Suppression and Social Action

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Suppression of intellectual dissent can be seen as one part of a general historical struggle between on the one hand powerful and privileged interests in society and on the other grassroots initiatives for a more equal and just society. Here I will first describe this context for understanding suppression in general terms. Then I will discuss the ambiguous relation between intellectual dissidents and social action groups.

It is common historically for the mass of people in complex societies to be dominated economically, politically and ideologically by particular elite groups.[1] In the history of European peoples, the earlier primary elite group of the feudal aristocracy and church hierarchy was supplanted several hundred years ago by capitalist owners and managers. More recently power has been shifting to political and bureaucratic state elites, most notably under state socialism but also in capitalist societies. These shifts in the locus of power have resulted from economic, political and social development, and the ensuing struggles between interest groups.

The other essential component in this process has been the struggles of the mass of the people, the non-elites. These struggles have waxed and waned, but have been marked by progress in some areas, such as the ending of slavery, development of mass literacy, spreading of the franchise, redistribution of some economic benefits to workers, and ending of colonialism. These struggles have become increasingly self-aware and organised. But new struggles are required as new forms of exploitation and oppression arise or expand, such as neo-colonialism, technology designed to control workers, and weapons of mass destruction.

What is the role in this historical process of intellectuals and institutions for cultivating intellectual skills? For centuries one primary function has been the ideological legitimation of current social arrangements. This legitimation has at various times included religious certification of the god-givenness of the social order, the alleged social and biological necessity of capitalist competition (social Darwinism), and the alleged necessity to have experts to manage all aspects of society (technocracy). This sort of legitimation has been important because ruling groups have usually been in the minority and have depended for their power and privilege on the support or acquiescence of the bulk of the population. Besides legitimation, in the past century or so schools and universities have played an increasing role in training more people in intellectual skills useful for the maintenance and expansion of industrial society.

Intellectual skills are indeed used widely for justifying power structures and for ensuring the normal functioning of industrial society, but they also contain the seeds of liberation, for supporting struggles for democratisation. It is this potential for ideological unmasking of the present order that makes universities periodically become hotbeds of dissent, and leads to attempts by elite groups to throttle these movements. The institutions of learning are

protected in two ways: first by their own service in the maintenance of society, and second by the intellectual tradition of liberal education and freedom of opinion. This tradition — which represents the intellectual self-justification of higher learning and which often masks the reality of intellectual service to vested interests — can also be used to defend the existence of dissent.

Within academia and other intellectual institutions, suppression is one mechanism to ensure that the main beneficiaries of paid intellectual activities are the dominant groups in society, in particular corporate, bureaucratic and professional elites. The main forces forging this orientation are the hierarchy, division of labour, privilege and status of paid intellectuals.[2] Suppression is essentially a back-up mechanism, to keep those in line who are not induced or seduced by privilege and status to support the powers that be by keeping to their narrow activities and staying out of political struggles on behalf of oppressed groups. Suppression is important precisely because dissidence is so infrequent. When the consensus of expert intellectual opinion is virtually unanimous, a single dissenting voice can make a big difference in helping to legitimise contrary views.

The driving force behind challenges to dominant institutions in society comes not from intellectual dissidents themselves but rather arises from the potential for mass action at the grassroots such as by the labour movement. But dissidents can expose the nature and abuses of the ruling elites, puncture the standard legitimations and thus help to weaken support for the elites and to catalyse mass action. Dissidents in many cases are essentially subversives within the more privileged levels of the power structure. They break the bureaucratic and professional monopolies on knowledge and thus provide avenues for challenge from below. For example, John Coulter's public statements about the hazards of particular environmental chemicals in themselves did not threaten the profits of corporations. But by providing information about these hazards to public audiences — for example via the media — community group protest and possibly government action concerning the chemicals might be mobilised or focused, thus threatening profits. Similarly, by providing information about work hazards directly to workers and unions, John Coulter broke the ranks of professional control over such knowledge and provided leverage for workers and unions to take action.

Before Ann Baker and Clyde Manwell wrote their letter to the Adelaide *Advertiser* about fruit fly spraying, several other individuals had written similar letters. Clyde Manwell was singled out for attack because he was the first person to write from a prestigious position: his co-authorship of the letter was seen as breaking the monopoly on ''expert'' opinion on the fruit fly spraying issue, and thus greatly weakening the establishment view on the subject.

