Chapter 2: Ruth First and the Nature of Activist Research

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> 'Ruth First has come to be an icon of the revolutionary hero. This is to make too much of her. It is also to make too little. There is a danger that her real achievements, her bravery and her integrity, will be hidden behind the mirror. Ruth combined during her life the practical politics of the movement for liberation with commitments to investigating, researching and explaining' (Williams 2014: 13).

Introduction

I have greatly admired Ruth First since my student activism days in the mid-1970s. Her theorisation and revolutionary stance in a 1978 debate with Archie Mafeje on politics beyond the 1976 Soweto uprising in the Review of African Political Economy shaped my thinking and that of other student militants of my generation profoundly (First 1978). In re/reading some of First's writings and especially the literature about her, I regret that she herself did not have the opportunity to turn her formidable intellect to the question of activist research. It is likely that it is an issue that she would have engaged or been requested to engage at some point in her life. We are impoverished for that, because, personifying activist research (and much else besides) and 'because she was Ruth' (Slovo 2007: 21), she would have undoubtedly addressed this matter with great erudition, candour, critical reflexivity, imagination, elegance and verve.

At the heart of First was her commitment to, and practice of critique. O'Malley clarifies the meaning of 'critique':

> if one is to revolutionize human society in the interest of its perfection and welfare one must understand its nature, workings and failures, one must impart this understanding to others, and one must somehow affect the translation of this understanding into organized political

> action which will transform society in the interest of the common good. The unity of theory and praxis (means) the inseparability of these three efforts in genuine social criticism. (O'Malley 1970: xiv)

If the three-fold process of critique begins with self-clarification as it must, in my view it is followed not by some simple transmission of 'this understanding to others', but by deliberative, thoughtful and critical engagement with peer scholars and diverse other publics that help to further enrich understanding and shape the very constitution of knowledge (Delanty 2001: 154). Knowledge is to be valued for enhancing our understanding of our natural and social worlds and making us wonder anew in fresh new and fertile ways. It is critical that research and knowledge are not judged in purely instrumental and utilitarian terms and are not sacrificed at the altar of "relevance", defined parochially and reduced to market or economic relevance alone. Scholarship and knowledge are connected materially in a myriad of ways with power—economic, political, social and personal—and First would concur with O'Malley (1970: 4) that they must inform social action in the interests of building egalitarian, equitable, humane and democratic societies in which all are able to live rich, rewarding, cultured, secure, healthy and dignified lives. In '[revolutionizing] human society in the interest of its perfection and welfare' in ways that, in the age of the Anthropocene, are environmentally sustainable and mindful of non-human existence, the unity of theory and practice is critical: if practice without theory is blind, theory without practice is sterile.

In this reflection on Ruth First and activist research, I start from the premise that it is not possible to undertake value-free social science research; this is simultaneously a rejoinder to criticism and dismissal of activist research as being biased, flawed, not rigorous and not to be taken seriously. Activist research 'must be judged on its own merits – the design and logic of the project, the quality of the evidentiary base, the analytical power of the argument, ways in which the scholarship resolves anomalies and builds upon and opens up new areas of inquiry, while challenging the inherited orthodoxies' (Isaacman 2003: 8). I pursue several questions. Who was Ruth First and what biographical details are relevant to the theme of activist research? Accordingly, in this chapter I proceed by locating First's ideological, political, epistemic and social orientation by focusing principally on her biography and history as relevant to her activist research. Thereafter, I consider the nature, ends and interests of activist research. Regarding First's research, was her research activist research, what examples can be provided, what were its key features and the institutional conditions of knowledge creation? I engage these issues in Chapter 3 and exemplify First's indisputably activist research. Noting her colleague and friend Gavin Williams' observation, I

also try to bring out from being 'hidden behind the mirror' her 'real achievements, her bravery, and her integrity' (Williams 2014: 13). Insofar as there are tensions and dilemmas involved in undertaking activist research, what are they, in what contexts and situations do they arise and can they be resolved, or only managed? Did First address the tensions; if so, how and with what success? I discuss the challenges, ambiguities, tensions and dilemmas that arise in the practice of activist research in the second part of Chapter 3. Finally, I draw together some final thoughts on First and activist research and contemporary challenges.

Locating Ruth First

Biography is important for understanding First's activist research and writing. A key feature of Eurocentric epistemology is the supposed irrelevance of 'the persona of the scholar', and the idea that scholars function as 'value-neutral analysts' (Wallerstein 1997: 95); however, 'disembodied and un-located assumptions about knowing and knowledge making' obfuscate 'the hidden geo- and bio-graphical politics of knowledge of imperial epistemology' (Mignolo 2011: 118). Calling 'into question the modern/colonial foundation of the control of knowledge, it is necessary to focus on the knower' because the 'knower is always implicated, geo- and body-politically in the known', despite the fact that 'modern epistemology managed to conceal both and built the figure of the detached observer, a neutral seeker of truth and objectivity' (Mignolo 2011: 123). Grosfoguel weighs in that 'we always speak from a particular location in the power structures. Nobody escapes the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical, and racial hierarchies' within which we are located (Grosfoguel 2007: 213). Feminist scholar Donna Haraway also persuasively argues that knowledge-making is about 'location' and 'situated and embodied knowledges', not about 'transcendence and splitting of subject and object'—scholars must be 'answerable for what we learn how to see' (Haraway 1988: 583). The flaw of 'Western epistemic traditions … that claim detachment of the known from the knower' is that 'they rest on a division between mind and world, or between reason and nature as an ontological a priori' (Mbembe 2016: 32). In this approach,

> the knowing subject is enclosed in itself and peeks out at a world of objects and produces supposedly objective knowledge of those objects. The knowing subject is thus able to know the world without being part of that world and he or she is by all accounts able to produce knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context. (Mbembe 2016: 33)

Heloise Ruth First was born on 4 May 1925 in Johannesburg, the offspring of Jewish parents Julius First and Matilda Levetan who migrated from Latvia and Lithuania respectively to South Africa in the early 1900s (O'Laughlin 2014; Wieder 2013). Her 'parents were members of the International Socialist League and founder members of the South African Communist Party in 1921' (Marks 1983: 123); she followed in their footsteps ideologically and politically and joined the Junior Left book club at age fourteen (Wieder 2013). Growing up in 'a relatively wealthy Johannesburg community' and in a family that 'lived a privileged life as upper-middle-class White South Africans' (Wieder 2013: 35), First graduated from Jeppe Girls High School in 1941, where she was the Literary Prefect and won a prize for an essay, *'On Poetry'*. She was described as 'brilliant and powerful, but at the same time vulnerable' and as 'sharp-tongued but also shy' (Wieder 2013: 40). She herself wrote that the 'air of confidence' that she possessed, and that other people remarked on, was 'useful in keeping others from knowing how easily assailed and self-consciously vulnerable I was' (First 1965: 129).

