The Wealth of Activism

Annelies E. Broekman & Jan M. Broekman

Abstract

The question pertaining to a correct and precise profile of 'activism' and 'the activist' has not often been posed and was certainly not subjected to philosophical considerations. This essay is an attempt to suggest some outlines for the performance of that task. First, one has to delineate meanings of the concepts 'social' and 'activism' because the general expression 'social activism' mixes meanings belonging to both, so that questions about 'activism' as such remain unclear. Second, modern philosophy offers clarifications of meanings in the framework of a philosophy of language. Two approaches in this field are used in our problem posing: the consideration of (a) the qualities and structures of *speech* of an activist, in particular his or her *speech acts*, and (b) the qualities and structures of *belonging* of an activist, which are expressed in the meaning the activist gives to his or her *speaker position*. This essay is supported by a remark, which Hannah Arendt already formulated in 1958: "No other human performance requires speech to the same extent as action". This can guide us in considerations concerning activism today.

Keywords: Social activism-activist profile, the street, the common & commonness, interactivity, language-speech act, belonging

Conversations with a modern day activist appear to be mainly of political nature. Themes and ideas that fascinate everyone, such as social justice or multiculturalism as well as caring for planet and climate, failed hitherto in a great number of Western States to function as a fundament for policy development. *Politics* is for that reason used by activists as an instrument and at the same time considered a major object. Their views on society are grounded in their understanding of the primordial interest of politics. That interest makes them expand the traditional meaning of politics: the latter refers to party-driven politics, whereas activists strive for other practices and procedures, which are driven by collectives. Although activist politics possess a different meaning, they are still belonging to the political realm cherished by contemporary society.

The latter embrace also today's *sciences*, in particular scientific views, their methods, research projects and datafications included. Here is also a change of traditional meaning: activists follow scientific rules to argument their standpoints and perceive how science may be captured by capitalistic goals and become an instrument of the powers they fight so that scientific methods are also perverted by those trends. There is no incompatibility between activism and non-perverted scientific perspectives, but it seems difficult to establish a harmonious concordance between activism and this dominant type of organization of the sciences. One rarely encounters activist participation in a scientific research project that is financed by the

state or by corporations[1]. They simply do not fit together. Sciences, one should venture to formulate, are for activists and non-activists alike, a complex political issue, and many of its practices are a sign of the predominance of capitalism and of related power systems that keep the failures of caring for planet and population alive. An interest in *philosophical* approaches and analysis is at an even larger distance to politics and the sciences. When activist philosophers analyze the components of their activism philosophically, they end up with the classification of a "political philosophy", not with any form of social change. What has philosophy to offer in the case of modern activism? There is neither in activism nor in philosophy an answer one could consider. The distance between *politics, sciences* and *philosophy*, which characterizes activism should be observed and respected. But we vehemently search for a next step, which seems hidden at this moment. It must be a step *beyond* the dominance of the political discourse, which is inherent to all forms of activism.

One has to add, that no activist exploration is ever without the support of others who share that attitude: activist views do not engender individually, activists stand on themselves but are never alone. They do, however, not defend a standard view on social, environmental, psychological or legal issues in modern society. Their words keep up with the flow of social life and that might complicate an understanding of activism as a basic concept. Activism is a word with many meanings; it awakens forceful hopes and expectations but also aversion, distaste and feelings of uncontrollable anarchy by those who are outside of activist views. So, how do we find a path to understand the strong ties between activist togetherness, social order and democracy? Is activism not by definition social, so that the globally accepted expression *social activism* is in fact a tautology? In other words: is a non-social activism thinkable? It is clear, that we need a theoretical and philosophical understanding of the 'activism' concept today and a path for accessing the unfathomed wealth of activism.

Activism and the Social

Because activism is most often understood in terms of politics, it is mainly in politics that the meaning of the concept has been engendered. That situation relates to "*social activism*" as a generally accepted heading but it does not clarify the categorization 'social' other than in terms of 'goal' or of 'location'. The broad counterculture specter that formed the basis of activism, reaching from Conflict to Education, from Economics to Environment, from Health to Race and Religion, from Sciences to Electronics and Technology, was expected to provide insight into the specificities of Post-World War I & II 's activism, but it failed. It did not answer the question what social activism contributes to clarify activism in its relations with socio-political

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[1] An exception is perhaps the project > http://www.ejolt.org <

issues of the day, such as climate change, global poverty or terrorism. Accepting a relation between *activism* and the *social* has apparently a central function, but it does not lead to an appropriate understanding of activism in itself.

Do only its forms of application determine activism? That does not clarify its nature as encountered in commonness, belonging/not-belonging, or in for instance developmental psychology, sociology, pedagogy, macro-economy or politics. The fundamental question whether activism is just an application of social needs, seems to remain unanswered as long as activism on its own is not envisaged. And that is not achieved as long as for instance the Cambridge English Dictionary circumscribes activism in a representative manner as totally dependent on "a person who believes strongly in political or social change and takes part in activities such as public protests to try to make this happen". Or when we still read in the *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice* that "activism is action on behalf of a cause, ... has been present throughout history ... in every sort of political system and is not necessarily a good thing or a bad thing"[2].

We furthermore, while searching for the many meanings of activism in various stages of Occidental culture during the last centuries, experience that most illustrations on Internet-pages with information on 'activism' focus on *street* scenes. They suggest that *street* and *activism* belong closely together. The 'street' is indeed an important component of all unfolding socio-cultural patterns of modern life. It is therefore no surprise that streets are often viewed as the preferred stage for activist occurrences. The 'street' is (a) a Google-like *indication* of a public space, but it is (b) also a *symbol* of that space, and finally (c) the *word* for the real location of what happens in public life. No wonder, that 'the street' is often mentioned, but there exists no concept that informs us about the reality of 'the street' in relation to activism. The same is true for the concept of 'activism' itself. Its history is vague and needs a reliable basis for our understanding. The street indicates a sign, a common image that is often subjected to political discussion, and *activism* appears to indicate no more than specific forms of human inter-activity.