There is an interactive process between intellectual dissidents and mass movements, and this process is sometimes a complicated one. In many cases, the rise of mass movements encourages or allows dissent within intellectual institutions. For example, the rise of the environmental movement has encouraged and enabled many scientists and academics to undertake research and make public stands on environmental issues. On the other hand, a few courageous intellectuals are often found promoting an issue before it becomes the basis for a mass movement. Rachel Carson and some other scientists played this role in relation to environmental issues in the 1950s and early 1960s. In the case of nuclear power, various individual scientists — such as, in the United States, Henry Kendall, John Gofman and Arthur Tamplin — took critical stands in the early 1970s, before popular concern about this technology had reached major proportions. These scientists played an important role in legitimising anti-nuclear concerns, and laying the intellectual basis for mass action years later. And once the mass anti-nuclear movement developed, other scientists and intellectuals took stands, such as the three General Electric nuclear engineers who resigned in 1976.

Those intellectuals who take stands contrary to elite interests before mass concern develops are often suppressed, as were Carson, Gofman and Tamplin.[3] But once mass concern is aroused, it may become acceptable to do research or teaching in the once ignored or taboo area. For example, programs in peace studies, environmental studies and women's

studies are in numerous cases set up in response to general public concern on these issues, and sometimes due to direct public pressure. In the United States, not a single holistic study program in the area of energy and environment was established at a university before 1971, by which time widespread public interest and the definition of the main problems had already been developed.[4] A similar situation applies in Australia in this area. Intellectual institutions are but rarely in the forefront in developing new areas of study relevant to social problems. They are much more likely to move into areas after popular concern has well and truly developed. In this they are similar to other basically conservative institutions, such as the law, major political parties and the churches.

From this perspective, the role of dissidents within intellectual institutions, and the role of small social action groups, is much greater than first appearances might suggest. Although their immediate impact may seem small, they can provide the stimulus for development of mass concern and mass action on social issues, and thus do more to induce institutional change than the more immediate method of working through "proper channels".

I will now look at the problem of social change from the point of view of those in social action groups. What should be their orientation with respect to intellectual institutions, and towards dissidents?

SUPPORT FOR DISSIDENT PROFESSIONALS

The most immediate thing social activists can do is directly support dissidents in their battles against suppression. Social activists often are experienced in political campaigning and are much better equipped to organise defences of dissidents than are professional intellectuals. Support for dissidents by outside social activists sometimes happens, but not as often as might be expected. The reason is the distance maintained by most senior professional intellectuals — including many dissidents — from social action groups. Personally, I think this distance should be bridged through efforts on both sides. Social activists can help in this by supporting dissidents.

Another problem in supporting dissidents is different perceptions of the motivations and value of the dissident activity. Some dissidents may be seen by outsiders to be taking a stand only in order to gain personally. A university program under threat may contain some committed, hard-working, socially conscious and outspoken scholars and others who are more interested in a job or in expanding their power. Or the program leaders may oppose internal staff democracy or oppose more participation by students. Social activists can legitimately feel ambivalent about supporting such programs and the individuals in them. Should an imperfect but generally desirable program be supported unconditionally, or should criticisms of the program by social activists be made privately or publicly?

Compounding these problems are differences of opinion and splits within social movements about the role of professional intellectual activity in social activism. For example, many people in the Australian peace movement have spent much time and effort promoting the establishment of a peace research institute. Others would not oppose such an institute, but do not see it as a high priority. Still others see efforts for setting up an institute as a diversion from more important tasks of building up mass involvement in the peace movement and developing grassroots strategies. These and other perspectives will influence the willingness and approach of anti-war activists in supporting professional intellectuals who speak out on issues of war and peace. Divergences in perspective can be quite major, and are important in, for example, the feminist, political economy and environmental movements.

SUPPRESSION WITHIN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social movements can be organised in various ways, but they almost always contain some individuals with greater formal or informal power than others, such as officials, paid workers, key spokespeople, and editors of movement journals. This power can be used to

suppress individuals from a different clique or with unorthodox opinions. Suppression within social movements can take forms such as:

- withdrawing union membership, blacklisting, beating and even killing of rank-and-file trade union activists[5];
- expulsion of dissenting members from political parties;
- sacking of politically minded environmental workers from environment centres;
- social ostracism, character assassination and sacking of feminists with ''incorrect views'' from community service organisations dominated by particular types of feminists;
- blocking of dissenting views from ostensibly pluralistic social movement journals.

