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## **The Engaged Academic: Academic intellectuals and the psychiatric survivor movement**

Mark Cresswell & Helen Spandler

### **Abstract**

This paper considers some political and ethical issues associated with the 'academic intellectual' who researches social movements. It identifies some of the 'lived contradictions' such a role encounters and analyses some approaches to addressing these contradictions. In general, it concerns the 'politico-ethical stance' of the academic intellectual in relation to social movements and, as such, references the 'theory of the intellectual' associated with the work of Antonio Gramsci. More specifically, it considers that role in relation to one political 'field' and one type of movement: a field which we refer to, following the work of Peter Sedgwick, as 'psychopolitics', and a movement which, since the mid-to-late 1980s, has been known as the 'psychiatric survivor' movement – psychiatric patients and their allies who campaign for the democratisation of the mental health system. In particular, through a comparison of two texts, Nick Crossley's *Contesting Psychiatry* and Kathryn Church's *Forbidden Narratives*, the paper contrasts different depths of engagement between academic intellectuals and the social movements which they research.

Key words:

psychopolitics, academic intellectuals, movement intellectuals,  
psychiatry/mental health

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## Introduction

This paper considers a type of 'intellectual': the 'academic intellectual' who researches social movements. It identifies some of the contradictions such a role encounters and contrasts some approaches to addressing these contradictions. The paper's goals are both specific and general. In general, it concerns the role of the 'academic intellectual' in relation to social movements. More specifically, the paper considers that role in relation to one political 'field' and one type of movement: a field which we refer to as 'psychopolitics' and a movement which, since the mid-to-late 1980s, has been known as the 'psychiatric survivor' movement.

The paper is structured in three parts. Part 1 sketches specifications of the paper's key concepts: psychopolitics, psychiatric survivors and academic intellectuals. Part 2 outlines what, following Colin Barker and Laurence Cox (2002), we call the 'lived contradictions' faced by academic intellectuals researching social movements. Part 3 contrasts how these 'lived contradictions' are approached in two prominent texts specifically concerned with the psychiatric survivor movement: Nick Crossley's *Contesting Psychiatry* (2006a) and Kathryn Church's *Forbidden Narratives* (1995). We argue that Crossley demonstrates *minimal* engagement with these movements, whereas Church, by contrast, demonstrates a commitment which we regard as 'deeply engaged' (Tattersall, 2006). Hence, the paper differentiates amongst academic intellectuals researching psychiatric survivors according to the *depth* of their engagement with the 'lived contradictions' such relationships entail.

Finally, the paper rejects a critique which may be levelled at the notion of the 'deeply engaged' academic – that in valorising 'engagement' above the more

academically-oriented values of ‘objectivity’, ‘scientificity’ etc., it succumbs to what may be called a ‘tautology problem’. In other words, the argument in favour of ‘deep engagement’ appears logically circular and can, therefore, provide no independent criterion of evaluation external to the practices of ‘engagement’ itself (e.g. academic ‘objectivity’). We conclude, however, that academia also, in its more minimally engaged manifestations, succumbs to its own form of circular logic - whilst the values of ‘deep engagement’, by contrast, are grounded, not in a logical tautology at all, but, rather, in the academic intellectual’s experience of ‘lived contradictions’ and dialogic relations with social movements themselves.

## **Part 1: Psychopolitics, Psychiatric Survivors and Academic**

### **Intellectuals**

#### ***Psychopolitics***

The term ‘psychopolitics’ was coined by Peter Sedgwick (1982), a prominent member of the British New Left, to refer to a field of political action focused upon welfare institutions concerned with the governance of ‘mental health’. Such institutions are sometimes critically characterised as the ‘psy-disciplines’ (Rose, 1985, Parker et al., 1995), which includes biomedical psychiatry but also numerous ancillary co-institutions including: psychology, social work, nursing etc. Under conditions of advanced capitalism, the psy-disciplines have become a political ‘field of contention’ (Crossley, 2005a, 2006ab) characterised by struggles over both identity-claims (e.g. the recognition of professional and patient identities) and the distribution of public resources (cf. Fraser, 1997).

Following Sedgwick, we call this field of contention *psychopolitics* and we understand activism within it in terms of heterogeneous political agents deploying resources of power and capital in sub- and adjacent fields. Examples of *sub*-fields include social movement organisations [SMOs], professional bodies, ‘third sector’ charities etc., whilst *adjacent* fields incorporate the media, academia and the law. As academics who are engaged within the psychopolitical field, we are specifically interested in the relationship *between* SMOs (sub-field) and those academics (adjacent field) who actively conduct research *upon them* (SMOs).

### ***Psychiatric Survivors***

Our interest, then, is the relationship between psychopolitical SMOs and academics conducting research within this particular ‘field of contention’. To this statement, we should add a qualification – for our *interest* in such SMOs is by no means *objective*; it is *not* primarily as an ‘object’ of social research that they have entered our view. Rather, our interest is driven by what we have referred to elsewhere as a ‘politico-ethical stance’ (Cresswell and Spandler, 2009, p. 143) - a stance typified by ‘deep engagement’ with SMOs in this field (see Tattersall, 2006). Updating Sedgwick’s (1982) seminal work, we argue for the transformation of psychiatry and its simultaneous democratisation via the formation of *political alliances* within and across the psychopolitical field (see Cresswell and Spandler, 2009). We focus upon psychopolitical SMOs because they have been and remain key agents of democratisation – whilst under the generic rubric of ‘psychopolitical SMOs’, we are particularly focussed upon alliances with self-defined ‘psychiatric survivors’: psychiatric patients’ groups and their allies which emphasise the potentially iatrogenic

effects of treatment by the ‘psy-disciplines’ (see Breggin, 1992, Campbell, 1992, Pembroke, 1991) and, therefore, the need to campaign for alternative treatments and forms of support (see Spandler and Calton, 2009).

