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Trawsnewid Addysg, Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education, Transforming Lives



ECAY6006 The Politics of Activism

Theme 1: What is Activism?

What Is Activism?



*Take a moment to think about the concept of
'activism'.*

What do you understand the word to mean?

Where have you heard it?

In what context?

Is it a positive or negative phrase?

What is Activism?

- Activism is often defined as actions taken to bring about social, political, economic, or environmental change.
- This can include a wide range of activities such as protests, campaigns, and other forms of public demonstration.
- Activism is typically driven by the belief that it is possible to make a positive difference in society through these efforts.
- However, there are many definitions depending on the perspective one chooses to take.
- We will briefly explore some of these in turn



N.B. Please make a note of any common themes

Activism – Some Definitions

- In philosophical terms it has been argued that it is;
- ‘The doctrine that action rather than theory is needed at some political juncture’;
- ‘an **activist** is therefore one who works to make change happen’. (Blackburn, 2016, no page)
- In the field of Social Work, it is defined as;
- ‘Taking collective action in attempting to bring about change as an alternative to seeking change through elected representatives’ (Harris & White, 2018, no page)

Activism – Some Definitions

- In the field of Human Geography we have;
- ‘The actions of a group of citizens, usually volunteers, who work together to try and redress what they consider to be an unfair or unjust situation’.
- ‘Their activities include campaigning (such as letter writing, marching, and picketing), peaceful marching, civil disobedience, sabotage, or other militant forms of protest’.
- ‘Although usually local in scale, activism can occur at national and supra-national levels’ (Rogers *et al*, 2013, no page)
- We will return to some of these points later in the Module.

Activism – Some Definitions

- The complexity involved in defining the term is exemplified if we search for ‘activism’ in the online [OUP database](#) (accessed via the library)
 - As well as the examples above, we can also find the following among others:
 - Public health activism
 - Grassroots activism
 - Environmental activism
 - Social Activism
 - Eco-activism
 - Feminist activism
 - Hashtag activism
 - Fat Activism
 - Shareholder activism
- Are there any of these that are unfamiliar to you?*

Activism – Some Definitions

- One further definition, is from the human rights **watch-dog** Liberties
- They state that ‘Simply put, activism refers to action taken challenging those in power to bring about change in society and benefit **the greater good**’ (Brooks, 2023)
- We will return to the issue of **the greater good** in another Theme



Study skills digression – suitable sources

- So, who are Liberties and why am I using them as a source?
- Their website tells us that ‘Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) is a **watchdog** that safeguards the human rights of everyone in the European Union’.
- They also tell us that ‘Liberties is a young **NGO, registered under German law** in January 2017’
- Finally, the website tells us that they are part funded by the **European Union**. ([Liberties](#), No Date)
- What do these things tell us? *Discuss this as a group.*



Study skills digression – suitable sources

- **If** all of those statements are true, then we can say the following:
- As a human rights **watchdog** the organisation is likely to have a bias in favour of human rights and you need to acknowledge this
- As a **NGO** registered with the **German Government** we can assume that there is some form of oversight to ensure the organisation is genuine
- If it is in receipt of **EU funding** we can assume that there is financial oversight

Activist – A further point

- Blackburn (ibid.) also mentions the activist as the person who undertakes activism
- Brown *et al* (2018) expand on this stating that an activist is;
- One who takes an **active** part, usually as a volunteer, in a political party or interest group.
- Because activism is **costly**, activists are **unusual people**.



What do you think they mean by these phrases?

Activist – A further point

- Brown *et al* (ibid.) go on to argue that;
- ‘Either they enjoy political activity for its own sake, or they have **off-median** views which give them an incentive to pull the party or interest group towards the position they favour, rather than the position it would take to maximize its vote or influence’.
- Hence some have argued for a ‘law of curvilinear disparity’ which holds that activists hold more **extreme** views than either the **mass electorate** or the **party leadership**. There is some empirical support for this ‘law’ but it has rarely been tested carefully’.



What are they saying here?

Activism – A Legal Definition?

- In the UK, there is not a specific legal definition of "activism."
- When we look at legislative responses it is important to note that the phrases **protest**, **public order**, **demonstration** etc. are used rather than activism
- However, activism generally refers to efforts to promote, impede, direct, or intervene in social, political, economic, or environmental reform with the desire to make changes in society.
- This can include activities such as protests, campaigns, and other forms of advocacy.

Activism – A Legal Definition?

- The right to protest, which is a common form of activism, is protected under the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) (Council of Europe, 2021)
- Specifically, the right to protest is covered under the rights to **freedom of expression** and **freedom of assembly**.
- However, this protection only applies to peaceful protests and does not extend to acts of violence or damage. We will return to this point in a later Theme.
- It should be noted that, despite statements by the previous, Conservative, Government criticising the ECHR, the UK is a member of the Council of Europe and a signatory to the Convention.
- It is also enshrined in the Human Rights Act 1998

References

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