

Dept Head: Act Now  
Title: Why I'm Not an Activist  
Author: Joel Schalit

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Whenever I hear the word "activism," it makes me want to run. It's not that I have anything against activists, per se. As a leftist, I find a great deal of value in individuals engaging in the kinds of political activities we normally associate with activists: Helping organize demonstrations, handing out leaflets and petitions, volunteering on behalf of political parties and labor unions, or working as an employee of an NGO, or a Non-Governmental Organization. These are all entirely laudable activities, because they represent individuals attempting to actively participate in the political process. In progressive circles, there is no higher calling, because to be an activist means to be dedicated to concerns of a decidedly political nature.

What I find alienating about the term is the way it tends to define political labor. Unless an individual is formally involved in structured political activities or a member of a disciplined revolutionary organization, progressives tend to infer that those not *involved* are not actively engaged in struggles for social justice. Unfortunately, not everyone has the time or the resources to make politics their vocation, nor should they have to. Equally troubling is the implication that politics is its own sphere of activity distinct from the kinds of power struggles we experience in everyday life. Just because someone might not participate in conventional political activities does not mean that they are not critically negotiating their relationship to the state and the marketplace in their own highly personalized ways. The point is to be politicized.

Such surplus connotations of the term 'activist' have their roots in the absence of any credible social democratic political parties in the United States capable of representing the interests of the left. Thus, when most Americans try to qualify what it means to be dedicated to a particular political cause, they do so by using language that suggests the pretense of having the freedom to participate in a greater community of likeminded people in possession of a shared political ideology. Since very few alternative political formations like these actually exist, we develop ways of speaking about our political activities which suggest that we are part of a greater network of persons united by our respective pursuits of social justice. Describing our political engagements as "activism" is a way of doing that.

I've had to learn this lesson through searching for supportive media spaces to explore and express my political opinions as an Israeli-American writer with a strong interest in Frankfurt School Marxist theory and the Middle Eastern conflict. These informal institutions are my political parties and NGO stand-ins. First and foremost an essayist, and secondly a 'zine editor, over the course of the past decade, I have finally learned the value of what it's like to be a part of a progressive political community through participating in underground publishing projects such as *Bad Subjects* and *Punk Planet*.

As an editor, I request specific pieces on the basis of what I'd like to learn as much as I may already be familiar with their subject matter. So far, the result has been a politically plural mix, which bears very few signs of the kind of doctrinal rigidity that influenced factional infighting between Communist intellectuals in the 1930s. Structurally, there's a great deal of deference paid to anarchism, particularly when it comes to speculating on what anti-market movement hierarchies ought to look like. However, there's an increasingly Marxist influence being brought to bear in terms of how progressives in our circles speak about class. This is also a mixed blessing. Sometimes I fear there's almost too much emphasis being placed on the mechanical movement of global capital, without enough attention being placed on culture, gender and in certain instances, religion. My worry is that this will lead to a new kind of crude economism redolent of the Cold War left. With the International Socialists taking an increasing leadership role in demonstrations and campus organizing, it's not hard to conjecture.

Regardless of my own heterodox concerns, I am delighted by what I see happening, because it's creative, it's thoughtful, and it's not so obsessively devoted to street politics that it forgets that intellectual labor is its own kind of political practice. Even better, there's a certain kind of generosity of spirit afoot, because all of this hard and creative work is being done after hours, during time normally allotted to coping with life after dinner. Best of all, most of the people I learn from are by no means what Antonio Gramsci called "traditional intellectuals," but people with real jobs who learn just as much about free trade zones from an Ultra red record as they do from reading a William Greider book.

They are young punk rockers, thirty-something office workers, service industry laborers, sex workers, teachers and professional journalists, fearful for their future and how they are going to be affected by an increasingly war-torn, authoritarian world that none of us can ever remember being so dark, so violent or so cruel. A good day for them is being able to sneak a peak at the online edition of the *Guardian* while they are enmeshed in spreadsheets, or an op-ed piece in an Israeli newspaper such as *Ha'aretz*, which given the country it comes from, is proof that the best progressive intellectuals can survive the worst periods of history with their moral integrity firmly intact.

BIO: Joel Schalit is co-director of *Bad Subjects: Political Education for Everyday Life* (HYPERLINK "<http://www.eserver.org/bs>" [www.eserver.org/bs](http://www.eserver.org/bs)) and Associate Editor of *Punk Planet Magazine*. He is the author of *Jerusalem Calling: A Homeless Conscience in a Post-Everything World*, and the editor of *The Anti-Capitalism Reader: Imagining a Geography of Opposition*, both published in 2002 by Akashic Books. In his real life, Joel works as the general manager of the Asphodel record label.