### *Academic Intellectuals*

Any political field which penetrates ‘social space’ (see Bourdieu, 1989) as pervasively as psychopolitics simultaneously attracts the attention of *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu, 1988), an ‘ideal type’ (see Weber, 1949) we refer to in this paper as the ‘academic intellectual’. In fact, psychopolitics and academia exist in a state of dynamic inter-relation. Under conditions of advanced capitalism, this relationship is manifest in at least three ways, by:

1. the credentialing by the state, via the cultural capital of academia, of those ‘psy-experts’ tasked with ‘administering’ the ‘mentally ill’ (i.e. the training of psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, etc.);
2. the penetration of the psyche by the bio-technologies of the natural and social sciences whereby manifestations of human distress become pharmacologically pacified and/or psychologically ‘managed’ by clinical interventions designed according to a positivistic ‘evidence base’;
3. the academic ‘gaze’ of the social sciences which takes the psychopolitical field - and survivor SMOs within it – as their ‘object’ of research.

As should be clear by now, it is this last relationship that is of particular interest to this paper. Whilst, in the generic terms of the ‘academic gaze of the social sciences’ there now exists a sub-field comprising ‘Social Movement Studies’ with its own ‘institutional academic apparatus’ (Barker and Cox, 2002, p. 1), *within* that field, there is a growing focus upon survivor SMOs themselves as an ‘object’ of research (e.g. Crossley, 2006a, Emerick, 1996, Everett 1994, Morrison, 2005). Both

tendencies – the generic and the specific - have been the brunt of incisive critiques. Laurence Cox (with Colin Barker [2002] and Alf Nilsen [2007]) has identified the *misperceptions* of the academic gaze in relation to social movements in general; whilst in the *specific* case of survivor SMOs, the recently digitized archives of the Survivors History Group (SHG) has sought to displace the hegemony of academic accounts of their history in favour of survivors' *own* acts of collective remembrance (see Survivors History Group, 2010). The Survivors History Group (SHG) is a survivor SMO run *by* survivors *for* survivors, whose manifesto expressly declares that,

[w]e seek to record, preserve, collate, and make widely available the diversity and creativity of [survivors] through personal accounts, writings, poetry, art, music, drama, photography, campaigning, speaking, influencing and all other expressions. Our basic founding principle is that [survivors] own their history.<sup>1</sup>

In harmony with both this more specific critique and the generic critique of Cox et al, the strategy of this paper is one we would characterise as 'reflexive auto-critique' (see ....., 2009, p. 143). This means that, rather than taking survivor SMOs themselves as our 'object' of research, we turn our gaze *back*, instead, upon the academic field itself and *its* relationship to social movements. To 'turn back' in this way invites recognition that the academic field functions according to a set of 'field specific' rules (see Bourdieu, Passeron and de Saint-Martin, 1994) – one of which appears to be a *lack* of reflexive auto-critique concerning its relationship with social movements. Given such an evident lack, it is not surprising, therefore, that reflexive work at the interface of the academic and psychopolitical fields should be so rarely attempted in a manner, say, analogous to Henry Giroux's (2009) recent analysis of the interaction of the academic and military fields. This paper is an attempt to address that lack.<sup>2</sup>

### *Intellectual ‘Types’*

Our point-of-departure is the aforementioned generic critique of Barker and Cox (2002) which builds upon Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) theory of the ‘intellectual’. Gramsci contrasted two ‘types’ of intellectual: the ‘traditional’ and the ‘organic’, the former being characterised as the ‘ivory tower’ academic who defended the class status quo and the latter as the activist grassroots organiser whose ‘role and function’ was to construct a transformative historical ‘bloc’. The typology was grounded in a Marxist theory of hegemony which continued to stress the primacy of class-based social relations. Barker and Cox, however, provide a revision of Gramsci (1971) in the sense that his classic contrast is now displaced from solely class-based relations onto the field of social movements. With this displacement effected, they may now contrast the *academic* (‘traditional’) *intellectual*, typified by the higher education ‘knowledge-worker’, with the *movement intellectual*, typified by Gramsci’s ‘organic’ grassroots activist (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 301-311). Thus, a subtle transformation occurs: Gramsci’s ‘traditional intellectual’, in Barker and Cox’s hands, becomes the ‘academic intellectual’ *of* social movements whilst the ‘organic intellectual’ becomes the ‘activist’ located *within* social movements – the ‘movement intellectual’.

This analysis, it would seem, is salutary and carries over, we think, term-for-term when applied to the heterogeneous field of psychopolitics. Thus Gramsci’s ‘organic intellectual’ becomes the ‘movement intellectual’ and the ‘movement intellectuals’ of the psychiatric survivor movement may be identified as those activists who have played a leadership role within the movement itself. We may name just a few that are particularly salient for this paper: in the Canadian context, Pat



Capponi (e.g., 2003) and David Reville (e.g., 2005) and in the UK, the already-mentioned activists of the Survivors History Group (SHG) such as Peter Campbell (e.g., 1992) and Louise Pembroke (e.g., 1991)<sup>3</sup>. These are the psychopolitical heirs of Gramsci's 'organic intellectual'.

Barker and Cox's contrast between the 'academic' and the 'movement' intellectual highlights further distinctions of value. Academic intellectuals, they argue, tend to be *singly* located within the academic field, apprehending social movements from within academia, as 'objects' of research, 'to be observed, described and explained' - not to be engaged with as 'active processes that people...experience' (2002, p. 4).<sup>4</sup> Thus the academic intellectual's *theoretical* work is confined to formulating *abstract* 'generic propositions' which tend to 'marginalise the position of the [social movement] actor' (ibid, p. 3). And the intellectual 'field' within which these formulations are validated is constituted by *other* academics via the 'institutional...apparatus' of 'impact factors', 'esteem indicators', 'citation metrics' etc. Recognition within this field confers upon the academic intellectual hegemonic cultural capital (see Bourdieu, 1988, 1989).

