of buildings, squaring off in front of the bulldozers, using their bodies as shields to prevent the colonial eviction of Kalama Valley residents.[xxiv] This marked another instance of faculty finding interdependent power in their bodies themselves, and showcased a deeply collaborative and nonhierarchical approach to faculty activism.

"Prepare for a very, very long struggle and beware of those who want to divide us. … We have declared war on those who want to destroy education!" Professor Ramón Jiménez's words echoed across the streets of New York City, and were met with the cheers of thousands of protesters fighting against extreme budget cuts to the City University of New York college system that attempted to close Hostos Community College.[xxv] [xxvi] The only bilingual college on the East coast, Hostos had guaranteed admission for anyone with a high school diploma, free tuition, and served a 98% minority student body.[xxvii] Saving Hostos was also a fight against racial and class-based oppression. From 1973 to 1978, faculty, students, and staff from Hostos organized three waves of coordinated actions to save, fund, and provide adequate space for their college. The actions were led primarily by coalitions of students and faculty from Hostos. However, these coalitions also built relationships with other CUNY campuses, South Bronx community members, and New York City unions.[xxviii] Throughout their years of organizing, they used a multitude of strategies: large-scale protesting, occupying government offices, taking over the school, teach-ins, workshops, student-run television programs, hunger strikes, and more.[xxix] [xxx] [xxxi] [xxxii] They won. Six year's worth of "Save Hostos" actions prevented the college from closing, gave it a building, secured for it adequate funding, and demonstrated the power and possibility of collective action led by student-faculty collaborations.

Before classes began on April 4, 1985, a silver chain clattered against the front doors of Hamilton Hall on Columbia University's campus. With the doors of the administrative center of the college threaded together with chains and steps crowded with demonstrators, "Business as usual did not take place at Columbia."[xxxiii] Members of the Coalition for a Free South Africa (CFSA) coordinated a sit-in of hundreds of students and faculty who blockaded the building's main entrance until the university board of trustees issued a written public statement of their intention to divest completely from its South Africa related holdings.[xxxiv] [xxxv] Initiated in 1977, eight years' worth of protest, petitions, hunger strikes, and teach-ins culminated in this moment.[xxxvi] [xxxvii] [xxxviii] [xxxix] While Columbia university's divestment from South African apartheid was primarily a student-led movement, the Columbia Faculty Against Apartheid group participated in and amplified student activism.[xl] [xli] Faculty joined hunger strikes,[xlii] held teach-ins to fuel energy for the protests,[xliii] and helped forge collaborations with local community unions to support the students. Their actions demonstrated yet more possibilities for disruptive and collaborative faculty activism.

Analysis

We exist within a vast network of taken-for-granted social interdepencies, and the relative functionality of society depends upon our day-to-day cooperation within those interdependencies (Piven, 2006). For example, the functioning of a busy, urban road depends upon the cooperation of all the cars on one side of the road to drive in one direction, the cars on the other side to drive in the other, and the cyclists and pedestrians to stay to the side. Businesses within that town count on the ability of their workers to travel to work in a timely manner upon those roads, and local residents depend upon the businesses to be open and serve their needs. Recognizing these intersecting dependencies, one can see how we all have a role to play in maintaining the social order in which we exist. Yet, this also means that we have the potential to *not* maintain the social order, to *disrupt* the social order. Pedestrians can stop walking on sidewalks and take over roads. Workers can decide not to show up and go on strike. Consumers can stop paying money to certain businesses through boycotts.

What networks of interdependency did I find amongst faculty at the five postsecondary institutions I studied? How did faculty remove their cooperation from those networks of interdependency, disrupt the institution's functioning, and use that disruption as leverage? Compiling the results from all five cases, I found that faculty used four primary interdependencies as leverage points for their activism. That is, I analyzed all types activism in the five cases, found types which disrupted interdependent relationships, and distilled those types into four categories of interdependent power.

First, I found that faculty have *power as employees*. Students, administrators, and (for public universities) the state are dependent upon faculty labor. Faculty labor is what allows students to meet their educational goals, accumulate credits to graduate, and join the workforce to make enough money to survive. Administrators pay faculty and expect them to provide this crucial educational role, as well as many service roles that maintain the functionality of the university. The state depends upon faculty labor because, in today's neoliberal world, the state serves the global economy (Brown, 2015). Capitalism has compelled educational institutions to graduate certain numbers of students and ensure those alumni do their part to maintain the economic order. Thus, when faculty in the five historical cases I researched recognized themselves as the labor force that maintains the flow of graduates into the global economy, they identified a core interdependent relationship: the state, students, and administrators rely on our labor. If we do not give it, we have power and can leverage that power for change. This power is activated primarily through striking and was exemplified by SFSU faculty.