On the eve of attending the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Johannesburg, South Africa, she made a speech outside the Johannesburg City Hall, where she attended political lectures and meetings with her parents from a young age; she was said to be a 'brilliant orator'. First joined the Young Communist League in 1943, and was editor of its newspaper (Wieder 2013: 48). She graduated from Wits in 1946 with a Bachelor of Arts degree, though most of her courses were in the social sciences and included Sociology, Social Anthropology, Social Economics, Democracy and Society, Native Law and Native Administration (Wieder 2013: 46). The five years taken to complete her degree was likely the consequence of extensive involvement 'in leftist political work – both at the university and in the community' (Wieder 2013: 47). At Wits, First helped found the Federation of Progressive Students, 'a radical student organization' (Wieder 2013: 50). She remarked that 'on a South African campus, the student issues that matter are national issues' (First 1965: 116). Wits brought her into contact with the likes of Nelson Mandela; her friendship circle included many future political notables and 'placed her in a non-racial world that did not exist for most White students' (Wieder 2013: 5). First 'is remembered as a comrade who questioned commonplaces and challenged her comrades' (Wieder 2011: 88). She 'participated in one of the first joint Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA)-African National Congress (ANC) movements, the Anti-Pass Campaign of 1944-45' and was 'elected to the Johannesburg District of the Communist Party of South Africa' (Wieder 2013: 48, 61). With the outbreak of the African Mineworkers Union strike in 1946, she resigned her job as a researcher at the Social Welfare Department to support the strike.

Subsequently, at age 21 she joined *The Guardian* (later *New Age*), remaining the editor of its Johannesburg edition for 17 years (Wieder 2013: 48, 56). From 1955, First was also editor of *Fighting Talk*:

> a radical political and literary journal – a further indication of her wide-ranging interests. As a journalist, her expose of forced labour practices in the notorious Bethal district and her coverage of the Alexandra bus boycotts are deservedly well-known; an article ... in 1961 entitled "The Gold of Migrant Labour" was perhaps more far-reaching in its analysis. (Marks 1983: 124)

The journalistic investigations demonstrated to First 'South African capital's methods of controlling labour in its two most fundamental and brutal forms, on the mines and on the Bethal farms'; and 'confirmed and informed her Marxist understanding of South African society' (Williams 2014: 22). They also presaged 'much of the historical work and academic debate of the 1970s on the role of the mining industry in the construction of the apartheid state' (Marks 1983: 124).

First's 'writing on South Africa was, from the outset, hard-hitting and penetrating investigative journalism at its best' (Marks 1983: 124; Zeilig 2014: 135). The journalism and political activism of the 1940s and 1950s exposed her to conditions of labourers and provided experience that would later, be put to good use in her research and writing. The activism included helping to reconstitute the CPSA as the South African Communist Party (SACP) and establish the Congress of Democrats in 1953 and her involvement in drafting the Freedom Charter in 1955. It was to result in arrest and trial for treason between 1956 and 1961. Marks notes that:

> the germ of Ruth's later concerns is to be seen in this earlier work: her clear understanding of the exploitative axis of the apartheid state on the farms and mines of South Africa, her identification with the struggles of workers and peasants, her internationalism and the wider knowledge she gained of the problems of development and the transition to socialism. (Marks 1983: 124)

Walter Sisulu talks about First as 'one of the most dynamic personalities in the movement' during the early 1960s and as editor of *New Age* 'central to nearly everything' (Pinnock 2007: 220). In 1963, following the arrests of the underground leadership of the ANC, SACP and Umkhonto we Sizwe MK at Rivonia, First was arrested at the Wits University library and held in solitary confinement for 117 days, during which time she was ruthlessly interrogated, resulting in her attempted suicide. The following year, failing to obtain a passport, she and her three children left South Africa for England on an exit permit, where they joined her partner, Joe Slovo. She would not set foot in South Africa again. Re-establishing herself and

a young family in exile, she continued with her political activism through involvement in exile politics, addresses and speeches at anti-apartheid events. First remained a member of the SACP and was an ANC activist, however, she 'never hesitated to ask major and critical questions of them' (Zeilig 2014: 135). In exile, however, she 'had to find a new way of making a living' and 'so began a period of intense research, writing and teaching' (Williams et al. 2014: 9), which I address later.

In 1972, First was awarded a fellowship at the University of Manchester; thereafter she was appointed to a lecturing position in the Sociology department at Durham University, which she occupied until 1978. She taught courses on Sociology of Developing Societies, Sociology of Industrial Development, Political Sociology, Third World Social Movements, and the Sociology of Gender (Wieder 2011: 92–93). In her colleague Williams' view, her 'experiences as an activist and journalist brought both breadth and depth' (Wieder 2011: 92) to the Sociology of Developing Societies course and a student noted about the course on gender that it was 'challenging, stimulating, and often provoking furious discussions' (Williams 2014: 3). In 1975, First taught for a semester at the University of Dar es Salaam, an exciting milieu where she connected with various notable left-wing scholars. She was 'flushed with elation at the experience of development studies having some relevance, and students being responsive' (Williams 2014: 3). When presented with the opportunity to connect with the *Centro de Estudos Africanos* (CEA – Centre of African Studies) at the *Universidade (University) Eduardo Mondlane* in Maputo she grabbed it. In 1977, she spent time at CEA 'to lead a research project on the export of Mozambican migrant labour to the South African mines'; she subsequently resigned from Durham to become CEA research director in 1979 'in charge of setting up and running its research-based development course' (Wuyts 2014: 60). First expressed 'how important it was to be at home, geographically, politically and pedagogically' (Wieder 2011: 96). There will be a further discussion on the CEA experience in due course, an activity that was tragically cut short in 1982 by her murder in her office by South African security forces.