It is true that the 'movement intellectual' is also likely to be singly located – but, this time, *within* the movement itself, producing knowledge *for* it and *within* it, not *about* it and *of* it. For the movement intellectual, the movement is what they are a part of and what is a part of them. From within such a location, the movement is no sort of 'object'. Thus, the movement intellectual's *theoretical* work is formulated, not according to the abstract generalisations of the academic intellectual, but upon *concrete* 'case propositions' which analyse pragmatic proposals in practice. Invariably, the movement intellectual's theoretical work is organised in response to two imperative questions: *Which side are you on?* and *What is to be done?* (Barker

and Cox, 2002). It is not that such questions are devoid of *theoretical* content but this ‘theory’ is not apprehended ‘in terms of a clash in generic propositions’ but, rather, as a series of ‘practical choices facing activists and movements’ (ibid., p. 12). Such theoretical work places activists *themselves* at the centre of their own accounts –as in the digitized archives of the Survivors History Group (SHG) - as *critical agents* who discuss, analyse and ‘test out’ theoretical proposals in practice. And the intellectual ‘field’ within which *these* formulations are validated is constituted by other activists within the context of social movement *practice* (pamphleteering, direct protest, cyber-activism etc.). Recognition within this field confers upon the movement intellectual its own *counter-hegemonic* cultural capital (ibid.).

It is important to note that, as these contrasts represent ‘ideal typifications’ (see Weber, 1949), there will be exceptions which blur such distinctions. Let us identify two. First, Barker and Cox are *themselves* academic intellectuals who are *doubly located* within academia *and* social movements. Not only have they pursued a ‘deep engagement’ with social movements, but, significantly for this paper, they intentionally practice a mode of ‘reflexive auto-critique’. It is for this reason that we would characterise them as exemplars of ‘the engaged academic’ for the generic field of social movements.

More specifically, it is important to note the recent rise, from the 1990s onwards, of the ‘survivor academic’ - a researcher (often, but not always, located within academia) who explicitly utilises their experience as a ‘psychiatric survivor’ in their intellectual work (e.g. Sweeney et al., 2008). Like Barker and Cox, survivor academics, such as Peter Beresford (e.g., 2005) and Diana Rose (e.g., 2008), are also *doubly located* insofar as they remain within the social movement field (e.g. within survivor SMOs) but also within academia.<sup>5</sup>

Although such exceptions theoretically demonstrate that '[a]lmost any empirical case will diverge from the pure type' (Parkin, 2002, p. 30), we do not consider this to render Barker and Cox's distinctions merely heuristic. But it does highlight the specificity of the psychopolitical field and the fact that the sub-field of survivor SMOs, like the adjacent field of academia, is itself 'in movement'. More significantly, it highlights the necessity of making further distinctions *between* academic intellectuals if we are, indeed, to define an effective 'politico-ethical stance' based upon an engagement with social movements.

For this reason, we next consider what we call, following Barker and Cox (2002), the 'lived contradictions' that face academic intellectuals in their relationships with social movements. We will argue that confronting such 'lived contradictions' in a way that is 'deeply engaged' results in productive, yet, at the same time, problematic, 'unsettled relations' (see Bannerji et al., 1992) between academics and survivor SMOs. Indeed, we would suggest that embracing such 'unsettled relations' is a precondition for defining a 'politico-ethical stance' that is truly 'deeply engaged'.

## **Part 2:**

### **The 'lived contradictions' of the academic intellectual**

Pursuing the line of engagement of Barker and Cox, we share their 'sense of unease' with the 'uncomfortable observation that academic work is...parasitic on social movements' (2002, p.1). As such, they are sceptical about the academic field itself. They sum up their scepticism by concluding that academic intellectuals who research

social movements embody a set of ‘lived contradictions’ (ibid., p. 25). Building upon this idea, we specify three such ‘lived contradictions’ as follows:

1. Agent versus Object;
2. Solidarity versus Recuperation;
3. Experience versus Theory.

1. Agent or Object?

If, as Barker and Cox point out (ibid., p. 3, emphasis added), the academic intellectual’s ‘gaze’ tends to view social movements as ‘objects of study, to be observed, described and explained, not as active processes that people *engage* with, *experience* or *transform*’; and, if this objectification subsumes the *critical agency* of the movement activist beneath an ‘abstract generic proposition’ which is subsequently validated within the academic and *not* the social movement field, then an obvious question is raised.

- How do academic intellectuals *live the contradiction* between seeing social movements as *critical agents* of change and gazing upon them ‘academically’ as objects of research?

2. Solidarity or Recuperation?

Living this first contradiction confronts the academic intellectual with an additional problem – that of *recuperating* social movements for academic purposes rather than demonstrating with them an engaged *solidarity*. By ‘recuperation’ we refer to that process whereby the academic intellectual’s ‘politico-ethical stance’ is neutered by both the requirements of economic survival plus the ‘lures’ of hegemonic prestige – that is to say, the pursuit within academia of ‘impact factors’, ‘esteem indicators’,

‘permanent tenure’ etc. In particular, the potential for the ‘engaged’ academic to construct progressive alliances between academics, professionals and users of services is systematically neutered by the lure of just such prestige, a seduction which Russell Jacoby (1987) (and others) have so aptly denounced. Barker and Cox alert us to the expropriation of ‘activist theory’ – those concrete rather than abstract propositions - which are then ‘recolonised and becomes a source of new, “sexy”...research subjects whose purpose is to attract...funding and status’ (2002, p. 9). Negotiating this contradiction poses a separate question:

- How does the academic intellectual *live the contradiction* between an engaged solidarity and the ‘lures’ of recuperation?

