



The Border between Theory and Activism

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“Ain't got no mother, ain't got no culture
Ain't got no friends, ain't got no schooling
Ain't got no love, ain't got no name
Ain't got no ticket, ain't got no token
Ain't got no God

Then what have I got
Why am I alive anyway?
Got my hair, got my head
Got my brains, got my ears
Got my eyes, got my nose
Got my mouth, I got my smile

Yeah, what have I got
Nobody can take away

I've got life

Nina Simone – Ain't Got No/I Got Life



These days that I am supposed to organize my notes from the round table into a publishable text, in Athens – the city where I live – 300 migrant workers are on hunger strike. Around and through this major political struggle I will try to organize my thoughts and reflect further on one of the most contested themes that were discussed at the roundtable in Veroia, and that can be synopsisized in the question “what does it mean to be an activist?”

The hunger strike started on the 25th of January, 2011, and the demand of the hunger strikers has been the legalization of all migrants who live in Greece.² Their first step to publicly self-identify as “illegal” instead of hiding in the shadows of the Athenian metropolis was itself a declaration generative of a political identity. As Peter Nyers (2008, 163) writes, to self-identify as a non-status person is, in a deeply paradoxical way, to engage in an act of citizenship.

In a period when Greece is troubled by a deep economic and social crisis and migrants without papers are presented in the dominant discourse as one of the big burdens for society while far-right xenophobic views and actions are growing, the migrants’ struggle was a deeply political action, in the sense that Jacques Rancière (2006, 231) presents: “politics means precisely this, that you speak at a time and in a place you are not expected to speak”.

The migrants’ struggle brings the ubiquity of the border into light: in the center of the city their struggle highlights the differences between people who have rights and people who are “illegal”, between citizens and non-citizens in the juridical sense of the term. Their bodies, through the hunger strike, become the field of the political struggle for a life with dignity. It is their exclusion from institutional rights that dictates such means of struggle as a hunger strike, or as they write in their text: “we have no other way to make our voices be heard”. They have got life, in Nina Simone’s words, and their own lives and bodies – that on the Schengen borderline, in detention centers and during deportations are without any meaning for the sovereign power – are brought into the center and are contested in the public political sphere. Their lives and bodies, through their action, are not anymore “bare”.

In the first text the migrants circulated asking for solidarity before the beginning of their hunger strike, they wrote: “We will do what we can to struggle for what is right. What will you do?” What kind of answer(s) can be given to such a question? As a “sensitive” academic probably the answer would be “I will write a

² Migration in Greece became massive after the fall of Soviet Union in the early 1990’s. The first massive legalization process took place in 1997, after strong political pressure and huge mobilizations by both migrant and antiracist groups. It was followed by other two legalization processes in 2001-2002 and 2004-2005. After that no migrant without papers that who has entered Greece was able to get any work or residence permit. The only way for people without papers to get a temporary legal status was to apply for asylum and maintain the status of asylum claimant for some years until their application got rejected (percentage of asylum applications being accepted is less than 1% per year since 2004).

text for you in a well-known academic journal, it will probably be published within a year”, or even “you will be the case study of my new research, I will interview many of you and theorize upon your case”. Another set of answers could be “I will collect signatures to support your struggle from other members of the academic community” or “I will write texts supporting your struggle in the newspapers”.

Without denying the importance of such answers, from my point of view the border between being a “sensitive” academic and an activist can only be crossed by one answer: “we will be together in this struggle”. And being together actually means devoting your energy, thinking and will, or in Nina Simon’s words your hands, your ears and your brains to this struggle that is not anymore “theirs” but “ours”. So, in the way I think around this question, activism is not about choosing a socially or politically relevant topic of research, it is not about sitting in your office and theorizing upon social movements, struggles or resistance, but being there and giving yourself to such, smaller or bigger, everyday struggles.