The expression 'activism as application of social ideals and goals' does not create a frame to understand the concept of 'activism' in its essence. And another remark must be added: the 'street' is not primarily a *political* form but an *epistemological* achievement, that is: an outstanding form of knowledge. Studies on 'the street' in Ancient Greek culture in the 5th century BC as well as Walter Benjamin's studies on the Parisian street/passage during the very beginning of the 20th century illustrate the value of that remark. The street is a continuing process with special cognitive relevance and streets embrace what occurs on- and in them beyond fixation or planning. The street appears in the light of cognition-analysis as *unruly*; its capacity for embedding differentiations or dynamics that unfold in unforeseeable

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[2] Brian Martin: "Activism, social and political", in: *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice,* Gary L. Anderson & Kathryn G. Herr (Eds.), 2007, p. 19 f.

manners remains a leading motive. Relations between *activism* and *street* may receive attention in theory-formation, but properties of the street obviate those of activism.

Activism and Loyalty

The term 'activism' is connected with a vigorous advocating of a cause, especially a political cause, on a scale that is seldom considered in social sciences theory or any philosophy of social life. Histories of activism are linked to the occurrences of their region of application, in particular to regions with effective social change. *Activism is as a consequence mostly understood via its relation with its social effects and not by research into the concept itself*. That leads to a fragmentary understanding of the concept, although it urgently needs a deeper understanding.

It is in certain, often historical, situations extremely important to have a clear definition of activism at hand. The point is, that activism is often connected with other concepts, and this can without a clear insight in the concept of activism lead to unclear and inappropriate understandings of a social or political situation. An example can be read in old schoolbooks on the history of wars in Western Europe. *Loyalty* was maintained as a defining factor of activism during the First World War. Ethical or political qualifications of *forms* or *positions* of loyalty differed from the question whether loyalty is a feature of activism. For example, when German enemy-forces occupied several European countries during that War, oppression awakened in Belgium (a State with tensions between a separated Flemish and Walloon population) the strong desire to make regionalist and nationalist ideals come true by means of a well-organized activism in the politics of the occupied country. Activism was in this Belgian situation rooted in at least three dimensions of political life: (a) the enduring problematic relation to the State as a legally and institutionally vested body with the unfulfilled task to create a bond between populations and mother tongues, (b) the omnipresent awareness of a long-standing oppression by a Walloon dominancy, so that the oppression by the Germans was – in contrast to other European countries – for the Flemish just a variation on a well-known and ever-experienced theme, and (c) the fact that the two languages within the Belgian State, Flemish and French, were internationally identified with Germany and France, the parties at war. The unfolding activism in Belgium appeared a mirroring of the political occurrences at the enlarged scale of a World War. Forms of loyalty were at stake: the most profiled *activists* in Flanders preferred collaboration with the German occupier above cooperation with factions in their own State in order to change the constitution of the State. They were successful as long as the War was going on; their activities resulted for instance even in the transformation in 1916 of a Belgian State University (Gent) into an independent Flemish institution. But after the War, the activists were convicted of collaboration with the enemy and the word 'activist' disappeared from public use, understanding and interest. And the question whether 'activism' really relates to

forms of loyalty was left unanswered. There was no meaning left for the word 'activist'.

This short story illustrates that a link between activism and loyalty was not evident, and that we were for decades not sure how to understand activism. It appears that activism was a century long almost exclusively understood as *social activism* – in legal, political, economic or psychological contexts. Social activism theory does *not* focus on the authentic features of activism itself but researches in how far language can be understood as a communicative tool (including recent IT developments and related electronic techniques), in how far language organizes our knowledge and shapes our life-styles and demarcates our thought patterns. This expresses another feature of activism that touches our experience of the world around us and its profiles of education and social information. Social activism is able to integrate many dimensions of our life *without* further research into activism itself. What conditioning features are alive in the heart of activism itself? That is the key question, which leads us to further considerations.

The question is relevant in all contexts and in all forms of *social* activism: what is the major characteristic of an activist personality, or – in abstraction from this individuality – of activism as a concept?

That leads to the formulation of a thesis, which is foundational for our main proposal in this essay: *we must consider language as a key issue and a constitutive feature of activism beyond ethical, political and related consequences*. To come back to the above mentioned story: loyalty as well as activity are like language: those concepts need a context to unfold their meaning.

A socio-political viewpoint in favor of a specific attitude can only be articulated if a *plurality* of views creates the context. That is observable in all historical phases of the activism concept. Viewpoints of elites, of feudal or religious groups, of private entrepreneurs, of capitalists, corporations or related influential attitude makers in social life are *plural* and only as such do they form the often-cherished 'public opinion'. The coherence of activism and loyalty shows, apart from this contextual condition, *the most important* characteristic in its exploring inequalities of power levels: it regards *differences* in power and power positions. Their presence in public spheres, in decision-making or free-lance or state-institutional governance will be a point of departure for activist arguments to unfold counter movements to initiate. Activist strategies will meet difficulties where differences fail to be registered or evoked in public opinion. That was demonstrated in the Belgian example, and it is also today at issue when activist ideals are not conform the profiles of conventional politics, as cases of climate change illustrate. Most interesting is, that defining or even understanding activism becomes difficult when one leaves fields of conventional differences behind.

This is one of the factors that could make understandable why activism has seldom been at issue in philosophical and theoretical discussions, and never in the perspective of a philosophy of language (the issue of meaning included). If it is taken

seriously as a valuable issue in those fields, it is at utmost researched as an element of social theory and not as a theme in itself. We conclude: the term *social activism* is, observed from a theoretical viewpoint, a reduction of meaning in itself. The majority of studies in which activism is involved proves the correctness of this insight; they focus on the social domains and have activism itself defined by its application.

