



Position Paper

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DISSENT 101

THE PLACE OF ACTIVISM IN THE FUTURE
OF THE UNIVERSITY

MAIN POINTS:

- Shin Dong-hyuk is the only person we know of who was born into a North Korean labour camp and escaped. In March 2013, Dong-hyuk came to Dalhousie University to meet with a group of students who had organized a project protesting human rights violations in North Korea. Dong-hyuk told students and community members that he felt greater hope for the North Korean people from student protests than he did from the actions of military officials and diplomats.
- This paper explains why Dong-hyuk felt such hope. It demonstrates that universities are one of the few institutions in society that allow for audacity, organization, dissent, and advocacy. History shows that universities have played an important role in fostering dissent and advocacy in society.
- Yet politicians, university administrators, and faculty have largely overlooked the potential for activism on campus. In an era of austerity and utilitarian programs, the university risks overlooking audacity as its greatest attribute.
- Instead of viewing activism as secondary to the university experience, I argue that dissent and activism are the university's greatest strengths.
- Historically, some of the greatest movements of progressive social change have been born and bred on university campuses. From Martin Luther to Martin Luther King Jr., the university has played an important role in redirecting society's moral compass.
- Today, universities face the twenty-first century worried that they will lose control of creating, teaching, and disseminating knowledge. They are paying little attention to the ways that they can act as a space for mobilizing much-needed activism on complex global challenges.
- The story of Shin Dong-hyuk's arrival at Dalhousie University and the efforts of the students in a class that encouraged activism as a practicum show us how professors and students can organize to make an enormous contribution to global challenges that perplex our society.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the rare people to have escaped a North Korean labour camp, Shin Dong-hyuk chose to speak to students at Dalhousie University rather than meet with top US military generals and UN ambassadors. Explaining his decision, Dong-hyuk said that he believed that there was greater hope for the North Korean people in his meeting with a group of university students in Halifax, Nova Scotia, than in his meeting top politicians and generals. The students in question were part of a class entitled *Development and Activism*, a third-year undergraduate class offered in International Development Studies. For a class project, the students had organized into a group and had worked to generate public engagement, protest, and dissent. The students' activities ranged from holding policy workshops on the fate of North Korea to mailing copies of their textbook, *Escape from Camp 14*, to members of parliament.¹ They also held a public protest in front of the Halifax Security Forum in November 2012.

Shin Dong-hyuk felt great hope in the university and in students. What secret about the university experience inspired hope in an otherwise hopeless situation? Shin Dong-hyuk's journey to Halifax speaks to universities' enormous potential to bring about progressive social change through a simple quality: audacity. But audacity is threatened by the political practice of austerity, and as students, professors, and members of our communities, we must make a choice about the place of the university in our society. Is the university an institution that can embrace audacity? Or is it merely an expensive social burden to be cut down by austerity?

Universities offer a space for audacity that almost no other institution can mimic. In what other institution can individuals seek progressive solutions to pressing challenges such as poverty eradication, human rights, and climate change, while critically questioning the structures of power that perpetuate such challenges in the first place? Research laboratories, international financial institutions, and nongovernmental organizations can encourage audacity, but often they have a much more limited capacity to engage in structural change. In government, employees are frequently constrained by narrow ministry silos and pre-set mandates. A managerial response to an employee's innovative idea may sound something like, "Which action request are you going to fill out to make that happen? Speak to your ES-5 to make sure that there is a budget for that." In the private sector, the pursuit of profit is meant to drive innovation. If one says, "I am going to overcome climate change," the response will involve a variation of, "And how will you make money?" Finally, for nongovernmental organizations – themselves activist –speaking out vehemently to poor government policy, risks losing their funding stream. In short, the university a unique space where people can dream big, can organize, and, most importantly, can be taken seriously by

¹ Harden, B. (2012). *Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West*. New York: Viking.

society in the process. It is even possible to receive research grants for audacity – or to teach tactics for activism.

Yet audacity is on the defensive within universities on two fronts. The first is a growing trend to view the university as a utilitarian space whose role is to prepare students for the job market. The second is the fall-out of austerity programs, where government serves up budget cuts and universities respond by increasing class sizes and culling innovation.

As a global society, we are facing some of the most complex challenges in human history: entrenched poverty, irreversible climate change, human rights abuses in North Korea and beyond. This is the crisis faced by the university model. There is no textbook solution, and no multiple-choice quiz to make the issues go away. Universities used to have a monopoly on knowledge. Those of us who worked in the Ivory Tower created knowledge, taught it, and disseminated it. But today all of this can be done off campus. Think tanks and the private sector create knowledge, e-learning can teach us many things, and forums such as TED talks can disseminate lessons learned to a global audience.

But there is one thing that the university alone can do: offer space for audacity, for organization, and for dissent. During the civil rights movement, Professor James Lawson offered courses that taught students non-violent protest. These tactics were put to use to occupy lunch counters. Alice Paul was a university student suffragette when she went on hunger strikes to convince President Wilson of women's right to vote. The greatest Vietnam War protests were organized on university campuses across the world.