For Ralph Miliband, First was characterised by a 'quiet resolve' to 'struggle against oppression in South Africa', married 'to a sharply critical view of the shortcomings of the left' (Miliband 1982: 313–314). She was 'the least "utopian" of revolutionaries'; she recognised the failings of the liberation movements to which she belonged, yet did not doubt 'the justice of her cause or … the urgent need to strive for its advancement' (Miliband 1982: 313–314). She:

> was above all a political activist, who became a writer and scholar by force of circumstances and because she had a remarkable talent for social and political analysis. She was intellectually very tough, direct, precise, unsentimental, impatient with rhetoric and pretentiousness. She had strong opinions, definite perspectives. This might have made her rigid and narrow; but

> it did not. She remained an intensely questioning person, with a great appetite for learning, with a free mind, an open ear and a great sense of the ridiculous. (Miliband 1982: 314)

John Saul comments similarly that she:

> was a brilliant social scientist – albeit a revolutionary social scientist (and, again, she would have made no real distinction between the two, between her roles as revolutionary and as social scientist). For, as a social scientist, she knew that there was no substitute for clear thinking and hard work – for a genuine science. And she knew that solidly grounded revolutionary endeavour required and demanded no less. (Saul 2014: 121–122)

Her 'remarkable body of writing' that encompassed 'investigative journalism to memoir to political and literary analysis' was 'driven both by her political commitments and by her frank curiosity about people and the worlds they inhabited'. It was 'characterized by the clarity of her prose, her rigorous research, her careful use of the narrative form and her interest in addressing the widest possible audience' (Williams 2019). She contributed not only to the 'revolutionary struggle in Africa, but also to 'raising the intellectual and moral level of … discourse' (Saul 2014: 121). The SACP general secretary observed that 'the bomb that took Comrade Ruth's life was intended to deprive our movement of the services of one of its most gifted militants. We openly acknowledge the exceptional gravity of the loss to us caused by her death' (Kasrils 2020).

A colleague at the CEA writes that First was 'easy to like – charismatic, beautiful, an acute interlocutor, a generous friend, a creative organiser of research and teaching … She got on with things, despite self-doubts, and she aimed high.' She was 'a good listener' and 'usually self-confident, as clear and convincing in public lectures or interviews as in the classroom'. However, 'she was also capable of aggressive argument, sharp critique, mighty rows, witty asides and very cool rebuff' (O'Laughlin 2014: 45). Williams recalls First as 'elegant, forceful, efficient and often impatient' (Williams 2019). Some of her qualities elicited critical comments. Saul notes that he doubted that there was anyone who was familiar with her 'who didn't have difficult moments with her. She was tough, demanding, even occasionally domineering' (Saul 2014: 122). He, however, also observes that if tensions existed, they:

> were not arbitrary ones, that almost invariably something important, intellectually and politically, was at stake. The seriousness of her engagement, the intensity of her concern, could never be doubted. Nor, if you were struggling to be as serious yourself, could such

> moments cast any doubt upon her personal concern, her compassion, her continuing solidarity in the next round of whatever struggle, public or personal, was in train. (Saul 2014: 122)

Moreover, while her 'direct and sharp ways of delivering criticisms without any pretentions to political correctness ... tended to put off or intimidate both friend and foe, it was not intended' (Manghezi 2014: 84–96).

First was shaped by her context and as an activist researcher who was a White, middle-class woman, she had to navigate personally and politically complex issues of race, class and gender as well as their intersections. She was 'caught in a world that made her, but in which she could not bear to live as it was' and 'struggled her entire life against the injustices of race and class in southern Africa' (O'Laughlin 2014: 44). First is credited as being 'an exemplar of turning that power and privilege against itself to serve the interests of the poor and the oppressed' (Cock n.d.). She was 'forged in a hard school, a revolutionary socialist and a woman fighting consistently and unflaggingly against racism, chauvinism and capitalist exploitation in the teeth of one of the most brutal regimes the world has ever seen and, fortunately for us all, she was ready to fight back for what she believed in' (Saul 2014: 122). It is observed that considering her 'very self-demanding, and unassuming' nature, 'the idea that she could ever become a symbol and an inspiration would have sent her into fits of embarrassed laughter. But her life and her death have made her so' (Miliband 1982: 314)—deservedly so!

Activist research: Nature, ends and interests

Having "situated" Ruth First, the subject, I now turn to the object of activist research and consider its nature, the ends and interests that it seeks to serve and the social function of activist researchers. Furthermore, I explore the connections between activist research and the development of political programmes, manifestos, plans, strategies, policies and tactics (PSPs, in short) and some of the ambiguities, paradoxes, tensions and dilemmas that can arise in undertaking activist research. To research is to answer a question on an issue or problem based on an ethical, dispassionate, systematic and disciplined inquiry that is informed by theoretical and ontological assumptions and is open to the scrutiny of peers and the wider public. Given the focus on First and her activist research, my concern is social issues and problems and social science research. The social sciences are concerned with understanding the dynamics of social life and explaining how societies work. They are 'about understanding the reasons people give for their actions in terms of the contexts in which they act, as well as analysing the relations of cause and effect

in the social, political and economic spheres, but also concerns the hopes, wishes and aspirations that people, in their different cultural ways, hold' (May 2000: ix).