Brian Martin formulated some important character traits in his above-quoted study *Activism, social and political*. He remarks: "The research most relevant to activism is about social movements. As well as telling the stories of movements, researchers have looked at social structures that influence their origins and survival, resources that movements can use, political opportunities that they can take up, and systems of meaning that enable them to get their message across. However, little of the research on social movements tells much about what activists do and how they can do it better. Few activists pay much attention to research on social movements, because so little is oriented to their practical concerns. In addition, most scholarly research is written in a style that is not attractive to activists". Indeed, scientific styles may not be so attractive for activists because they are in general a layperson that dedicates his or her free time to the cause. It is as if even social sciences research has never been put to the service of activists. Activists do *not* encounter any open, understandable and valuable basic research about their position and attitude, so that they focus on the *object* of their concerns rather than on the *foundational features* of their activity. One should keep in mind that the movement of activism created internal-functional research using special blogs, fanzines, free books and counter information press. Brian Martin adds: "Many activists learn about issues – corporate globalization, genetic engineering, or whatever – in a manner analogous to grassroots educator Paulo Freire's method of teaching reading and writing through politically charged words. Activists learn what they can about issues so they can be effective in their actions and they take action because of what they have learned about issues."[3] One should not interpret this wrongly: activists learn because they have been confronted with the impacts of specific events, occurrences or consequences. Think of the farmer whose family and animals are infected by agro-toxics, who has to fight Monsanto by means of searching information by the subject. Many activists display a high level of knowledge and IT skills, although scientists, party-politicians and in particular lobbyists in the context of corporations often speak about them as if they were illiterate.

Indeed: to go on speaking about "*social* activism" implies that the language of reflection of activists will proceed in politically charged terms! The theme *Activism and Loyalty* illustrates every detail of this serious drawback. The addition 'social' to 'activism' is problematic in the sense that it conceals how loyalty *always* relates to differences. Differences inspire an exercise of power; activism appears in that light as a form of applied power. Is the development from (a) activism towards (b) social

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[3] Brian Martin: "Activism, social and political", in: *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice,* Gary L. Anderson & Kathryn G. Herr (Eds.), 2007, p. 25.

activism as (c) a social movement, not in itself exemplary for what opposes the dynamics of activism? Are 'greenhouse effects' or even 'global warming' really the appropriate indication for the spirit and mindset of activism, or are they just easy-going and public-attracting concepts that are introduced to give the phenomenon of activism a name?

Inter-activity

Considerations pertaining to activism unveil components, which seem to be important for our understanding of activism as a concept. They direct to a lack of theoretical insight in the concept as well as to the consequences of understanding activism as *social* activism – in more general words: to a concept that only becomes meaningful through its well-determined application only. But a *theory of activism* should, however, loosen ties between the concept and its patterns of application in social practice to create a philosophical approach of activism as a phenomenon. The development of such an approach begins with a number of basic insights: activism is not identical with social activism; activism relates to levels of loyalty, which are often beyond ethical or political standpoints; activism relates to forms and levels of power, but we cannot determine what types of power are at issue; activism needs to awaken the awareness of differences because activism is senseless without difference. Activism is decidedly not solely a form of institutional policies, of social movements and related structures in society, of scientific developments or macro-economic patterns, let alone a form of our recent in-depth datafication of modern life. When activists develop knowledge in those fields, they explore that insight for instance to further equality, freedom, democracy, justice or other principles of social life, as the fight against the agro-toxics and its producer Monsanto illustrated.

That legitimate us to again focus on the concept of activism itself, – a focus that is lacking all around. We try to find a basic point of departure, a cornerstone to stand on, and clarify that focus: activism is always a form of inter-activity. And, we have to add in this context: *interactivity* is about (a) everyday-life citizens but also and at the same time about (b) subject-centered thought patterns. Indeed, individuals and though patterns do belong closely together – that is an important philosophical conclusion. The question is, in how far that view includes a new profile for activists, which relates to their varied discourses. If interactivity becomes the new term in activism, one should critically research in connection with that term in how far a *"strict subject-position"* of the activist in society and thought patterns can still be accepted. In other words: can we support activists and activism, when they embrace a subject-centered profile of thought patterns that fit to a modern global or even post-global society? Or is this focus on the central position of the subject an insurmountable impediment? At the end, the question is whether the *social* profile of an activist and the *philosophical* profile of the same do mirror or contrast each other –

in itself a very difficult philosophical question. Interaction seems an appropriate expression to describe all sorts of reciprocal actions.

Interaction seems an appropriate expression to describe all sorts of reciprocal actions. Reciprocal actors are in a view on interaction enriched by means of reception and assimilation of data and their various ways of becoming informed. But the crux is in the fact that they receive and assimilate data in interaction as fixed and stable entities and not as ever-changing entities emerging from a process of continuous change. We should ask whether this model really fits the ever-dynamic energy that moves the world we live in. In other words: human individuals are individuals because of their "being in interaction", so that "being an individual" is already the result of an unnamed pattern of social dynamics! That is a foundational insight into the question, why we underlined that an activist is not alone. The observation, regards the fundamental shortcomings of the terms "interaction" and "interactionism". In other words, if meaningful social life would solely be based on interaction and its presupposed properties, then human relations do not touch the deeper layers of an actor's life sphere, his or her emotional life and potential for personal growth or activity

We therefore propose to replace the concept of "*interaction*" with "*interactivity*". Interactivity does not solely highlight a simple circularity in contrast to a predominant linear character of interaction. It rather expresses the constant change in human life and life-quality as well as the continuous expansion of personal experiences and growth in a person's character, opinion and activity.

There are two arguments to consider in this context, and both deliver insight into the fact that *interactivity is not a simple extrapolation of interaction.* Both could provide a basis for understanding the concept of 'activism'.

First, activists in interaction change during their activity in the processes of social action and their activity creates a situation in which they are longer at home in 'interaction'. They do not understand themselves as the result of a well-determined purposeful action but rather as an element of a power of change, growth, and development in general culture that inspires, directs and enforces them. *An activist is not in interaction but rather a participant in interactivity.* Any educated self-understanding will confirm that one's own actions are best understood as a form of re-acting to the presence of others in precisely the context of that presence, which provokes changes of the changing "subject/self".