Second, faculty have *power as accreditors*. The power faculty have as accreditors is similar to the power they have as employees; they both activate very similar networks of interdependent relationships. Students, students' parents, administrators, the business economy, and the state are dependent upon faculty accrediting students for the same purposes of them graduating and contributing to the global economy. What is unique about this form of interdependent power is that faculty can still teach students, but the accreditation process stops. Thus, the impacts and associated interdependent relationships are different. Faculty at the University of Michigan activated this power through the withholding of grades.

Third, faculty have *power as recognized knowledge producers and authorities*. The government, media, and administrators are dependent upon faculty research to produce knowledge. For example, in the University of Michigan case, the U.S. Military contracted out faculty researchers to conduct classified military research, relying upon their labor, knowledge, and authority to procure information necessary for the Vietnam War. Faculty can activate this

power through refusing research grants, releasing otherwise classified research, or changing research procedures.

Fourth, faculty have *power as bodies.* Private industries, government organizations, university populations, and everyday people depend on faculty to keep their bodies healthy and clear of thoroughfares to maintain day-to-day business. This type of interdependent power is not unique to faculty; everyone has it. Many faculty in the five historical cases I analyzed recognized how the state and institution depended upon them keeping their bodies healthy and in (or out) of certain places, and refused cooperation with that dependency to gain leverage. This power was activated through sit-ins, hunger strikes, blocking streets, placing one's body between students and police or between a bulldozer and a house, etc. Interestingly, activating this form of interdependent power *can* "snowball" into activating other forms of interdependent power. For example, if faculty go on a hunger strike, as they did at Hostos College and Columbia University, they are potentially also going on a work strike if their hunger prevents them from being able to teach, activating their power as employees as well.

As faculty learn from this research about the kinds of power they hold and consider how to use them in today's world, it behooves us to strategize and procede with care. Piven (2006) explains that not all networks of social relations are equally important. She writes, "important interdependences are rooted in the cooperative activities that generate the material bases for social life, and that sustain the force and authority of the state" (p. 22). Thus, there is more leverage in collaborative forms of activism that disrupt the provision of material necessities, such as food, money, shelter, transportation, and that disrupt the authority of the state. Even so, history shows that not all uses of interdependent power – no matter how strategic - result in wins. Standing in front of bulldozers to prevent the eviction of poor and/or Indigenous people in Kalama Valley did not save that community. While this particular loss did not stop the future success of the Hawaiian Sovereignty movement, it does demonstrate (as all major efforts to save our communities do) the level of investment, passion, and risk activists take on when they activate their interdependent power. Along with a major leverage of power comes an increase in responsibility and risk; for example, the five-month long faculty strikes at SFSU resulted in several job losses. Thus, a final lesson learned from these historical examples is that leveraging interdependent power necessitates strong solidarity, networks of care and support, and transparency and consent regarding the risks.

Conclusions and Outcomes

I initiated this project with the goal of expanding and inspiring our imaginaries, capacities, and engagements in collective faculty activism. In an attempt to do so, to date I have shared the results of this study primarily through presentations (see timeline above). I have several other venues for publication, though shifts in my workload post-pandemic have made them difficult to actualize. I created a social media platform to share results, highlight additional examples, and create a public history of faculty activism, linked here (Farley, Pollett, & Whetstone, 2019; Strasdin, 2019). I received a solicitation from MIT press to write a book based on this study, which I may pursue in the future if time allows. Finally, I am currently preparing a manuscript for submission to Studies in Higher Education.

I have benefited as a faculty activist from this project: as covid disrupted my data collection, it also upended faculty working conditions at my university, resulting in the firing of

over 100 faculty and an unknown number of staff. During this time of upheaval, I worked with our (unrecognized) faculty union to plan actions in ways that drew from this research. In 2022, I led a campus and community wide teach-in for climate justice and am leading another this year. I also became the faculty advisor for the student-led fossil fuel divestment group at my university.

Carrying this research forward could include a study with today's faculty activists. What are the new barriers and challenges faculty activists face presently? And, through participatory action research, I want to understand how these portraits and how learning the histories of faculty activism can help us in our current work to vision and build a better world. As historian Howard Zinn (2010) says, "If we remember those times and places – and there are so many –where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction" (p. 279).

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