### 3. Experience or Theory?

This recuperation is, in its simplest sense, that posed by this pursuit of academic progression/survival. But it is also a recuperation *by theory*. We will be specifying this contradiction for the psychopolitical field but we should also point out that it signifies a generic intellectual tendency that E.P. Thompson (1978, p. 205) once criticised as ‘theoretical imperialism’. Cox, in particular (with Barker; also with Nilsen [e.g., 2007])<sup>6</sup> has done much to expose the pitfalls of this contradiction. For example, Cox and Nilsen observe that where this contradiction is resolved by the academic ‘imperialistically’, the underlying assumption is that theory is *only* produced within academia. On the contrary, as any movement activist knows,

‘the production of theory is not necessarily a scholastic exercise...the producers of theory are not necessarily academically trained personnel...’ (Cox and Nielsen, 2005<sup>7</sup>)

The main pitfall of ‘theoretical imperialism’ is *historical amnesia*. The academic intellectual must never *forget* that the dynamic of theory and experience is one which

historically occurs within activism anyway – and this for the obvious reason that *movement intellectuals theoretically reflect upon their experience*. It is simply not the case that ‘academics provide ‘knowledge’ and movements produce ‘access’’ (Barker and Cox, 2002, p. 1) – or, to put it another way, that academic intellectuals provide ‘theory’ which activists must then act *upon*.

This recognition raises a problem. If the dynamic of theory and experience is addressed within activism anyway, what is the academic intellectual’s *theoretical* role? What is the point of their theory? That the question invites a response is admitted as such by Barker, Nilsen and Cox in their concession that ‘[n]o one could sensibly argue that academic work...is of *no* use to movements’ (ibid., emphasis added) and their demand for ‘dialogue between activist and academic theorising’ (Cox and Nilsen, 2007, p. 424). On the back of this demand a final question emerges:

- How does the academic intellectual *live the contradiction* between an engagement with the movement’s *own* theory and the ‘amnesia’ of ‘theoretical imperialism’?

Here we have three ‘lived contradictions’ and three accompanying questions confronting the academic intellectual researching social movements. In the final section we consider how these contradictions were actually ‘lived’ in the work of two academics specifically conducting research in the psychopolitical field. We do so via the analysis of two contrasting texts. In contrasting these, we will be bearing in mind both the specificity of this particular field and the fact that we are making distinctions *between* academics according to the *depth* of their engagement with the contradictions outlined above. We have chosen two very different texts, one characterised by minimal engagement and one by deep engagement - whilst remaining fully aware of

the pitfalls of an overly polemical strategy which constructs false polarities and artificial divisions. But, at the risk of ‘bending the stick too far’, we have selected these examples precisely insofar as they emphasise the politico-ethical distinctions we are seeking to make.

### **Part 3: Lived contradictions?**

#### **Nick Crossley’s *Contesting Psychiatry* (2006a)**

Our first text is Nick Crossley’s *Contesting Psychiatry: Social Movements in Mental Health* (2006a), which summarises a decade-long research programme into ‘the field of psychiatric contention’ (ibid., pp. 13-29; see also 2006b). This text is a prominent example of an academic intellectual researching the psychopolitical field. Crossley’s work on ‘social movement theory’ (e.g., 2002) and on survivor SMOs specifically, is highly regarded (see Reed, 2005) within academia; indeed, we employ it ourselves in the preliminary specifications sketched out in Part 1 above. Yet an exploration of his text in light of our ‘lived contradictions’ reveals some of the contrasts we are seeking to make.

As Crossley points out, social movements are not ‘agents’ as such, for it is survivor SMOs which ‘express and translate’ their beliefs into action (2006a, p. 14). Yet he is less clear about the *critical agency* of movement intellectuals themselves who, in his analysis, become simultaneously subsumed beneath the broader category of SMOs *and* subordinated to certain *recuperative* tendencies of academic research. Consider, in this latter respect, the crucial issue of the ‘naming’ and ‘anonymity’ of his ‘objects’ of research – issues which concern the formal ‘research ethics’ aspects of the academic intellectual’s role.<sup>8</sup> In conducting ‘oral history interviews’ with ‘35 key

players’ (2006a, p. 6) – including a number of survivor movement intellectuals - Crossley elected to keep the identities of his research subjects anonymous. Fully aware that many of his interviewees were *public* figures, he conceded that, ‘[i]t has sometimes proved difficult to reconcile the *imperative of anonymity* with the...nature of my project’ (ibid., p. 7). It is true that, understood solely in terms of the ‘institutional academic apparatus’ of social research, he remained fully compliant with the ‘imperatives’ of ‘research ethics’ etc.<sup>9</sup> Yet, that imperative plays itself out in a way that has the tendency to *objectify* movement intellectuals by reducing them to the status of ‘rank and serial number’ (e.g. ‘Jack, an early activist’ [ibid., p. 8]; ‘Interview 16, survivor activist’ (ibid., p. 203) etc.).

Against this, consider the *exception* of the following case. For, in interviewing a critical agent who has historically *opposed* survivor SMOs, Crossley curiously forgets his own imperative. He suffers a bout of ‘amnesia’. Thus, whilst 34 ‘key players’ within survivor SMOs are reduced to the status of ‘rank and serial number’, his final interviewee, Marjorie Wallace, the campaigning journalist and founder member of the mental health SMO ‘Schizophrenia: A National Emergency’ (SANE) (e.g. Wallace, 1985) is exceptionally *named* (Crossley, 2006a, p. 197; also pp. 194-198). The exception *denies* critical agency to movement intellectuals whilst *granting* it in this exceptional case to someone who – as Crossley himself concedes – may be considered part of a ‘backlash’ (ibid, p. 191) against survivor SMOs.<sup>10</sup>

Turning, next, to the second question of solidarity and recuperation, nothing better contrasts the distance between a deeply engaged politico-ethical stance and the objectifying academic’s *minimal* role, than the dedication featured on Crossley’s ‘Acknowledgements’ page. ‘Thank you’, Crossley says,



‘to all the activists who allowed me to interview them... though *you can’t all ‘win’, whatever that entails*, I wish you all well in your struggle. *Whatever side of the fence one sits on*, it is pretty obvious that much needs to be done to improve mental health services...’ (ibid., p. ix, emphases added).