A second argument is that, especially, computers and other electronic devices already changed our concept of interaction before any philosophical reconsideration unfolded. The world of electronically enhanced interaction is the world on a different scale, which belongs to any attempt to create a theory of activism. Common social discourses support that position. There is, however, one fundamental condition: a correct focus on expressivity, and in particular on *language*, is the key for developing any such theory and for a meaningful understanding of the activist. Once we agree that an activist is never alone, we also consider that interactivity is profiled *in terms*

of language – words spoken, speech generated. Words confirm togetherness, and deeds, gestures, movements, facial and other expressions are translated into words or related articulations. The following pages attempt to explore this insight, and thus are an appeal to broaden the field of research on activism.

Language

Not only language itself but also the (social) positions that belong to linguistic utterances play an important role in this context.

(a) Among the most important is the speaker-position in activism. The activist will be confronted with the question whether a predominant speaker is tolerable in our social relations and patterns of everyday life. An answer can be found at various levels of a theory of language in general, of spoken language and of speech acts, as Searle activated at the end of the sixties. Those levels of study and insight are on the path from *sign* to *signification* and vice versa, and never allow a spoken word to become understood as an isolated phenomenon. To speak is to communicate, and speech acts are inherently inter-active. The role of an activist is ultimately a language issue and primarily a *sign-function.*

(b) To characterize 'inter-activity' was explained in the foregoing paragraph. That concept is not without consequences for our socio-political thought patterns, our ways of thinking and practising life. In inter-activity plays a subject, even as speaker, not the decisive role. The speech of a speaking subject is an occurrence in the heart of a common good and a common practice, which we call 'language'. Issues like 'loyalty' or 'differences created by power positions' are not tolerable in honoring the commonness in speech and its language.

(c) Focus is here, apart from *subject-bound* thinking and speaking, on the *power* position of all thought formation. That specific power is incorporated in each subject and its position in society[4]. Inter-activity downplays such types of power position; it should replace subjectivity: *sharing* should replace *power* – that replacement is a substantial component of an activist's attitude and mode of being! But this is only possible under the condition that interactivity remains a valid and a legitimate position, a feature under the command of a continuous restructuring of social discourses and their ethical impetus. Only under that condition will an activist be able to perform inter-actively. Does that performance bring renewal of developments in socio-political life?

(d) Important is, that interactivity is the most specific *form* of behavior and thought formation in which activists participate. When activists play soccer or are gardening together, they emphasize the interactive features of those forms of togetherness by

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[4] That position is exemplified in law and legal discourse. Legal power is in strictly maintaining the subject position: the subject as speaker, as judge, as thinker, is always engaged in producing power.

speaking and thinking together. This is characteristic in all activist actions and their inter-activity: they speak. We have to consider the quality of that speaking and study their speech activities, which are also forms of interactivity. A principal insight is at stake: their interactivity is lingual by nature. But there is more to discover in that articulation within the process of interactivity. Two features draw our attention in that context: (a) activist utterances are striving for a maximum of clarity – as if it were an artificial language with in-build control mechanisms (like in law and legal discourse) – and (b) activist utterances are structured for taking care of the listener, the receiver who functions on equal footing with the sender/speaker. The care taking for the listener is the care taking for the *other* who is involved in the activist ideology. This dimension differs fundamentally from the classical 'I–Thou' thought pattern (M. Buber) and the dialogic philosophy of the twenties in the last century. The essence of the linguistic utterance is *not* in the speaking subject, *not* in the human being that fulfills the role of the *other,* but in the structure of interactivity! One has to repeat that interactivity is a matter of language. This is extremely important for a primordial understanding of the activist attitude and practice. Outlining the role of the activist is in essence an affair of meaning making, and that occurrence of meaning representation requires attention for the subtlety of lingual expressions and of language in general.

(e) The general conclusion remains: there is no theoretical pertaining to the term 'activism' without including the relevant linguistic dimensions at stake. An analysis of different features of language unveils, however, much more than just the existence of a particular level of activist language. Any view on language is rooted in other dimensions than in everyday language alone. In the case of the activist, focus is on his or her speaker activity in combination with the various speaker positions in discourses. All embrace the process of signification in its cultural and even 'life'-context. At the end, reality as such is at stake. The discourse of activism colors crucial forms of social life. Such coloring is a matter of *total attitude* embraced by subject and object alike. Language appears the key to a renewed insight into the profile of the activist and to activism in general.

Natural and Non-natural Language

As was said before: a mother tongue, the natural language of the everyday life world of each one of us, is different from a professional language and its discourses. The natural language/mother tongue mostly conceals differences in language attitudes. It may therefore be helpful to understand a fundamental distinction between two positions or attitudes: they were named (as was done in the first days of phenomenology by Edmund Husserl) the *naïve-natural* and a *non-naïve-natural* language attitude or position. Of course, the two are both 'natural' in so far as human nature constitutes them. But it is humans who *consciously made* non-natural

languages: scientists, linguists or philosophers. In each of them, reality is constituted. Although activists have seldom participated in this field, they are continuously confronted with non-natural languages that characterize the discipline they focus on. That variety overwhelms and illustrates how the expression "the" activist is simply a naïve construction. They have to listen and associate with groups and individuals that speak a non-natural language within the frame of their natural language: economists, psychologists, farmers, administrators, monitors and the like. What natural languages articulate, belongs in the words of Wilfrid Sellars to our "manifest images" of reality, whereas what non-natural languages express belongs to the realm of our 'scientific images'[5]. Again: that seems a true challenge. Consider how an activist touches on my reality, and what is the meaning of my world for the physical or psychological reality on which the activist focuses? And, what is more: how can she know my natural language (loaded with manifest and scientific images), when I cannot know those dimensions myself? That uncertainty is a very concrete issue in today's world. Everyone living in a State and its policies encounters non-natural languages and its sciences. The decision in those languages is: eating OGM is OK and that means: you eat OGM even if you have no clue about biogenetics!

Indeed, languages always include views on reality. Those views are often too artificially classified as prejudice, lack of neutrality and objectivity, deviant or a-social behaviors and the like. Classifications of *attitude* do not meet the challenge of our understanding of reality: in each mother tongue is reality interpreted already *before* any social position or judgement is acquired. There exists no point of reference in view of which a prejudice can be profiled: all reality is 'interpreted reality', and an activist's share in this is important in Occidental culture. It implies, that every interpretation of any type of social reality is the interpretation of an interpretation. This motive challenges us, whose lives are anchored in observations, to search for the touchstone of an activist's position far beyond his or her *social* activism. We are directed towards his or her point of exploration and understanding of the range from *sign* to *signification*, which is a range that is (at a more general level) a *sign of life* itself.