C. Wright Mills observes that people are 'social and historical actors who must be understood ... in close and intricate interplay with social and historical structures' (Mills 1959: 158). One cannot understand the lives of individuals or the histories of societies without understanding the interconnectedness between individuals and social structure and biography and history. As distinct from:

> 'personal troubles', 'public issues' are 'matters that transcend (the) local environments of ... individual(s) and the range of their inner life. They have to do with ... the institutions of an historical society, with the ways in which various milieu overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. An issue is a public matter.' (Mills 1959: 8)

Sociologically, 'personal troubles' must 'be understood in terms of public issues and in terms of the problems of history-making'. If the 'human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles – and to the problems of the individual life ... the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations' (Mills 1959: 226).

The nature of activist research

Activist research spans the ideological and political spectrum. Piven notes that not all activist research is 'on the political left. A good many academics work to provide arguments and evidence aimed not at reducing inequality, but rather at legitimating it' not to expose 'the perverse consequences for humankind of American militarism and imperial overreach, but rather (to justify) American military and imperial expansion'. Such academics serve power, but logically, are 'scholar activists' (Piven 2010: 806–810). Activist research occurs within specific social and institutional contexts and relations of authority and power, even if it may seek to transform those contexts and relations. In relation to First, I confine myself to left-wing activist research, while mindful that her early research was undertaken as an independent researcher, to the institutional context of the university, as opposed to other contexts like extra-university institutions and political movements.

Edward Said argued that 'the intellectual always has a choice either to side with the less represented, the forgotten or ignored, or to side with the powerful' (Said 1996: 32–33), implying that no middle ground or neutrality is possible. Those researchers who style themselves as 'neutral seeker(s) of truth

and objectivity' with their 'disembodied and un-located assumptions about knowing and knowledge making', obfuscate 'the hidden geo- and bio-graphical politics of knowledge' (Mignolo 2011: 118). Activist researchers, in contrast, are open and transparent about their ideological and political proclivities. Activist research identifies the 'deepest ethical-political convictions of activist researchers' and allows 'them drive the formulation of … research objectives' – the opposite of 'value free' research that 'suppress those convictions' (Hale 2017: 13–15).

Framed by critical theoretical discourses, left-wing activist research is concerned with the mutual interaction of social structure and conjuncture and human agency; how structure and conjuncture limit and constrain social action and outcomes, yet simultaneously, afford opportunities for human agency and social change. Activist research embraces Said's postulates that the world and society are ultimately made by people and can be understood through reason, that humans have the 'capacity to make knowledge, as opposed to absorbing it passively, reactively, and dully' and that 'critique that is directed at the state of affairs in, as well as out of, the university … gathers its force and relevance by its democratic, secular, and open character' (Said 2004: 22). Activist research seeks 'to make more things available to critical scrutiny as the product of human labor, human energies for emancipation and enlightenment and … human misreadings and misinterpretations of the collective past and present' (Said 2004: 22). While humans can produce knowledge there is, however, 'always something radically incomplete, insufficient, provisional, disputable and arguable about humanistic knowledge' (Said 2004: 12).

Activist research 'challenge(s) existing social hierarchies and oppressive institutions as well as the truth regimes and structures of power that produced and supported them. Not content simply to critique the status quo, (it) seek(s) to change it' (Hale 2017; Isaacman 2003: 3). Its goal is 'not to replace the theoretically driven quest for understanding of basic processes with 'applied' problem-solving'; rather it constitutes a 'category of research, which is both theoretically driven and intended to be put to use' (Hale 2017: 13). It is oriented to use by movements of exploited and oppressed social groups 'to formulate strategies for transforming these conditions and to achieve the power necessary to make these strategies effective' (Hale 2017: 13). Distinct from critical research, which makes recourse to radical critical theory, however, remains aloof from directly connecting with political and social movements, activist research seeks links with movements. Put simply, if all activist research is or should be critical research, critical research, while invaluable, is not activist research. Isaacman distinguishes between radical scholars:

> whose ideas, however provocative, remain totally ensconced in the academy, and their (activist) counterparts, who use their knowledge in the quest for social justice writ large. Although the boundaries between these two categories may, at times, be blurred, for the latter their intellectual work is always a critical part of their political practice, and vice versa. (Isaacman 2003: 3)

Activist researchers:

> are driven by a mutually reinforcing intellectual and political agenda. At the core of this agenda are two major initiatives: one, to render audible the voices and concerns of the powerless and simultaneously recover the experiences of the disadvantaged and underrepresented which are routinely ignored, forgotten, or cast into the shadows of history; two, to support their struggles aimed at ending exploitative practices and dismantling institutions of oppression. (Isaacman 2003: 4)

Activist research is, thus, connected to political activism of different kinds—different degrees of involvement 'in anticolonial and anti-imperialist' organisations and movements, 'promoting human rights, global justice, and peace, ... grassroots organizing, working in transnational NGOs, or speaking out as public intellectuals' (Isaacman 2003: 3). Because of its orientation and because much is at stake, activist research demands 'empirical rigor, and a well-developed methodological canon that can guide us to produce the best possible understanding of the problem at hand, the confidence to distinguish between better and less good explanations and the means to communicate these results in a clear and useful manner' (Hale 2017: 13).

Activist researchers 'can bring to political activity an ability to identify realities which activists may have neither the time nor the (opportunity) to discern. This may also help them to pursue their goals more effectively' (Friedman 2015: 24). At the same time, 'by virtue of their direct critical participation in the public sphere and their social role in the production, representation and dissemination of knowledge, activist [researchers] are uniquely positioned to confront the prevailing dogmas and inherited orthodoxies in the academy' (Isaacman 2003: 3–4). Their activism can help (and has helped) to fertilise epistemological, theoretical, conceptual, methodological and analytical breakthroughs, change the terms of debate and extend the boundaries of knowledge (Isaacman 2003: 29). Moreover, knowledge, expertise and skills developed as activists can enhance scholarship in various ways.