Suppression within social movements typically involves many of the methods found in suppression elsewhere, including personal attacks such as threatening phone calls, spreading of slanderous stories, ostracism, criticising work, failing to provide information about meetings and social functions, and public confrontation. Especially revealing of power inequalities is the use by social movements of formal mechanisms against dissidents such as defamation suits and legal challenges concerning elections or administrative action. For the dissidents, suppression is especially difficult to handle psychologically when the social movement espouses values such as emotional honesty and participatory democracy, since expectations of fair treatment are much greater than in mainstream institutions.

Sometimes suppression within social movements is justified by conventional criteria: shortage of funds, incompetence of the suppressed, or personality clashes. At other times the exercise of power by a particular faction or clique is justified by alleging that the dissident is insufficiently committed to the movement.[6]

Suppression of intellectual dissent is most rigorous in those left-wing parties which maintain a strict ''line'', but also can occur in more broadly based movements. Most movements base their activities on a set of more or less unquestioned assumptions, and challenging these assumptions may not be well received.

Like suppression in general, suppression within social movements is an area in which documentation is scarce, and so my comments here are based largely on personal observations and discussions. Social activists sometimes argue that public discussion of internal dissent and its suppression is undesirable because it will be seized upon by critics to attack the social movement. This argument is often used to make activists feel guilty about protesting against abuses within their own groups. But silence and nonaction, besides being ethically unacceptable, are often even more harmful to the movement than speaking out. Tolerance or support for internal suppression can cause entrenchment of factions or cliques, alienation of supporters, neglect or loss of new ideas and constituencies, and corruption of principled behaviour. In making compromises to attain power or influence, the movement may come to resemble the institutions it aims to transform or displace.

If social activists are to be consistent and effective in opposing suppression of intellectual dissent, then they need to make sure their own house is in order. In my opinion, tolerance of a diversity of opinions is essential in developing a program and practice for beneficial social change. Social activists could well take to heart the principles of academic freedom which are so seldom used by academics.

INSTITUTIONALISATION

Besides defending dissidents, another thing social activists can try to do is to promote institutionalisation of their concerns within intellectual institutions. This is a difficult task. A frequent result of the development of mass concern on an issue is the establishment of government departments or academic programs which treat the issues but without the critical force behind the original concern. Government departments of industrial relations may serve to integrate workers and unions into the capitalist system. Environmental studies departments may study environmental problems and develop policy within the context of

existing practices and assumptions of industrialisation and the existing distribution of political and economic power.[7] Even after a "radical" program is set up, an ongoing struggle may be required to prevent expropriation of the original social concern into service to elite interests, such as building "environmentally sound" car parks for yacht clubs.

To have some chance that programs on social issues will maintain some critical concern, social activists need to be involved directly in designing the form and content of the programs. One important model is the science shop, well developed at several Dutch universities.[8] Groups such as trade unions or community welfare, peace or environmental groups can contact the science shop for advice about questions involving expertise in science and technology. The workers at the science shop try to connect the requesting groups with scientists willing to work on the problem. Another example is the Centre for Alternative Industrial and Technological Systems, a research unit set up at North East London Polytechnic to study problems relevant to the alternative corporate plan developed by Lucas Aerospace workers.[9]

What about the structure of the university? The basic problem is the power structure of the university, especially the power of academic elites and administrations.[10] The most fundamental challenge to this power is flattening the academic hierarchy. This would do more to allow genuine academic freedom than marginal fiddling with tenure, procedures, or staff and student representation on committees. If all high salaries were reduced — for example to the average wage — then staff members could be greatly increased and everyone given tenure or extended contracts. This would free numerous people from publication rat-races, bureaucratic infighting and bootlicking, and permit a great deal of innovative teaching and research.

The typical strategy by radicals in academia has been to try to get more radicals into positions within the present academic structures, whether this is via promotion of talented radicals to high positions or by increasing staff and student representation on decision-making bodies. The more fundamental strategy of flattening the hierarchy has seldom been adopted. The challenge — as yet largely unmet — is to develop persuasive campaigns with this more fundamental change as a goal.