Before we concentrate on language as an instrument to outline the profile of activism, we mention again the existence of the two levels of lingual articulation. They are neither perfectly separated nor just a different color of language in its totality. A mother tongue can be performed by means of specific speech acts, but cannot lead to insight in all components that constitute its performance. Notice, that a linguistic *performance* is never identical to the *use* of a language – a fact that many analytical philosophers of language (like Searle) disregard. If one reflects upon the character of a mother tongue, one has already changed attitude because that is inherent to the reflection. One thus unwittingly enters a non-naïve dimension. In that case, one really explores 'another language'.

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[5] Wilfrid Sellars: "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man" in Robert Colodny (ed.), *Science, Perception, and Reality*. Humanities Press/Ridgeview, pp. 35-78 (1963).

Complexity increases at that very moment, because the language in which a mother tongue is used is not *completely* different. The riddle is in the embedment of a natural language in a non-natural language, and that implication occurs never at the level of language alone since it includes social positions and other meaning making components of life. What we *know* is wider expanded than what we can articulate! One conclusion is far-reaching: there can never be a secure 1:1 relationship between word and thing, language and reality, or mind and matter! That is the basis for an approach of reality *tout court* in which an activist is also included. This sounds radical and mysterious at the same time. It focuses intensively on our concept of 'knowledge' and our activity of 'knowing' – both are loaded with ethical relevance, but none of us seems able to profile that relevance and thus make this ethical dimension accessible to everybody's daily life. Should we not consider the mystery of reflection as a preferred form at work in each thought formation: a 'bending back'? Is activism not a form of 'responsibly bending back' to other words, languages, considerations or decisions – and persons in society?

The Activist Speech Act

Any attempt to define 'activism' will be met with some mistrust. That general attitude surrounding activism is evident: things have primarily to change, not to be discussed. Defining defies. But language is omnipresent because there is no change without conversation or discussion, so there is no change without language – the latter includes the many dimensions of action (including those of the activist) at stake. This is more than true for the speech act of the activist. One has to keep in mind, that the activist's activity, which we name 'speech act', is a linguistic activity. Speech is not in the first place understandable as an act of clean and correct grammatical or syntactic utterance of a language, an act of good prose or soft and wonderful poetry. The starting point of activist speaking is in the specificity of the *doing* and therefore *very near to emotional articulation* and *not only to linguistic rule following*. Why the doing, one can ask. How are *speech* and *act* working together? The famous author of *Animal Farm* and *1984*[6], George Orwell, offered in an intriguing 1946 essay *'Why I Write'* an insight in a writer's motivation, which could in many regards be understood as a parallel to the activist speech act: "When I sit down to write a book, ... I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing".[7]

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[6] Remember how this book is a study on the political framework of *semantics*: words change their meaning and individuals loose contact with them, so that society urges its citizens to adapt different thought patterns and with them also other political ideas and ideals – at the end even the construction of a new language, called 'Newspeak'. The book was written in 1948 and outlined experiences with the Nazi-German regime as well as the upcoming totalitarian Stalinism.

We underline that there is in this remark no mention of any stylistic, linguistic or even semantic profile of the writer's attitude, although the remark touches several aspects of the essence of language. Language as a well-ordered ensemble of words is not at stake; on the contrary: Orwell speaks about the innermost drive for writing that equals speaking. He writes about both speaking and writing as an act of positioning oneself in reality, whereby what counts is what *others* do, how they react and how they format the world around us after their reading. No, the writing is not the construction of a dialogue on paper or on the street, and it is not an outcry to achieve a preformatted socio-political change. It is a far more authentic power, a dynamism on its own in which pen and paper, the writing hand and the creative brain are all in one move, which is just fragmentarily mentioned as 'an act'. One of the supreme realizations in which all those components are powerfully represented, is in the art of graffiti. All focus is on the act. Of essence is, that we are confronted with linguistic communication, with language without words, their grammar, syntax or other forms of utterance. If that is the case, what then is at stake in Orwell's description? The answer directs us to another dimension of linguistic nature: the fact that words must be spoken or uttered in understandable forms. A speech act is, generally spoken, an act of externalization. Emphasis is on this view. What does it mean, that externalization is a prerogative in the activist speech act?

John Searle initiated, as mentioned, a discussion about that question in his 1969 essay *Speech Acts*, which has been followed widely among analytical philosophers. But he took a difficult philosophical position to start his explorations. It is highly questionable to identify *meaning* and *utterance* in the context of studying exteriorization as the most distinctive mark of language, and that is exactly what he suggested. Formulated in everyday language, he claimed: it is for the speaker "in principle always possible ... to say exactly what he means"[8]. But this is doubtful. An overwhelming simplicity and deficiency is implicit in this characterization of the hearer who is the receiver of the speaker and his or her exactly articulated meaning. A hearer is never identical to a speaker, but the latter needs the first in a most absolute sense. The entire situation of speaking and hearing, even when considered in the context of language's exteriorization, is *never* a matter of two equal parties acting under two equal conditions. We should keep in mind, that this inequality among speaking parties is essential in the characterization of the activist speech act.

Searle formulates another consequence of his philosophical point of departure, and states: "a study of the meaning of sentences is not in principle distinct from a study of speech acts. Properly construed, they are the same study." But the difficulty in understanding and practicing his insight is, that we do not speak in sentences –

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[7] George Orwell: Why I write' in: *Why I Write,* Penguin Books (Series: Great Ideas), London 2004, p. 8f.