It was students' organizations that pushed for universal suffrage, civil rights, and gender equity. Student movements have brought down governments as well. The downfall of Slobodan Milošević in Serbia was fostered by student protests.² University students in the April 6 Movement organized the Egyptian revolution and occupied Tahrir Square. It took three years of planning. History shows that by refusing to ignore problems, by becoming involved in the process of change, student movements can be a powerful global force. So powerful is student protest that governments cannot suppress it. And the university is the one place where such audacious ideas can be born, where they can be organized, and where they can go out into the world. This is exactly why we should embrace audacity on campus – so that the most complex social problems in the world can be made to go away.

² Prosic-Dvornic, M. (1992). Enough! Student Protest '92: The Youth of Belgrade in Quest of 'Another Serbia'. *Anthropology of East Europe Review*. 11(1&2). 127 – 137.

Introduction: Students over generals

In March 2013, students, faculty, and community members enjoyed a touching and monumental moment at Dalhousie University. Shin Dong-hyuk, the only known person born into a North Korean labour camp to have escaped alive, spoke on campus. The room was beyond capacity. In a venue meant for 250 people crowded over 450, with another 150 listening outside the door.

Dong-hyuk came to Dalhousie University because in the fall of 2011, a class of 76 students in the *Development and Activism* class in the Department of International Development Studies had organized the “Camp 14 Project”. The students named the project after the labour camp into which Dong-hyuk had been born. The students organized for months to raise public awareness and to encourage members of government to support sending a human rights commission into the labour camps of North Korea. The students organized a peace march, they held roundtables, and they mailed copies of their textbooks to 50 members of parliament in Ottawa.³ Shin Dong-hyuk saw the photos of the march on the project’s Facebook page, website, and Twitter page. After spending a night clicking through the photos, liking some and commenting on others, Dong-hyuk wrote the following message on the group’s Facebook timeline: “You guys are my heroes. I come to see you – promise”!⁴

Shin Dong-hyuk came to Dalhousie at a time when he had been invited to meet with four-star US military generals and United Nations ambassadors. He turned them down to come to visit third-year university students instead. In explaining his decision, Dong-hyuk said that he believed that there was greater hope for the North Korean people in his meeting with a group of university students in Halifax, Nova Scotia, than there was in his meeting with diplomats, politicians, and generals.

This man has witnessed the most perverse elements of humankind inside a North Korean labour camp. In these camps, humanity does not exist. Prisoners pay for their crimes through three generations of hard labour. Shin Dong-hyuk was born into Camp 14. His parents had allegedly committed crimes, and he was born to pay for it. He was raised to only know the 10 rules of the camp, nothing more. Survival did not come by trusting others or by making promises.⁵ The guards rewarded the prisoners for snitching on each other. Dong-hyuk did not even know that there was a country called North Korea around him, or that the world was round. He knew the universe only as having prisoners, guards, and electric fences. There were no teachers – only guards. Dong-hyuk witnessed a guard beating his six-year-old classmate to death because she stole some

³ Harden, B. (2012). *Escape from Camp 14: One Man’s Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West*. New York: Viking.

⁴ McNutt, R. (2013). Born In Hell, Fled to Freedom. *Dal News*. Retrieved from: http://www.dal.ca/news/2013/03/07/born-in-hell-fled-to-freedom--how-a-harrowing-escape-from-north.html?utm_source=home&utm_medium=hottopic&utm_campaign=dalnews

⁵ Harden (2012).

kernels of corn.⁶ In the work camps, prisoners get by through deception, not through trust. If prisoners fall behind on their work quota, they are shot; if they dissent, they are shot; if they break a rule, they are shot. Dong-hyuk only escaped the prison because he heard about the delicious taste of boiled chicken and grilled meat beyond the fence.

Since his escape, Dong-hyuk has become a leading activist for human rights in North Korea. He travels the world. He has been on *60 Minutes* and he has met with senators and presidential candidates. He works with nongovernmental organizations to push for a United Nations-backed human rights inquiry into human rights violations in North Korea. In three years, Shin Dong-hyuk has worked tirelessly to raise awareness of, and to encourage action on, the human rights calamity in North Korea. He realizes that the challenges are enormous. The political tension of the Korean peninsula leaves many dumbfounded as to a solution. Some 24 million people live in North Korea's totalitarian nightmare. Two hundred thousand are in work camps in zones of complete control. The country is economically distraught, and the population is largely consumed with the cult-of-personality brainwashing called *songun*, which requires complete devotion to the Kim Dynasty.⁷ China benefits from the situation,⁸ and South Korea has little interest in inheriting such a disparate population.⁹ The United States and Japan are primarily concerned with nuclear proliferation. Many human rights activists have dismissed the human rights situation in North Korea as hopeless because the powerful interests are more interested in other things.¹⁰

Yet Shin Dong-hyuk sincerely believes that university students in Halifax Nova Scotia have greater potential to assist the 200,000 North Korean prisoners than do top military personnel. The belief is not naïve in any way. Dong-hyuk did not suggest that the students would create a grand movement that would suddenly turn the tide on the crisis. He positioned students' efforts as a small light, far off in the distance of a dark tunnel. He believes that today's actions may lead that light to grow as actions progress, political pressure builds, and more people participate.