Left-wing activist researchers may differ theoretically and in terms of political affiliations, yet share tangible concerns: an anathema to capitalism and class domination with their attendant inequities of wealth, income and opportunities; to neo-liberalism and its attempt to 'bring all human action into the domain of the market' on the dubious grounds that 'the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions' (Harvey 2005: 3) and to racism, patriarchy and all forms of oppressive social relations and conditions. Their political goals may differ, yet they are committed generally to anti-capitalist futures, to 'a moral order in which justice, equality and individual freedom are

uncompromised by the avarice of the few' and to 'political, social and economic arrangements where persons are never treated as means to an end, but as ends in their own right' (Prunty 1985: 133–140). Left-wing activists will concur that theory should 'analyze and expose the hiatus between the actual and the possible, between the existing order of contradictions and the potential future state' (Held as cited in Motala 2003: 1) and that knowledge should intervene in the social world. They could differ on whether it should be a 'weak interventionism' or 'strong interventionism'.

Instead of restricting themselves entirely to the academic terrain and engagement with only academic peers, activist researchers orient themselves to larger, wider and more diverse publics. Ideally, this involves activist researchers in reflexive communication—not simply the transmission of knowledge to 'users' in the wider society, but an argumentative, critical and thoughtful engagement that potentially shapes the constitution of knowledge (Delanty 2001: 154). Engagement beyond the boundary of the university with the wider public and the communication and shaping of ideas and thinking is integral to the public good function and a responsibility of the university. There is a 'long and honorable tradition of popular presentation of science' and 'popularization' should not be equated 'with trivialization, cheapening, or inaccuracy' (Gould 1997: 599). The 'concepts of science, in all their richness and ambiguity, can be presented without any compromise, without any simplification counting as distortion, in language accessible to all ... people' (Gould 1989: 16).

Ends, interests and social functions

In engaging the questions of the ends and interests of knowledge and the social function role of activist researchers, I draw on insights provided by Theodore Schatzki and Zygmunt Bauman respectively, with inflections from Weber, Habermas and Foucault. It should be evident that while they have "cognitive interests", activist research and researchers gravitate towards a concern with "practical ends" and "strategic interests." Insofar as their social function is concerned, activist researchers lean strongly towards a mode of reasoning that is interpretive rather than legislative. They serve as "interpreters" and perform an interpretive function rather than as "legislators" who play a legislative role of legislating social goals, policies and strategies. As will be noted, there are views that, rather than confine themselves to being counsellors to legislators, intellectuals should because of their expertise, directly legislate (Bauman 1987: 103–104). For reasons that should be clear, this proposition is an anathema for activist research, given its commitment to connecting with and serving social movements and advancing democracy.

Knowledge can serve various ends. According to Schatzki, one reason for social theoretical endeavour, 'is that it may be intrinsically valuable'. Since humans 'seek general answers and pictures of things' and

social theorising "fashions general accounts and analyses", it has value simply because of this' (Schatzki 2009: 40). Beyond being 'valuable for its own sake', Schatzki (2009) argues that 'social theory serves ends of two types'. The 'ends concerned are broader goals that social thinkers can pursue in developing theories that inform empirical research. The first type of end comprises cognitive ends. Prominent cognitive ends are description, explanation, interpretation and evaluation or criticism' (Schatzki 2009: 40). However, 'social inquiry and theory can aim at, not just cognitive ends, but practical ones too. Important practical ends include control (i.e., of society), mutual understanding among humans, the achievement of the good society along with the amelioration of social ills and ethical education' (Schatzki 2009: 41). The ends described are somewhat similar to those of Weber, who posits that researchers engage in science either as 'science for science's sake or for practical purposes, for orienting practical activities' (Weber 1964: 129–156). Weber adds that science contributes to practical life: 'to the technology of controlling life by calculating external objects as well as man's activities', to 'methods of thinking, the tools and training for thought' and 'to gain clarity, which presupposes that the scientist is competent and possesses clarity' (Weber 1964: 150–151).

If social theorising can contribute 'toward the good society and to ameliorat(ing) social ills', it can also 'contribute to reflective political action' in various ways (Schatzki 2009: 41).

> Political actions are likely to ... be insufficiently informed about contexts, and thus possibly self-defeating, if they are oblivious to theory and especially theory-informed research. Regarding goals, an important contribution that theory makes to political action is developing, clarifying, and defending values and ideal social arrangements. One cannot sensibly seek to change the world without some understanding of the good society or good state of affairs toward which change should work. Theory can clarify or propose such societies and states of affairs. As a result, clearheaded political change rests, directly or indirectly, on theory or theoretical ideas. (Schatzki 2009: 41–42)

'Practical ends' are linked to action, as 'their pursuit leads social inquirers both to advocate and to perform particular actions'—political actions, involvement in political and social movements, developing social policies, establishing research programmes and the like. To pursue 'practical ends' is to also affirm 'evaluation and criticism as legitimate components of research inquiry' since these 'are unavoidable if the point is to control society or to realise the good society. Self-criticism and -evaluation are required, moreover, for achieving mutual understanding or acting more clairvoyantly' (Schatzki 2009: 43). Schatzki argues that 'choice of ends is not without consequences', since 'the choice obviously affects a

researcher's subject matters, topics and projects. It also affects the forms of knowledge (s/he) produces, that is, the mix of factual statements, statistics, narratives, interpretations, generalisations, and models (s/he) fashions' (Schatzki 2009: 44).

Habermas identifies two kinds of rationality: communicative reasoning directed towards inter-mutual understanding and strategic reasoning geared towards utilising knowledge to purposefully achieve successful actions (Habermas 1984). In addition, he distinguishes between three kinds of 'knowledge-constitutive interests' that are linked to different methodological frameworks (Habermas 1972: 308). One is 'technical cognitive interest' in expanding 'our power of technical control' manifested by 'empirical-analytic sciences'. Another is 'practical cognitive interest' manifested by 'historical-hermeneutic sciences' that are interested in 'interpretations that make possible the orientation of action within common traditions' (Habermas 1972: 313). A third is 'emancipatory cognitive interest' manifested by 'critically oriented sciences' that are concerned with determining 'when theoretical statements grasp invariant regularities of social action as such and when they express ideologically frozen relations of dependence that can in principle be transformed'. Inherent in 'emancipatory cognitive interest' is 'self-reflection' (Habermas 1972: 310). Habermas argues that 'knowledge-constitutive interests take form in the medium of work, language and power' (Habermas 1972: 313). However, the 'configuration of knowledge and interest is not the same in all categories'. While it is 'illusory to suppose an autonomy, free of suppositions, in which knowing first grasps reality theoretically, only to be taken subsequently into the service of interests alien to it', it is possible for the mind to 'reflect back upon the interest structure that joins subject and object a priori: this is reserved to self-reflection. If the latter cannot cancel out interest, it can to a certain extent make up for it' (Habermas 1972: 313–314). I will return to the question of self-reflection later.