[8] John R. Searle: *Speech Acts. An Essay in the philosophy of Language*, Cambridge UP 1969, p. 18. Searle calls this the "principle of expressibility" and restricts its effect by the claim that it does not *always* work, have *all* effects and is not always *understood*.

nobody speaks whenever and in whatever language "in sentences" because sentences are a grammatical and syntactical construction *post factum*. The concept of a sentence belongs to a non-natural language that indicates when language becomes exteriorized. But one reads a repetition in the lines that immediately follow on the same page: "Since every meaningful sentence in virtue of its meaning can be used to perform a particular speech act (or range of speech acts), and since every possible speech act can in principle be given an exact formulation in a sentence or sentences (assuming an appropriate context of utterance), the study of the meanings of sentences and the study of speech acts are not two independent studies but one study from two different points of view." It is really tempting to formulate in contrast, that an activist speech act is the exact opposite of Searle's claim of an identity of meaning and utterance. So, why emphasize the utterances of an activist and try to find its unique meaning, when the above insights should be disputed already at the level of a philosophy of language, let alone the level of linguistic practice? The answer is most challenging: because our thesis is, that an activist's utterance is a speech act as a specific 'performance'.

One consequence of this insight is as simple as unavoidable: an understanding of language as the product of a (solistic speaking, language- and meaning producing) subject does not fit with the activist speech act. That is strongly reflected in the central term used in today's research, which is still inspired by analytical thought formation: the expression 'performance'. Speech as well as other language essentials is in the frame of this philosophy not *spoken* but *performed*, and the speaking or uttering of words is featured as a *performed* act. To qualify a speech utterance in such a manner does not solve our questions about the profile of a performer – and exactly such a profile should be meaningful in understanding the qualities of an activist.

It is also missing in Searle's catalogue of the various types of speech performance[9]. A major reason for this absence of profiling is in the fact that the entire philosophy of language is for Searle in essence a philosophy of the speaker. The dominance of the speaker is for him an omnipresent and most natural point of reference that is activated in the speaker-hearer relation. To perform a speech act is an act of performance in the sense of the performer only, and does *not* take other positions and components into account. Here is an important contrast with the speech activity of the activist. We already emphasized in above lines, that activist utterances are structured for taking care of the listener. The care taking is again at issue. The dominance of the speaker would never be effective and lead to speech in the totality of language, when this care taking of the hearer is not a constitutive element of the very same speech. *An activist speech act seems exemplary for any proper understanding of speech in the light of a philosophy of language!*

For instance a hearer plays during the performance the same role as the speaker and thus functions as a double. This view, shared by many philosophers and social scientists, does not provide insight into the specificity of an activist's speech

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[9] Searle distinguishes three types of speech acts in addition to J. Austin's *perlocutionary act*; they are: *utterance act, propositional act,* and *illocutionary act.* The three are qualified as *performance* acts.

act. Our concern about the profile of an activist's speech act is whether "performing" is the right characterization with acceptable implications of that speech act. Formulated in simple everyday language: is "speaking": "performing"? No, any exteriorization of language, any utterance of linguistic nature is broader and deeper than the ego-directed term "performance" suggests. The activist's speaking is directed towards human reality; the capacity to speak-out words of a language belongs to speaker *and* hearer *together* so that any act of speaking is *not* a subject's performance but rather an appeal to otherness. *If the activist's speech act is an appeal rather than a performance, how do we understand that appeal, which evidently constitutes the profile of the activist?*

The Activist Profile

In her great 1938 essay on Picasso, the famous US author Gertrude Stein described the re-orientation of writers and painters around her during the first years of the 20th century. On the French painter Seurat she writes: "Seurat's eye then began to tremble at what his eyes were seeing, he commenced to doubt if in looking he could see."[10] In parallel one could doubt, whether in performing speech acts one can speak. The activist speech act is not performed, but spoken, one concludes in this context. The inherent notion of *appeal* and in its perspective on *care taking* forms a clear contrast with the ego-centered (or subject-centered) notion of performance, which is in essence a command, a prescription or a comparable moment of language power. What does it mean, when we provisionally conclude that an activist speech act is a matter of unique appeal, motivated and concretized in care taking? It touches the seeing instead of the looking, the speaking instead of the performing of the speech act. A variety of aspects that reach out to the activists' profile should be mentioned here.

(a) The appeal actualized by the speech act is a *historical* phenomenon. The activist's words are always embedded in a more encompassing situation – a situation that is measured by time as well as by language utterances, like an ongoing discussion. It is a great theoretical contribution of the activist speech act to understand 'a striving for social change' as a parallel to 'an ongoing discussion'. This takes some elements of violence or conflict away, despite the fact that they remain in the activist's toolbox. An utterance will never be out-of-time like a streak or thunderbolt, and will always connect to earlier as well as future verbally articulated social complexities. This is important: an activist speech act strives *not* to be alienating, baffling or conflicting. Features of human individuals are respected and not contorted in the interest of the speaker.

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[10] Gertrude Stein: *Picasso*, London 1938, 3rd edition 1946, p. 1.

(b) The appeal inherent to the activist speech act is *intentional*. It never concerns an outcry without premeditation and is always completing already existing meanings. An activist will try to verbally make clear that many of those meanings are known to him or her and are respected in their context. But those meanings are shown to be of importance of the speaker-activist, because they are the platform on which to start an in-depth argumentation or a challenging reasoning that could change the lives of those who were listening. It is exactly because of this attitude, that an activist speech act can bear the name of activism: his or her talking turns out to be an argument for change. A consequence concerns the difference with the speaker's speech act as promoted by analytical philosophy of language: not the performance plays the dominant role in the activist speech act, but the reception of what has been said or argued by others in a historical context. This emphasis on the reception of existing utterances forms the basis for profiling the activist.

(c) The appeal inherent to the activist speech act is indeed *active* because it is directed towards a process of *awakening awareness about a specific situation*, which has clearly common features. That awareness was neither acute nor relevant *before* the activist spoke, and it conditions any further articulation of viewpoints or meanings in the case. In other words: only *after* the first word(s) of the activist, which create this commonness, can a discourse unfold. In this regard is the activist's speech act a very unique and specific utterance in the entire framework of any philosophy of language. *The activist speech act includes a crucial "taking the floor" within in the speech act itself.* Otherness and the other have in this case priority – a hitherto unique conclusion. If one reflects on this analysis, it becomes clear *why* activism has hitherto been globally understood as *social* activism. The *social* dimension is neither a simple adjective, nor a specific field of application or a scientific specialization: this dimension is embedded in the linguistic nature of the concept of activism itself. Two intriguing remarks complete our attempt to profile the activist and the activist speech act in particular.