INTELLECTUAL SELF-MANAGEMENT

A third avenue for action by social action groups is in this final direction: developing models and campaigns to challenge power structures in society, including those within intellectual institutions. If the structures of unequal power and privilege can be transformed, then the use of suppression will be reduced. For example, in the labour movement the normal goals are improved wages and conditions within the existing structures of state-regulated capitalism. A more radical goal is that of workers' control, which looks towards a more egalitarian work environment in which workers themselves decide the organisation of work and the products produced, in conjunction with community interests.[11] In the women's movement the liberal goal is equality for women within the existing career and family structures. A more radical feminist goal is transforming the power hierarchies and establishing equality between the sexes within a more egalitarian society.

If this perspective is applied to intellectual activity, the goal becomes not experts for social movements but a spreading of expertise. One standard approach within social movements is to develop or cultivate "counter-experts": experts in a field who use their knowledge to criticise the activities or ideology of dominant interests. For example, scientists who were public opponents of nuclear power helped the anti-nuclear power movement by puncturing the mystifications of the pro-nuclear experts. Those within intellectual institutions who subscribe to this approach generally think in terms of the "social responsibility" of experts to make use of their knowledge to oppose social wrongs.

The approach of using counter-experts and promoting social responsibility of intellectuals is good as far as it goes, but it does not question the nature and role of expertise

itself. Knowledge produced and used by professional intellectuals is for the most part esoteric, jargon-ridden, separated from its ideological context, and hence irrelevant to social issues. Because intellectual institutions are geared to the interests of corporate, bureaucratic and professional elites, the knowledge they produce is likewise biased in form and content. Counter-experts can rectify this situation to some extent — especially as regards the content of knowledge — but may at the same time reinforce the dependence on certified expertise itself, to the detriment of social movements.

Underlying most social issues are questions of values, not of facts. Rather than use counter-experts to challenge the facts put forward by the supporters of elite interests, a more radical approach is to focus on the values underlying the differing sides to the debate. For example, instead of only spelling out the hazards of plutonium, the instances of reactor malfunctions and the limitations of proliferation treaties, emphasis can be put on the political and economic implications of centralised, high-cost and expert-dependent nuclear power technology, along with the implications of an energy future based on energy efficiency and small-scale decentralised use of renewable energy technologies and accompanying social changes.

To avoid dependence on the counter-experts, social action groups can promote the spreading of intellectual and practical skills: research, writing, speaking. This is encouraged in action groups which try to be non-hierarchical, participatory and self-managing, such as sections of the feminist, environmental, anarchist and non-violent action movements. These groups provide a base outside the intellectual institutions where intellectual activity and social action can be linked together in an ongoing process of building campaigns, under-taking cooperative research and learning, and communicating via journals and newsletters.[12]

Grassroots social activism linked with self-critical evaluation and study provides an alternative to relying on professional intellectuals and at the same time strengthens the positions of those intellectuals who do engage in or promote genuinely critical research or teaching. If a participative social movement with a sound set of principles and strategies for social change can be built, then intellectual institutions may eventually join the bandwagon.

In some ways, egalitarian social action groups are a greater long-term threat to the privileged professional intellectuals than are corporate or bureaucratic elites or powerful working-class organisations. The irony is that many of those who join and become most active in such groups are products of the academic system. While the academics pursue autonomy, academic freedom and control over work conditions for their own self-interest, these action groups are attempting to apply these same ideals to a much broader constituency.

Acknowledgements

References

1. The following several paragraphs are taken from Brian Martin, ''Suppression of dissident experts: ideological struggle in Australia'', *Crime and Social Justice*, no. 19, Summer 1983, pp. 91–9.

2. This point is developed at some length in: Brian Martin, ''Academics and social action'', *Higher Education Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, Spring 1984, pp. 17–33. A few paragraphs from this article are used in this chapter.

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4. David J. Rose, ''New laboratories for old'', in: Gerald Holton and William A. Blanpied (eds), *Science and its Publics: The Changing Relationship* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976), pp. 143–55.

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6. Katherine Newman, "Incipient bureaucracy: the development of hierarchy in egalitarian organizations", in Gerald M. Britan and Ronald Cohen (eds), *Hierarchy and Society* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980), pp. 143–64, see especially pp. 157–8.

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12. See for example: Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser and Christopher Moore, *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1981); The Training/Action Affinity Group of Movement for a New Society, *Building Social Change Communities* (Philadelphia: Movement for a New Society, 1979).