On the functions of the social sciences and researchers, in Bauman's view there are 'two distinct and alternative modes of philosophical and sociological practice that are best described as legislative and interpretive' (Bauman 1992: 115). They differ in their 'understanding the nature of the world, and the social world in particular, and in understanding the related nature, and purpose, of intellectual work' (Bauman 1987: 3). Researchers as 'legislators' make 'authoritative statements which arbitrate in controversies of opinions' and select opinions 'which, having been selected, become correct and binding'. The 'authority to arbitrate is ... legitimised by superior (objective) knowledge to which intellectuals have better access' than others because of 'procedural rules which assure the attainment of truth, (and) the arrival at valid moral judgement'. The validity of the 'procedural rules (and) ... the products of their application' and their deployment 'makes the intellectual professions ... collective owners of knowledge of direct and crucial relevance to the maintenance and perfection of the social order' (Bauman 1987: 4–5). Researchers as

'legislators' take 'knowledge to the people'—the concern is 'to legislate, organize and regulate, rather than disseminate knowledge' (Bauman 1995: 74). From the perspective of the state, the tasks are 'to make the state policy rational, that is, effective and efficient' and 'to render the conduct of (dominated classes) manageable, predictable and thus harmless' (Bauman 1995: 76). Typically, the target of activist research for 'legislators' is the state, 'the monarch, the despot, the legislator, who was to be enlightened' rather than other actors (Bauman 1987: 102–103). Of course, there are views that instead of serving merely as counsellors to legislators, intellectuals, because of their expertise, should directly legislate (Bauman 1987: 103–104).

In contrast, researchers as 'interpreters' translate 'statements' that exist within the academic sphere and are regulated by its customs 'so that they can be understood' within other knowledge systems that are based on different traditions. Here, they do not select 'the best social order' (Bauman 1995: 5). In democratic societies, 'the hopes, wishes and aspirations that people hold ... are not for the social scientist to prescribe' because the social sciences are not 'able to predict human behaviour with certainty' and 'conditions in societies which provided for this outcome, were it even possible, would be intolerable' (Bauman 1987). The reason is that 'a necessary condition of human freedom is the ability to have acted otherwise and thus to imagine and practice different ways of organising societies and living together' (May 2000: ix). Instead, activist researchers must facilitate 'communication between autonomous (sovereign) participants' to prevent 'the distortion of meaning in the process of communication' (May 2000: ix). To this end, they must promote 'the need to penetrate deeply the alien system of knowledge from which the translation is to be made' as well as 'the need to maintain the delicate balance between the two conversing traditions necessary for the message to be undistorted (regarding the meaning invested by the sender) and understood (by the recipient)' (Bauman 1995: 5).

Bauman contrasts well between 'legislative reason' and 'interpretive reason'. If 'interpretive reason is engaged in dialogue', 'legislative reason strives for the right to soliloquy'. If the former 'is interested in continuation of the dialogue', the latter 'wants to foreclose or terminate'. Moreover, 'interpretive reason is unsure when to stop, treating each act of appropriation as an invitation to further exchange. Legislative reason, on the contrary, values all accretions only in so far as they promise to advance towards the end' (Bauman 1994: 126). Beilharz provides 'the Weberian reminder, that forms of authority ought not to be inflated or illegitimately transferred from one sphere into another' (Beilharz 2000: 87). Arguing against the 'legislator' as the 'umpire of truth', Bauman advocates for the 'interpreter' as a 'clarifier of interpretive rules and facilitator of communication', which requires a 'self-reflexive' process of continuous interpretation and reinterpretation (Bauman 1994: 204). Instead of social science as 'a legislating authority', that is 'motivated by legislative reason, reasons which asserts ... the right for the

ultimate say, for the last word', Bauman argues for a social science whose goal, through its 'compulsive interpretive urge', is 'to relativize the existing interpretations of reality, ... to expose ... the unwarranted claims to exclusivity of others' interpretations, but without substituting itself in their place' (Bauman 1994: 214).

Foucault similarly contends that the function of intellectuals is 'not to tell others what they have to do', not to 'shape others' political will (Kritzman 1990). Their role is 'to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to re-examine rules and institutions and on the basis of this reproblematization'—the specific task of intellectuals—'to participate in the formation of a political will – as citizens' (Kritzman 1990: 265). Blacker (1998) is adamant that it is quite acceptable for activist researchers to critique and to not propose alternatives, to only hold a mirror and demonstrate the problems and possibly horrific outcomes that result from noble humanist ideals and good intentions (Blacker 1998: 348–367).

> As soon as one 'proposes' – one proposes a vocabulary, an ideology, which can only have effects of domination. What we have to present are instruments and tools that people might find useful. By forming groups specifically to make these analyses, to wage these struggles, by using these instruments or others: this is how, in the end, possibilities open up .... It is simply in the struggle itself and through it that positive conditions emerge. (Kritzman 1990: 197)

Kritzman warns that if the intellectual starts playing the role of 'prophet, in relation to what "must be", to what "must take place" – these effects of domination will return and we shall have other ideologies, functioning in the same way' (Kritzman 1990: 197). Activist researchers must guard against a discourse of "usefulness" that judges theory and research entirely on their utility as guides for social transformation and their recommendations for practice (Johannesson 1998: 300). In defining what is useful, activist researchers contribute to maintaining 'an elitist gap between those who produce recommendations and those who receive recommendations' and can play into the hands of political actors who 'are anxious for easy-to-install proposals to use (or at least to let the public think they are to be used)' (Johannesson 1998: 300). It is important to keep in mind that 'notions of usefulness ... are constructed notions' and to insist on broadening the 'notion of usefulness to include intellectual practices that problematize and conceptualize our strategies, stances, constructed notions, taken-for-granted ideas, experience, and so forth' (Johannesson 1998: 300).