First: this view on the speaker cannot be characterized as an exploration of the subject's role in language and its utterances. Highlighting the position of the *other* and of *otherness* as a primary condition for the articulation of a speech act is still within the limits of our study of language and speech. But it is, as e mentioned in above pages, definitively *beyond* the classical "I-Thou-It theme" which has dominated philosophy of language and social philosophy in German language studies of the 20th century. The centrally positioned "dialogue philosophy" (Martin Buber, et al.) is for instance still a subject-centered concept: it remains the "I" that says "You", whereas the activist speech act has to say "You" to fulfill the conditions for saying "I". This can easily be misunderstood as an elimination of the subject – and be read as an impulse to confuse activism and anarchism.

Second: stating that an activist speech act its characterized by the fact that the "You" must precede the "I" does not seem so exceptional, because there has always to be some security that a language is there to receive the words of its participants. Is

that reliability not delivered by any "You" that listens? Indeed, but words have many layers of meaning, and "I" or "You" utterances are always and at the same time involved in different layers of appearance, utterance or unfolding. Meanings are not just linked to various layers by grammatical categories, but are structurally coherent. They thus concern a fragment of society or a specific process of social development. The activist's care taking, which is a main feature of the activist speech act, has a *double* meaning: a maximal caring about the essence of an other's life situation, and: a speech featured that honors the hearer as determinant of the speaker's (the activist's) language. In this *double sense* of speech and speech act is the riddle of the hitherto unknown wealth of activism. It is ultimately *the wealth of difference.* The activist is aware of components of the hearer's situation, which is he or she is hardly or entirely no aware of. The structure of an activist speech act thus includes that difference in knowledge, awareness or social capacity, which has to be articulated in words. But the latter are not commands or recommendations but those words are rather a mode of caring on the basis of sharing. A philosophical consequence is, that the speech act of the activist concerns not solely an *articulation* but also the inherently required *translation* into everyday language of the social structure or level at issue. This "articulation including translation" has, as said before, the character of *appeal* and expresses a specific *loyalty* understood as *belonging* in terms of ordinary natural language. It is extremely important for understanding the profile of activist's speech, to perceive how this *appeal* connects with the central notion of *care taking* – and it is surprising that this connection is not only a matter of social behavior but also of the fundamental linguistic structure of the activist speech act.

Belonging

The three terms sustain our first attempt to construct the profile of an activist speech act: appeal, loyalty and belonging. They fit to the activist's general profile one encounters in literature as "an actor who takes action to achieve social change." But our explications pertaining to the components of an activist profile lead us to a (semi-) word game whether the "*ef*fect social change"-formula includes an "*af*fect social change". Effect is never the same as affect – so, how to consider this word game? An activist's affection for change would include loyalty and – above all – commonness which functions as the basis for his or her activity. The latter appeared to be significant when the structure of an activist speech act focused on the preliminary position of the "Thou" or "You". Affection and belonging were profiling forces. Is that a romantic motive or perhaps a superb romantic interpretation?

No, it is definitely not a romantic understanding, but rather an unusual and fundamentally dynamic interpretation. It views the activist's speech acts and related linguistic utterances as well as emotions that constitute their psychological context not as fixated data but as components of the flow of reality.

A remarkable expression seems the foundation for a language-based view on activism – the expression 'belonging'. Once an activist takes the floor and speaks his or her first words to "You", meaning "You, the people" or "You all, who live here ... ", she confirms her belonging through mostly speaking in the third person and uses the "we". The care taking is clearly expressed in terms that confirm a belonging. His or her words want to create and support first of all a new insight on the basis of the activist view in the lives of the multiple "You's" that are addressed. More information and different views on the facts of life should therefore awaken and provide new or at least different thoughts and actions pertaining to their own life situation – not the life situation of the activist. Look back at the classical definition of activism, which spoke of "taking action to effect social change": the effect are mostly the result of words creating distance. That distance between words and insights of the activist has the potential to change the situation of the others. It means, that words of activist and those of the hearers must differ, if the activist is really an activist! He or she has in insight, an attitude, an opinion, scientific data and interpretations, professional knowledge about farming, industrial engineering, psychological profiles, IT intelligence, economic or sociological structures, which are just *so* different, that this difference can cause a decisive change in the life situation of the farmer, the engineer, the psychologist and all others. But that sometimes very small difference should by no means cause a crack down of the feelings of belonging of the activist and of the farmer, the engineer or other groups or persons concerned. So, we conclude: this difference, as subtle as it may be, is a decisive component of the activist's speech act *and* belonging. *And*: the "belonging" and its commonness (so often misunderstood as a mode of community support) express the distance articulated, which is an argument for accepting a linguistic approach as key operator.

To "become an activist" is in the first place a matter of mastering its language and "speaking words that refer to meanings, which distance themselves from the evident commonness while they are spoken". In other words, *the smallest differentiation, which forms the activist's speaking, creates a common basis*. That awareness is formulated in Brian Martin's above-quoted 2007 essay on activism, where he states: "the easiest way to learn how to be an activist is to join a group and become involved"[11]. This viewpoint implies much more than the 20th century philosophy of language studied and brings us to appreciate language and its speech acts as the key to understanding activism. The activist is aware of the fundamental multiplicity of meaning, and knows by experience that one meaning on it's own – like one person on its own, cannot exist.

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[11] He adds: "There are few courses in educational institutions about activism, and even fewer teaching in practical skills. Some activist groups run training sessions for their members and others, but most learning occurs on a person-to-person basis, through direct instruction, learning by imitation, and learning by doing. This is supplemented by manuals on community organizing, campaigning, nonviolent action, and other skills, with an ever-growing amount of material available online". The words represent in a powerful way the "I–Thou–It"–module and illustrate its limits.