Judged in terms of our ‘lived contradictions’, Crossley is here at risk of recuperation. His ‘imperatives’ of neutrality, anonymity, objectivity - ‘*Whatever side of the fence one sits on*’ – place him at cross-purposes with Barker and Cox’s own imperative question of social movement activism: *Which side are you on?* Faced with this juxtaposition, a number of ‘politico-ethical’ questions ensue. Should the academic intellectual ask *himself* such an imperative question (‘which side am *I* on?’)? Is the Barker and Cox imperative *really* at odds with the dictates of ‘research ethics’ etc? Even to ask such questions, we would suggest, is to begin to ‘live’ the contradiction of solidarity and recuperation in a potentially productive way – in a way as, we will argue, Kathryn Church exemplifies through what she calls ‘unsettling relations’ between academics and survivor movements. We would ask, then, whether the phrase, ‘whatever side of the fence one sits on’ could *only* be made by someone who sees himself as *above* the battle? Or, whether the phrase, ‘you can’t all win, whatever that entails’, elides *any* ‘politico-ethical stance’ worthy of its name – a stance that could only be concerned with that other imperative question, as Cox and Nilsen (2005) remark, of ‘how can we win?’ It is not our intention here to impugn Crossley’s *academic* credentials; or to elide the practical compromises faced by, for instance, the untenured or ‘contract’ researcher striving to secure *academic* survival.<sup>11</sup> It *is*, however, a case of observing that Crossley’s position remains somewhat safely sat – not upon *either* side – but actually *on* the fence. It’s a *settled* relation.

It is also not our claim that Crossley demonstrates *zero* engagement with survivor SMOs. Indeed, it would be hard to research social movements at all without

even a *minimal* engagement. Neither would it be fair to say that Crossley is merely ‘theoretically imperialistic’. On the contrary, he is fully aware that what he calls the ‘story’ (aka the ‘experience’) of movement intellectuals is not epiphenomenal to the ‘real’ work of ‘theory’ and that activists *do* theoretically reflect upon their experience. All the same, he subordinates the ‘stories’ of his anonymous interviewees to an a priori theoretical task – specifically, the development of ‘social movement theory’ – which runs through the ‘usual suspects’ to alight on his very own version (e.g., Crossley, 2002). Crossley’s engagement, therefore, remains ‘academic’ throughout and, not surprisingly, it remains *within* academia where it is mainly validated. Because of the fact that he is singly located in the academic field, he does not critique practice *within that field*. Unlike Barker and Cox, he does not practice a reflexive auto-critique.

It is for the reason of this single location that the contradiction of experience and theory proves tangential for Crossley and is superseded, instead, by the contradictions of the *academic* field. Thus, the ‘data’ of ‘movement intellectuals’ ‘stories’ are subsumed beneath the sociologists classic concern with ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ for which anonymous activists become mere ‘nodes’ in the ‘networks’ of social structures (Crossley, 2006a, pp. 13-29; also 2007, 2008). In the face of such theoretical sophistication perhaps it is churlish to say that, ‘structures *still* don’t take to the streets!’ (see Dosse, 1998, pp. 115-117), but whatever the academic credentials of Crossley’s sociological work, the experience and theory of the movement intellectual is irretrievably lost.

This last pitfall, we think, is an ever-present for the academic who is only *minimally* engaged with social movements. But to what extent does it remain a pitfall for the academic who strives to be ‘deeply engaged’? And if confronting the ‘lived

contradictions’ of the academic intellectual results in productive, yet, at the same time, ‘unsettled relations’ between academics and survivor SMOs, what, then, would these relationships look like in practice? Cox and Nilsen, recall, demanded ‘*dialogue* between activist and academic theorising’ (Cox and Nilsen, 2007, p. 424). It is to an exemplar of such dialogue that we finally turn.

### **Kathryn Church’s *Forbidden Narratives* (1995)**

Our second text is the Canadian academic Kathryn Church’s *Forbidden Narratives: Critical Autobiography as Social Science* (1995), a somewhat neglected book which was the culmination of her doctoral research undertaken in the late 1980s/early 1990s. At first sight a comparison with Crossley would not appear to be in Church’s favour, the former being the author of many ‘high impact’ papers and books (e.g., 2002, 2005b, 2006ab) whilst the latter’s corpus contains a significant amount of ‘grey literature’<sup>12</sup> (e.g., 1997). Indeed, Church characterises herself as a ‘sociologist who resists Grand Theory’ and ‘a writer whose best stuff goes into e-mail’.<sup>13</sup> It is, however, precisely such contrasts which are so revealing for our purposes here. This is because they are indicative of her depth of engagement. Church proves to be not only engaged with the movement itself, but, equally, deeply engaged *with* our lived contradictions.

With *Forbidden Narratives*, we commence the analysis at the point we left Crossley’s - with our *third* contradiction of experience and theory. This point-of-departure arises because Church’s approach to lived contradiction emerges, in the first place, from *her own* experience – or, more specifically, from the distinctively *feminist*

mode of reflexive auto-critique which inspired it (see Bannerji et al., 1992). For Church recognised that what is essential in living a contradiction is precisely the fact that, although it may be *experienced*, a contradiction cannot be *theoretically* solved. Thus Church holds out the prospect that the apparent opposition of experience *or* theory may be ‘lived’ in an ethical but, nevertheless, still contradictory way - as an *experience*, precisely, *of* theory. *Forbidden Narratives* charts this experience through the following phases (1984-1993):

1. as an experience of alliance with survivor SMOs;
2. as an experience of research with survivor SMOs;
3. as an experience of personal ‘breakdown’.

Such cumulative experiences left Church with ‘burning’ questions (1995, p. 2) concerning the relationship of academic research to social movement activism. But unlike Crossley’s position of *single* location within academia, Church approached our contradictions with ‘a foot in both camps’ - from the *double* location of an academic intellectual *and* a social movement ally. In particular, Church was forced to ‘live’ one of the critical contradictions of experience and theory: the question of the academic intellectual’s *theoretical* role.