Weber clarifies that:

> In practice you can take this or that position when concerned with a problem of value ... If you take such and such a stand, then, according to scientific experience, you have to use such and such a means in order to carry out your conviction practically. Now, these means are perhaps such that you believe that you must reject them. Then you simply must choose between the end and the inevitable means. Does the end "justify" the means? Or does it not? The [researcher] can confront you with the necessity of this choice ... but cannot do more, so long as [s/he] wishes to remain a [researcher] and not to become a demagogue. (Weber 1964: 151)

Critically, for Bauman, a social science 'of interpretive reason also lays bare the 'the matter of ... responsibility to make the choice. The good choice is not given, it is not there already waiting to be learned and absorbed. The choice is something you have to work for' (Bauman 1994: 214). Researchers can help those involved in developing political programmes, manifestos, plans, strategies, policies and tactics (PSPs) to give themselves 'account(s) of the ultimate meaning of [their] own conduct', which is 'not so trifling a thing to do' and to fulfil the 'duty of bringing about self-clarification and a sense of responsibility'. They will be more successful in accomplishing this 'the more conscientiously [they avoid] the desire personally to impose upon or suggest to [their audiences] their own stand' (Weber 1964: 152).

For Weber 'the very meaning of scientific work' is that its accomplishments become antiquated with the passage of time and that 'every scientific "fulfilment" raises new "questions"; it asks to be "surpassed" and "outdated"' (Weber 1964: 138). Quoting Tolstoy, Weber argues that 'science ... gives no answer to ... the only important question for us: "What shall we do and how shall we live"' (Weber 1964: 143). In the 'interest of science', Weber rejects adopting political views in research, since they could compromise the search for truth, however, he accepts that science does not require one to set aside their sympathies, only that one presents scientific conclusions that may be contrary to one's sympathies. Researchers must 'recognize "inconvenient" facts; that is, "facts that are inconvenient for their party opinions"' (Weber 1964: 147). While Weber argues the 'impossibility of "scientifically" pleading for practical and interested ends' on the grounds that such pleading is 'meaningless in principle because the various value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other', he acknowledges the possibility of 'scientific' pleading in 'discussing the means for a firmly given and presupposed end' (Weber 1964: 147).

Schatzki's take on prescription is somewhat different and creates space for a wider role for activist researchers. The author notes that 'choice of ends also affects the prescriptions for action that an

investigator offers' and poses 'should activist researchers offer "prescriptions" to whoever they consider themselves serving?' (Schatzki 2009: 44). He observes that one view is to 'provide knowledge to populations and groups that should autonomously determine their own ends, policies and collective actions. Foucault is a fine example of such a theorist. Another view is that 'it is part of theory's job to offer prescriptions, social blueprints, and plans for action' (Schatzki 2009: 44). Schatzki's rejoinder is that 'this is a false dilemma. Theorists can prescribe courses of action or social arrangements, and people can ignore them. There is no reason to bar theorists from injecting whatever prescriptions they want into public space where, like recommendations from any quarter, their ideas can be discussed, adopted, or rejected' (Schatzki 2009: 44).

Given the challenges of activist research, which I address in the next chapter, critical reflection, self-reflection and 'epistemic reflexivity' become vitally important. In 'self-reflection knowledge for the sake of knowledge attains congruence with the interest in autonomy and responsibility' (Habermas 1972: 314). Emancipatory cognitive interest pursues 'reflection as such'; that is, 'in the power of self-reflection, knowledge and interest are one', and 'the unity of knowledge and interest proves itself in a dialectic that takes the historical traces of suppressed dialogue and reconstructs what has been suppressed' (Habermas 1972: 315). It is 'false consciousness' to not reflect on knowledge-constitutive interests and confront 'the risks that appear once the connection of knowledge and human interest has been comprehended on the level of self-reflection' (Habermas 1972: 315). However, there can also be 'dangerous bewitchments of misguided reflection'. To avoid this, emancipatory knowledge-constitutive interest needs honest critique without lapsing into the 'illusion of objectivism' (Habermas 1972: 315).

Johannesson observes the irony of activist researchers advancing ideas and proposals on PSPs without due reflection 'on their investment in the practice of working with these ideas', with the danger of masking the possible continuities from themselves, rather than breaks with previous or existing PSPs (Johannesson 1998: 309). Bourdieu calls this process 'officialization'—'the group ... masks from itself its own truth, binds itself by a public profession which sanctions and imposes what it utters, tacitly defining the limits of the thinkable and the unthinkable' (Bourdieu as cited in Johannesson 1998: 309). Activist researchers are 'epistemic individuals, rather than biographical individuals' who 'can become more critical of their ideas and practices by adopting what Bourdieu calls epistemic reflexivity'—self-analysis on themselves as contributors of ideas, their intellectual practice and the historical conditions and social relations under which their ideas are contributed (Johannesson 1998: 310). It also means paying greater attentiveness to how one's intellectual work could be represented and utilised in the service of the knowledge-power nexus (Blacker 1998). More is involved than researcher's interrogating their consciousness/unconsciousness; it extends to scrutiny of the unconsciousness of intellectual traditions

and practices, which is a collective enterprise rather than an individual burden. 'Epistemic reflexivity' facilitates activist researchers assuming 'greater responsibility, moral as well as practical, for their historically situated utopias' (Johannesson 1998: 312).