That insight leads to a next and more precise step: what is the structure and signification of this "double meaning speech act"? Is the word of the activist in principle unreliable, ambiguous, debatable and ever changeable with the flow of life because it cherishes the energy and dynamics of a specific difference? No, that is not the case, but activist words put their own articulation together with the understanding of the hearer in a different perspective. That might be the key mark of an activist speech act: the breach of the classical relationship between an "I" and a "You" and its lingual understanding. It means, that plural meanings are given full chance of unfolding. Activist words are filled with a reference to the "You" as forthcoming; they are the consequence of an actual situation, and not representing any here and now that is fixated as the "Hearer"-concept. There is no hearer without a future, and without being involved in flows of life changes. The activist appeals to the hearer that will be, and activist words give priority to that position as point of departure for any actual argumentation. So, if he or she says "You", or "You, people around here", or "We", then that "You" or "We" is a "*future* You" or "We" in his or her words, and they determine the actuality from there. The ultimate mark of the typical activist speech act is in the future, and from there is spoken towards the actuality. This looks as if *change* remains at issue – but the meaning of that very remarkable and specific speech formation is not *change* but rather change in the form of *completion.* In other words: an activist's speech act wants to complete the actual situation of the "Hearer" and thus argues from there towards the very moment of utterance that exists in a here and now.

One further step in the analysis of that speech act creates a more complete and also more complex image. The act of utterance is by nature a linguistic utterance and its language not only *expresses* but also *generates* the desired completion of the total situation in which the speaking takes place. The frustrating component is, that this way of speech formation does *not* start with any confirmation of loyalty and belonging (what speech acts tend to do silently) but with a non-belonging by means of calling for the hearer/participant as a *future* hearer. "We only seem to be here now but be aware that there are conditions, which ..." is the pattern of taking steps forwards before confirming anything now. The moving forwards occurs as a condition for any here and now, and is completely *included* in that actuality of speech. What seems *double* is not double, but *one* in its striving for completion. The unfolding of the speaking mind is not linear from here and now to a future, but from fragments of a future (often the result of scientific research) towards the now and from that now to new forms of factual completion. *Speech in the mind of the activist is a multidimensional occurrence.* Its major challenge is in mastering that multidimensionality.

Activism intrudes in multiple life-styles and modes of being – through sometimes violent speech, forceful appeal, the formulation of new questions and existential considerations, through evoking what has not yet been perceived, through targeting logo's of corporations as linguistic acts. Its language does not divide but

takes unexpected turns, proposes untraditional commitments and does not divide in parts nor propagates knowledge by analysis only. Not unlike the activist speech act, activism enforces the feeling and knowledge of the totality in which it honors the wealth of its multidimensionality. Its appeal to the multiple meanings of life is never unison; its order marked by that multiplicity provides equal value to past and present, and future as human possibilities to live and be lived in sameness and difference. The belonging of an activist always includes a minimal sign of non-belonging, which is the activist marker and is understood as a form of belonging. Both are implemented in and complete the activist's vision on the flow of life. Their double sense does not concern a split in character, personality or mind, but it rather illustrates the surprising wealth of activism.

Understanding Activism

Understanding activism today is accompanied by attempts to access its wealth of meanings. That wealth is clearly distinguishable at the horizon. But going there is a never-ending trip to see, explore or rediscover the conjectured treasures. We tried in this essay to make some steps clear, not through political or socio-scientific but through philosophical considerations. The latter distance them from the fashion to perceive activism exclusively as a social activism. Three important characteristics can thus be formulated.

First, activism differs nowadays considerably from what the term 'activism' indicated and seemed socio-politically important in the 20th century from World War I and II to the end of the millennium. The concept of loyalty had a central meaning in those days, and was philosophically dominated by predominantly German language studies on what was called the "I–Thou" relationship and considered as the key of understanding all types of social relations. In times of World Wars and their phases of military occupation of foreign territories it seemed no wonder, that 'activism' in its political sense was in those days – days in which no corporations functioned (the first multinationals had just to be instigated) and no globalism was formulated – closely linked to nationalist and explicit chauvinist attitudes.

Second, the most important insights on activism contemporary philosophy has to offer, relate in one way or another to a philosophy of language. Hannah Arendt formulated 1958 its principle attitude in a meaningful manner: "No other human performance requires speech to the same extent as action". This must be made true in consideration concerning activism today. Various continental, especially German, thinkers parallel to Arendt (for instance Habermas, Heidegger or Gadamer) focused on the interpretation of the strong relations between *praxis* and *action* on the one hand and *language* on the other[12]. In doing so, they supported an approach in philosophical terms.

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[12] Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, Chicago UP 1958, p. 179.

A more precise section of language philosophy is essential in this case. It concerns consideration of (a) the qualities and structures of *speech* of an activist, in particular his or her speech acts, and (b) the qualities and structures of *belonging* of an activist, which are expressed in the meaning the activist gives to his or her speaker position.

Conclusion

The profiling of activism is most importantly in a semantic analysis of the activist's "*belonging*" – the meanings involved in her activity, which are expressed in her articulations. The latter exhibit a specific and essential structure and show a masterful management of multiple meanings in the speech act as a deed – and often as a gift. That is based on the articulation of many layers of time and locality inherent to the speech phenomenon. The activist's "we" has indeed many dimensions, and this "we' is not restricted to a simple replacement of a speaker's "I". We suggested in the above lines, that there are at least two layers of meaning in effect in the activist's belonging:

One level pertains to meanings, which belong to insights, knowledge, study, and information or experience the activist acquired by means of study or participation in a (sub)cultural collectivity. Those, towards whom the activist's appeal is directed, did *not* acquire all that. A farmer with whom the activist talks about poison, poor harvest or plant improvement may not possess the knowledge of chemistry or corporative management that inspired an activist's insight.

Another level of meaning concerns what the activist and his or her public *share*: personal experiences, technical issues, political views, economic insights and the like. The difference between the two is essential in the structure of the activists views and the performance of her task: the first we call a form of non-belonging, the second of belonging. Without this difference, no activism! We therefore spoke about *a minimal sign of non-belonging being the activist marker.* And it will be clear, that in the end, the non-belonging must be understood as a precious form of belonging. The difference of the two meaning levels is the secret center of energy and dynamic that characterizes activism – no activism would unfold without it.