This question was clarified through a process which she aptly referred to as ‘*coming-into-theory*’ (ibid.). But this was not just a process of coming-into ‘any old’ theory, for Church but, very precisely, a ‘coming-into’ *feminist* theory – a process that was *experiential* and did not exist only at the abstract level of theory. In fact, Church’s response to the contradiction of theory/experience turned out to be Janus-faced – ‘coming-into’ feminist theory forced her to ‘look two ways’ at once, both to theory and to experience, in a way which gave ‘intellectual legitimacy to personal narrative and experiential knowledge’ (ibid., p. 4.). Significantly, it was the emphasis

within feminist theory upon both *reflexivity* and *critical agency* that helped her ‘get to grips’ both with her own experience (e.g. of personal ‘breakdown’) and to recognise how this ‘resonated with’ the contrasting ‘breakdowns’ of psychiatric survivors (ibid., p. 45). Feminism thus provided Church with a theoretical ‘vantage point’ (ibid., p. 23) through which to *engage* with the movement.

Pursuing this feminist mode of reflexive auto-critique, Church acknowledged that survivors must *not* provide the ‘experience’ to which *she* would append the ‘theory’. Coupled with her own deep engagement with movement intellectuals, this made her increasingly aware of the inequalities which lie at the heart of ‘minimalistic’ approaches to the academic intellectual’s role:

‘[r]esearch [has] suffered from...effects of power inequalities...The most pervasive is the...injustice which results from the *objectification* of...human “subjects”...’ (ibid., p. 41, emphasis added)

This recognition, in turn, provided her with a *feminist* rendition of the contradiction of ‘agency’ and ‘object’:

‘I fully intended to be ‘objective’ about my work with psychiatric survivors but the realities of *genuine engagement* made it virtually impossible *not to take up subjectivity*’ (ibid., p. 3 emphases added).

The reality of ‘genuine engagement’ presented itself in the form of a pressing ‘demand’ – *not* from the dictates of ‘research governance’, ‘academic progression’ etc. *within* academia, but *personally* from psychiatric survivors themselves. What survivors demanded from Church was *not* academic objectification but, on the contrary, ‘a kind of *participation*: they wanted me to be *personal*’ (ibid., emphasis added). In fact, it was the depth of Church’s engagement with one particular ‘movement intellectual’ - Pat Capponi - that provoked the personal ‘breakdown’ which we have characterised as a phase of her ‘critical autobiography’. For, what

Capponi demanded of Church was not her *academic* credentials but a *real* relationship with the *real* Pat Capponi - an engaged relationship of both 'agency' and 'depth'.

It is in consequence of this relationship that *Forbidden Narratives* is 'up close and personal' in a way which finds little echo in *Contesting Psychiatry*. In contrast to Crossley, Church's engagement with psychiatric survivors was *not* primarily academic: it was 'politico-ethical' and it led, via a 'physical and emotional breakdown' (Church, 1995, p. 3) to an *experiential* and *theoretical* 'breakthrough' (ibid., p. 45) – to the process of 'coming-into' feminist theory.

We should be clear about our argument here. We are *not* suggesting that an experience of personal 'breakdown' is either a sufficient or a necessary condition of a 'politico-ethical stance' towards psychopolitical movements. Nevertheless, it still needs to be said that one of the most *forbidden* elements of Church's 'narrative' – her experience, as she says, of 'personal breakdown' - remains of significance as an example of *both* the experiential burdens inherent in the act of living through 'lived contradictions' *and* as an insight into that other 'forbidden narrative' which lies at the heart of psychopolitics: survivors own stigmatisation within the psychopolitical field. Church's 'forbidden narrative' cannot, therefore, at the end of the day, be judged as *identical* with the experiences of psychiatric survivors for the very reason, as she herself concedes, that she never *fully* experienced the stigmatizing effects of that particular 'field of contention':

[a]symmetries of power and privilege cushioned my fall and...separated me from the full extent of what is possible when, for whatever reasons, a life falls apart...I was never labelled, never admitted to hospital, never psychiatrically drugged, never given ECT.<sup>14</sup> I was able to pay for alternative health care (ibid., p. 69).

Ultimately, the value of Church's auto-critique resides in the manner in which it facilitated her 'coming-into-feminist-theory' in a way which did not objectify the movement, but enabled her to recognise the *critical agency* of movement intellectuals through the critical agency of her own 'deep engagement'. This recognition is expressed in the way that *Forbidden Narratives* represents survivor activists - for example, at a most basic level, in the way in which they are 'explicitly named':

'[t]here are a number of people explicitly named in this text and I thank them for allowing this sometimes difficult exposure as a contribution to my intellectual project: two amazing *psychiatric survivor leaders*, Pat Capponi and David Reville...' (ibid., p. xv).

Here, the comparison with Crossley is significant. In contrast to *Contesting Psychiatry*, where an 'imperative of anonymity' is (mostly) observed, Church felt *ethically* bound to *name* her *subjects* of research 'explicitly'. For her, the strategy of 'naming and acknowledging others is important, particularly in the survivor movement' where 'there has been so little recognition...of people's labors' (ibid., p. 5). And it is only via such 'explicit' strategies that Reville and Capponi are revealed as what they undoubtedly are: as *public* and *critical agents*, not anonymous *objects* of research. Unlike Crossley, in whose text survivor activists are effectively hidden, Church makes them *visible*. More significant even than this, in *Forbidden Narratives* survivors are 'explicitly named', not just in the sense of personal identification, but, also, in the Gramscian sense of being named in their 'role and function' as 'movement intellectuals' – named precisely, as Church makes plain, as 'psychiatric survivor leaders' (ibid.).

Church resisted academic 'objectification', then, through the *depth* of her own engagement. Yet, the fact that such engagement is never easy or 'settled' is the final

contradiction with which we want to engage. We think, ultimately, that ‘deep engagement’ equals ‘unsettled relations’. ‘Having a foot in both camps’ – Church’s ‘double location’ – provoked a series of these (ibid., pp. 73-94) but, again, in a Janus-faced way: *both* in the sense of her relationship with psychiatric survivors but *also* her relationship towards academia. Such ‘unsettled relations’ prove to be especially revealing in respect of our last ‘lived contradiction’.