Connecting activist research and PSP development

If activist research and the process of development of PSPs is connected, it is found that there are different moments in PSPs' development: problem identification and definition, PSP formulation, PSP adoption, PSP planning and implementation and PSP review. Activist research can have any of the different moments of PSP development as its objects, engage with the concerns of all or specific actors involved in PSP development and can potentially shape the dynamics and outcomes of some or all the different moments. This shaping can happen through theoretical and conceptual work or concrete empirical analysis as well as through the analysis of PSPs or analysis for PSPs. If we link the nature, purpose, objects and concerns of research, we find that social research exists on a continuum. The different purposes of activist research mark it as research either concerned with critique or with concrete social transformation. On the one pole, there is research that is either entirely unconcerned with intervening in the world or that seeks to intervene "weakly"—the concern is principally cognitive ends and interests. On the other pole, there is research that seeks to intervene strongly in the world, as when the aim of research is to design PSPs—a concern with "practical ends and strategic interests". Between the two poles of non-interest in PSP and analysis for PSP is research that has as its focus, however, not its purpose, PSP development (a concern with "cognitive ends"); the analysis of PSP (whose concern could be "cognitive ends" or "practical ends") and different kinds of analysis for PSP (a concern with "practical ends").

The purposes are linked to different objects of research. Analysis of PSP encompasses objects such as the analysis of existing or emerging PSPs, their impacts, outcomes and consequences, as well as the processes and dynamics of PSP development. Such scholarship could constitute either "basic" research that is entirely uninterested in PSP or research that is PSP-oriented. Analysis for PSP covers a range of objects: from analysis of the philosophical or theoretical underpinnings of PSPs or the structural and conjunctural conditions within which PSPs must be implemented, to analysis related to developing options for PSP and analysing their implications for values and goals, to designing concrete PSPs. Analysis of PSPs and analysis for PSPs can draw on a range of methodologies, methods (quantitative, qualitative) and techniques (documentary research, interviews, surveys, and collection and processing of statistical data using frequencies, cross-tabulations, regression analysis, etc.) (Hoppers 1997; Motala 2003; Muller

1993; Samoff 1995).[1]

The nature and content of activist research is shaped by various factors—its philosophical and theoretical orientations; personal inclinations, research interests; the theoretical, analytical and empirical questions that concern it, the institutional context of knowledge production, the time available and whether the research is self-initiated or commissioned. Some activist research purposely pursues PSP-oriented research as a matter of preference, or because it is a corollary of institutional location. Other activist research, especially that undertaken at universities, may confine itself to "basic" research, either on principle or because it has no affinity for PSP-oriented research; the latter could have PSP development as the object of research, but rather for the pursuit of knowledge than to contribute to its development. Activist researchers are shaped by biography and history, and their concerns are not static; they can and do oscillate between research that varies in nature and has different purposes and objects. In the process, activist researchers must navigate various and different possible ambiguities, paradoxes, tensions and dilemmas.

How research conceives its knowledge production, its motivations, the purposes it defines for research and its nature and accessibility are immaterial regarding the potential value for PSPs of research. All social research is potentially valuable for PSP development—on condition that the research has integrity, is rigorous and of good quality.[2] This is exemplified by First's *Barrel of the Gun*. First was not immediately concerned with PSP issues, however, her rigorous research and penetrating analysis meant that her monograph had great value for liberation movements concerned with genuine emancipation. It is also illustrated by Harold Wolpe's *Race, Class and Apartheid State* (Wolpe 1988), in which the author investigated through an impersonal, detached, yet unquestionably moral scholarship, the mutual interpenetration of past and present, events and processes, actions and agents and social structure and conjuncture in South Africa. Wolpe's (1988) concern was the social structures and conditions that frustrate social justice, yet make possible social struggles and the triumph of justice—a search for the mechanisms through which societies are reproduced or changed. Wolpe was not immediately concerned with PSP

1 The issue of activist research and researchers and methodology, methods and techniques is a separate but important issue.

2 To avoid viewing the relationship between research and PSP development in over-rationalistic terms and to not overstate the role and importance of research in PSP development, the following points are in order. The reasons why the research was undertaken, the purposes that the activist researchers are pursuing and the accessibility of their research and writing will, of course, affect the *extent* to which the research is PSP valuable. The nature of social actors for whom the research is intended and the degree to which they are intellectually and politically receptive to activist research will also condition its value for PSPs. For various reasons, poor quality activist research, unfortunately, sometimes enjoys prestige among some social actors. Still, ultimately, the PSP value of research is not determined solely by activist research itself, but also by the take-up of the research, its impact, the uses to which it is put, and the effects that it has on the political terrain.

issues, however, his rigorous theorising and penetrating analysis meant that his monograph was highly PSP-related and relevant for the liberation movement.

Of course, the fact that activist research may be valuable for PSP development does not secure its influence in political movements, even when activist researchers are members of those same movements. Often:

> influence is long-term and indirect. It takes time for ideas ... to filter through .... And since ideas only take hold if they pass through many hands, there is a great gap between the article or book and the actions or opinions they trigger. Intellectuals have no control over these processes. (Friedman 2015: 24)

The value of activist research for PSPs is not guaranteed by its orientation or explicit PSP purposes. Rigorous research that is unconcerned with PSP development can be as invaluable, if not sometimes of greater value than that which deliberately sets out to inform PSP development, especially when that research is of poor quality.

If we draw together the concerns of knowledge and research, the nature of intervention in the world and the role of researchers, we find that Schatzki's social theoretical ends of knowledge represent a weak intervention in the world when concerned with cognitive ends, and a strong intervention when linked to practical ends. Similarly, when knowledge interests (Habermas 1972) are of a purely cognitive nature, they are a weak intervention, becoming a strong intervention when they are of a strategic nature. When, in terms of Bauman, researchers function as legislators, they intervene strongly in the world in contrast with when they function as interpreters.

Conclusion

I have situated First's epistemic and wider intellectual orientation by sketching her history and biography as relevant to her activist research. I have also considered the core characteristics of activist research. In the next chapter I explore First's research, how she tried to mediate its associated tensions and dilemmas and with what success. I also discuss the more general challenges posed by activist research before sharing final thoughts on First and activist research and contemporary challenges.

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