For me, probably, such an answer comes easily, as I was long involved in the antiracist struggles before getting involved in academia. Frances Fox Piven (2010), in her article on scholarship and activism, underlines the tension created by this dual path. She highlights that academia today is structured in a way that does not encourage activism; in order to get promoted or even hired one has to present in conferences, publish papers, get cited by other scholars, in short, do only academic work. After all, Piven writes, we are constantly confronted in our daily routines with the rewards and punishments doled out by our colleagues and our larger scholarly reference groups. And, she continues, writing that activism is a completely different setting, as we do not interact with the movement every day and we are self-evidently not one of them. Reading her article helped me understand better my own position, as for me, still today, “rewards and punishments” come primarily from my involvement in the movement, as this is my reference group. As for the academic circles, I still sometimes feel I am not one of them, as my thinking is too political for academy and probably, at the same time, too academic for politics. So personally, I sometimes feel I am walking on the border between theory and activism – interesting as this may be, it is also quite difficult to manage.

Going back to the academic answers on the initial question posed by migrant hunger strikers, I want to make clear that I certainly don’t want to underestimate politically relevant research and theory; they are not only useful but necessary in order to get deeper into the social relations, in order to grasp the dilemmas of our era, in order to act. But can an academic really grasp such questions and get deeper into them only by working from his or her office or within academic circles? I tend to think – though I am also ambivalent on this – that without being in an everyday relation with the social, theorists tend to miss the politically relevant questions or the complexity and the dynamics of social action. This complexity and these dynamics, from my point of view, cannot be understood by a researcher who is very well informed on the literature or is doing field research; on the contrary, they

are very well embedded in the thinking and action of people who are involved in such collective struggles. For example, my participation in these first 30 days of the hunger strike forced me to think hard about all kinds of contradictions and ambivalences: on the attitudes, ideas, motives and different positions of the migrants who participate in this struggle, on ways of collective decision-making, on the groups and collectives who come to support such struggles and their strategies, contradictions and conflicts, on the (often mediating) role of NGO's, on the pressure and negotiations with the authorities, on the limits and dynamics of our own action. Certainly my position in this struggle doesn't make me a "neutral" observer: but the neutral position of the scientist has long been questioned anyway. On the contrary, my active involvement in this struggle makes me think harder, not only about identifying the contradictions and conflicts but how we will overcome them in order to move forward or even win this struggle. From such a position one can certainly avoid two quite common academic approaches on the relevant questions. One is the romanticization of the agents – in our case migrants and activists – or even of social movements, struggles or resistance. Many academic texts tend to approach romantically or even heroically the agents of such struggles, describing them as the new hybrid subjects in social change, failing to grasp both the complex – and certainly not heroic – relations of power functioning inside the collective structures and at the same time the unbearable social conditions faced by the agents in their everyday lives that bring such struggles into light.

The second common academic approach to social movements and activism is the strict criticism from "the outside" that only brings up the difficulties and contradictions without providing any (possible) ways out. Such a criticism usually comes from the "comfortable" position of an academic who is "trained to research, criticize and define social movements in order to make them better", as a well known academic told me in an informal conversation a few days ago. But can somebody, just by standing outside and articulating critical insights, make a difference in the action and strategies or even the way of organization of social movements? Being involved in such struggles is the only way to understand the deeper relations, the dynamics of the different groups, the real people involved and how they themselves understand their position and action. Only when somebody is able to grasp both the wider social conditions within which such struggles take place and at the same time the internal power relations, balances and dynamics, can one (probably) provide interesting and applicable ideas on how to "make things better". One more thing: being involved makes one evaluate and understand a social struggle not only by its results – for example the victory or the failure of achieving the hunger strikers' political claims – but as a process with hundreds of smaller or bigger victories and failures. And probably, at the end of the line, these smaller or bigger incidents will be the cracks from which future social and political processes and struggles will come into light. And it is important to be able to think and theorize not only on the "big picture" but also upon the multiple and complex moments of these processes.

From this position, I think that though it is crucial to represent in academic language and theorize upon social movements and struggles or to pose politically-relevant questions of research, being an activist is a step further than that: it is about being involved in such collective struggles; it is about acting in very material spaces and producing such spaces of collective action and resistance.

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