Doing ‘activist research’, being ‘political from *within* academia’ (ibid., p. 53, emphasis added), invokes questions of *solidarity* and *recuperation*. ‘Coming-into’ feminist theory may have afforded Church her theoretical breakthrough but it constituted, at one and the same time, an ‘experiential burden’. We will briefly consider this ‘burden’: first, in terms of her relationship to academia, and, then, in terms of her relationship to the social movement.

First, Church was acutely aware that the ‘lures’ of recuperation threatened her solidarity with psychiatric survivors. Her refusal to ‘play the academic game’ by, for example, objectifying the movement through a series of ‘high impact’ peer-reviewed papers, meant that, although she successfully resisted these ‘lures’, she did *not* readily achieve academic progression. Church prioritized, instead, a series of campaigning pamphlets designed to promote the aims of the movement.

Second, by practicing a feminist mode of reflexive auto-critique, Church was forced to reconsider her *own* role ‘as an “outsider” in relation to a movement comprised of people (‘insiders’) who have a history of oppression’ (ibid., p. 3) and, in consequence, her *own* potential for ‘inscribing...survivors into non-liberatory frameworks’ (ibid., p. 23). Precisely through this process of auto-critique, Church lost



her 'sense of being one of the *good guys*' (ibid.). Her 'outsider' status as a movement 'ally' became, for herself, a further source of critique.

Ironically, in light of Crossley's remarks ('Whatever *side* of the fence one sits on'), Church depicted this second unsettling relation through a 'teetering' metaphor – as a 'falling *off* the fence' (ibid., pp. 51-72). She signifies by this metaphor her 'sense of unease' at 'having a foot in both camps' – the 'unease' of the engaged academic as she *teeters* between 'double locations'. Just as she had 'fallen off the fence' of academic objectification via 'deep engagement' with the social movement, so Church *simultaneously* 'fell off the fence' of an *uncritical* solidarity towards psychiatric survivors. This was the experiential burden which accompanied her 'coming-into' feminism. She recognised that we cannot regain our self-definition as 'one of the good guys', simply by 'falling' again, this time *on the 'right' side of the fence* - by identifying solely with activists such as Reville, Capponi etc. As she makes clear, this is because we cannot, as academic intellectuals, just 'hand ourselves in' to the movement (ibid., p. 71). 'Coming-into' feminist theory, therefore, proved as *critical* a process for Church as her solidarity with psychiatric survivors. Both were interconnected components of her 'critical autobiography'. Indeed, Church's preservation of her own critical agency meant that despite the 'depth' of her engagement with Capponi, she acknowledged nevertheless that:

'I needed to take Pat seriously but also to understand her voice as *partial*. It needed to be *problematized* not to discount it but to make its implications explicit' (ibid., emphases added).

This additional recognition resulted in Church making a theoretical contribution which was never 'imperialistic', but was fully cognizant of 'difference'. For Church,

this difference was constituted by *both* her hegemonic cultural capital as an ‘academic intellectual’ *and* her lack of experience of the more stigmatising aspects of psychopolitics.

An ‘unsettling’ question remains. To what extent is solidarity possible in the midst of ‘unsettled relations’? Unsurprisingly, it seems, this is solidarity of a ‘teetering’ sort. But *solidarity*, nevertheless. For Church, the possibility of solidarity arose insofar as she worked *with* survivors ‘across difference’ (ibid., p. 68) – but this is itself an ‘unsettled relation’ which invokes all the contradictions incumbent upon ‘having a foot in both camps’. The engaged academic turns out, therefore, to be, simultaneously, both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ – a ‘double location’ of which Church was acutely aware. For, in asking the following question: ‘[i]f an “insider” and an “outsider” to a movement work together...are their interests identical?’ (ibid.), she astutely observed:

‘[c]learly not...*differences should be named*...a healthy recognition of separation is the only acceptable basis for...survivor participation...My friendship with Pat...was not based on our similarities but on *our comfort in naming differences*’ (ibid., emphases added).

We entirely agree and would only add the following caveat. Whilst working with survivors ‘across difference’ undoubtedly constitutes a *necessary* condition of deep academic engagement, it is not, in itself, *sufficient*. Our argument is that it must also be tied to a ‘politico-ethical stance’ which seeks to transform and democratise the psychopolitical field. And this requires not only the recognition of *difference*, but also a sense of *conviction* – a taking of *responsibility* for political action and alliance-formation. ‘Difference’, therefore, as Arthur Frank has observed, can never be *just* ‘recognition’ because,

'[a]ny claim for the *value* of...*difference* depends on what one does with the life of which that difference is a constituent part...the cost of value is *responsibility*' (1998, pp. 341-342, emphases added).

To which we would add that, for the engaged academic, 'taking responsibility' means *living* the contradictions that are part and parcel of the academic intellectual's role. 'Living the contradictions' requires that we are aware of them *as contradictions* and that we make politico-ethical choices as a result of this awareness. We cannot theoretically solve these 'lived contradictions' but we *can* refuse to 'sit on the fence'. Whilst it is not the last word on the subject, Church's *Forbidden Narratives* remains both a salutary point-of-departure within the specific field of psychopolitics *and* an important generic critique of the relationship between academia and social movements.

## Conclusion

In perusing advanced drafts of this paper the reservation has been raised by sceptical readers that, in valorising in the example of Church, the 'engaged' academic, we have been unwittingly guilty of falling into the trap of *tautology*. It is a substantial objection. This 'tautology-problem', so the argument goes, falls under the spell of its own circular logic: thus, the criterion of positive value for the academic intellectual researching social movements is defined by practices of 'engagement' whilst the answer to the question of how to establish, a priori, the criterion of positive value is likewise defined as...engagement. But what, a sceptical reader might argue, *grounds* the notion of 'deep engagement' in the first place? And what, furthermore, secures its status of positive value vis-à-vis the putative 'objectivity' of the minimally engaged academic?

To this we would make two replies. First, insofar as the question presupposes

its very own valorization – specifically, of ‘objectivity’ over ‘engagement’ - it tends *itself* towards a strategy of recuperation. The ‘tautology-problem’ holds out the false prospect of establishing an *academic* criterion by which social movement research might be judged. And, of course, we know very well the specific tautologies which accompany that judgment: academic research is valorised if it appears in ‘high-impact’ journals of peer-review. But what grounds *that particular* valorisation? Just the fact that they *are* high-impact journals of peer-review. Academia, thus, succumbs to its very own ‘circular logic’. This, we think, is where the tautology-problem properly lies. Indeed, the tautologies of the academic intellectual constitutes, we would argue, another ‘lived contradiction’ which in an era of public sector ‘cuts’ and the increasing privatisation of higher education, the ‘engaged academic’ increasingly has to contend.

But this is not our main response. For we would deny that we have fallen under the spell of a circular logic at all. The reason is this. The ‘lived contradictions’ of the academic intellectual are not, at the end of the day, *philosophical* problems. To think that they are, and to attempt their resolution at the analytical level, is the modus operandi of ‘theoretical imperialism’ - turning what is essentially a problem of ‘lived experience’ into a philosophical problem. This is precisely what E.P. Thompson, in ‘The Poverty of Theory’, railed magisterially against. Rather, we would express the problem like this. The engaged academic tries to be ‘deeply engaged’. And ‘deep engagement’, far from being a philosophical problem, is a human practice - a ‘lived contradiction’ involving all the ‘unsettled relations’ which are subsequently engaged. A ‘lived contradiction’ is a ‘lived experience’ - and it is at the level of ‘experience’ that its ‘evaluation’ needs to be made. But, here, we should take care about words. ‘Evaluation’ at this juncture is in fact a misnomer which we would rather avoid. It is

as if an academic intellectual armed with a positivistic 'evidence-base' could produce a succinct rendition of what constitutes 'deep engagement' (or what its outcomes or impacts might be). We prefer the normative language of 'responsibility' and 'politico-ethical stance' to define the role of the 'engaged academic'. And if, at this juncture, our sceptical reader was again to inquire about 'grounds', we could only say, 'You are absolutely correct' - nothing 'grounds' deep engagement precisely because it is a commitment to a dialogic relation which is future-directed, which anticipates the 'unsettled relations' to come. This, it seems to us, is the antithesis of tautology - it is, rather, *contingency*. And this means, we conclude, that, however it is to be 'valued', academic engagement is ultimately *contingent* upon a dialogic and future-directed relation, which can only be, in the manner of Church, an 'unsettled relation' with the movement itself.

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Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> At URL:

<http://209.85.229.132/search?q=cache:LK-KHUYi0RoJ:www.rethink.org/document.rm%3Fid%3D6373+SURVIVOR+HISTORY+GROUP&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk> – accessed 03/11/09.

<sup>2</sup> It could be objected, particularly given our valorisation later in this paper of the experiential reflexivity of Church, that we are not ‘practicing what we preach’. This excellent point was also made by an anonymous reviewer for *Social Movement Studies*. We accept the point and it has also formed the basis of our own self-criticism. Lack of space in part explains the omission but we would also add that we are interpreting ‘reflexive auto-critique’ in *two* complementary senses: i) in the sense given to it within ‘auto-ethnography’ (see Reed-Danahay, 1997), or what Church terms ‘critical autobiography’; ii) in the sense that we are also advocating a reflexive ‘turn’ within academia which turns the academic ‘gaze’ back upon the role and function of the academic intellectual in their relations with social movements. It is the first of these senses – but not the second – that is lacking in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> We give these examples of movement intellectuals as the two texts we contrast are based on social movement research in Canada and England.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to be clear that neither us, nor Cox and Barker, are arguing that *any* research about social movements *necessarily* objectifies movement participants, but it is an important tendency and concern.

<sup>5</sup> The survivor academic who is ‘doubly located’ within psychopolitics *and* the academic field undoubtedly faces a number of highly specific ‘lived contradictions’ which we do not address here, but which deserve to be considered in their own right.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the Cox/Nilsen paper’s are available on-line e.g.: URL:

[http://eprints.nuim.ie/460/1/AFPP\\_X\\_redux.pdf](http://eprints.nuim.ie/460/1/AFPP_X_redux.pdf);

URL: [http://eprints3.nuim.ie/458/1/AFPP\\_XI\\_final.pdf](http://eprints3.nuim.ie/458/1/AFPP_XI_final.pdf);

Many of these were contributions to the annual Alternative Futures and Popular Protest Conferences held at Manchester Metropolitan University.

<sup>7</sup> URL: <http://eprints.nuim.ie/445/>

<sup>8</sup> URL: [http://www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.htm#\\_anon](http://www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.htm#_anon) – accessed 18/01/10.

<sup>9</sup> Although it is worth noting that this ‘presumed anonymity’ has been challenged within social science research generally, where it is often wrongly assumed that research participants prefer to remain anonymous (e.g. Grinyer 2002).

<sup>10</sup> This situation has led the Survivors History Group to attempt to identify the interviewees of various sociological accounts of Survivor SMOs in the UK - to bring ‘critical agency’ back into official documentation of movement histories.

(see URL: <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm#ContestingPsychiatrybox>)

<sup>11</sup> We recognise that in some contexts there may be good reasons for ‘minimal engagement’ and are not seeking to fetishise the act of engagement itself, regardless of form or content.

<sup>12</sup> The University and College Union (UCU) have defined ‘grey literature’ as ‘outputs that are not in conventional published form such as confidential reports to government or business, software, designs, performances and artefacts...’.

URL: [http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/1/h/ucu\\_REFresponse\\_dec09.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/1/h/ucu_REFresponse_dec09.pdf).

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<sup>13</sup> From Church's webpage at the School of Disability Studies, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada.  
URL: <http://www.ryerson.ca/ds/for-faculty/index.html#Church>.

<sup>14</sup> ECT = 'Electro-Convulsive Therapy' – a controversial treatment within psychiatry.