I agree that there is great hope in the activism that can be bred on the university campus and within students.¹¹ What is the secret about the university

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Habib, B. (2011). North Korea's nuclear weapons programme and the maintenance of the Songun system. *PACIFIC REVIEW* 24 (1) 43-64

⁸ Yoon, S.H., Lee, S.O. (2013). From old comrades to new partnerships: dynamic development of economic relations between China and North Korea. *GEOGRAPHICAL JOURNAL*. 179, 19-31

⁹ Chang, Y., Haggard, S., Noland, M. (2009) Exit polls: Refugee assessments of North Korea's transition *JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE ECONOMICS* Volume: 37(1) , 144-150

¹⁰ Chaibong, H. (2005). The Two South Koreas: A House Divided. *The Washington Quarterly*. 28(3), 57 – 72.

¹¹ In this paper I refer to "the university" as the institution within society, rather than a given university.

experience that can cause such hope in an otherwise hopeless situation? The story of how Shin Dong-hyuk came to Halifax shows that the university has enormous potential to bring about progressive social change through a simple quality: that of audacity. Moreover, the university is an important space within broader ethics of protest, activism, and dissent. On one hand, it has the potential to inconvenience authorities and the regular operations of society; on the other, it affords activists with audacious demands the possibility for their demands to be taken seriously. But this potential is at risk on two fronts. First, the increasing push for political neutrality on campus that comes from career-focused program outcomes greatly limits professors' and students' capability to be audacious, to engage, and to commit to progressive social change. Second, the political culture of austerity aimed at university campuses is having vicious impacts on the campus' ability to facilitate meaningful action targeting complex social problems. Taken together, these fronts threaten the greatest strength that the university has to offer society.

This paper argues that by embracing activism, advocacy, and audacity on campus, and notably within the classroom, the university can become one of the most important institutions for progressive social change. For hundreds of years, activism has been born and bred on university campuses, and in many cases it has played an enormous role in transforming debate and the moral direction of socially complex problems. I believe that the university not only serves as an important space for organization, but that it also has a unique ability to influence moral dialogue on pressing social problems while directly challenging institutions of power. Historians, politicians, even university administrators often overlook the importance of campus activism in pushing for progressive social change by influencing the normative ethics of dissent. Dissent is instead all too easily dismissed as a peripheral activity to the main purpose of the university. But students' ability to organize themselves, to spread awareness, and to engage politicians is an inimitable tenant of the university experience that virtually no other institution can mimic. Government, nongovernmental organizations, international financial institutions, and the private sector are all bound to more stringent structures that limit audacity and dissent. This paper discusses the experiences of a class that aimed to embrace the role of activism on campus by integrating dissent, activism, and advocacy into the class curriculum. First scorned by faculty, and later praised by the university administration, *Development & Activism's* unique experience with human rights activist Shin Dong-hyuk demonstrates students' enormous capacity to challenge current norms.

I do not claim that *Development & Activism* is a model for activism on campus. I do, however, argue that a class on the philosophy, history, and methods of organizing protest gave students the opportunity to engage with the ethics of protest and made a meaningful contribution to progressive social change.

Curiosity has grown over activism's role in society in recent years, most notably since the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, Los Indignados, and Idle No More. Exploring how the university can negotiate the ethics of protest, dissent, and activism not only helps to inform this question, but opens the door to empowering individuals who refuse to accept the world that they are expected to inherit.

A course on dissent

I teach international development studies, a subject that looks at poverty, inequity, social justice, and environmental degradation – some of the world's most challenging problems. In my interview for the position, I said that international development studies is a subject that should eventually go away. I did not mean this in the sense that Prime Minister Stephen Harper intended to make international development disappear in the 2013 federal budget by folding the Canadian International Development Agency into the Department of Foreign Affairs. What I mean is that if we, as a society, are still trying to solve chronic poverty in 100 years, we will have failed at our job to find solutions to pressing global problems. If we are still facing human rights abuses, then we have failed; if we have not beaten environmental damage, health inequity, marginalization, and other damnations, then we will have failed. One hundred years from now, there should be no more international development studies: not because of budget constraints, but because there will no longer be a need to study the problems I listed above.

I strongly believe that the university offers an incomparable space to foster audacious dissent targeting complex social problems. This space for audacity is vital for overcoming complex social problems, and should be fully embraced by universities and governments in order to foster progressive social change. Few institutions other than the university permit the sort of audacity required to critically engage the structures of power that perpetuate social injustice and inequity. No doubt there are numerous institutions in the private and nongovernmental sectors that make bold attempts for progressive social change. With certain exceptions aside, however, most organizations respond to human calamity rather than develop innovative critical alternatives to current policy practice.¹²

In government, employees are often constrained by narrow ministry silos and pre-set mandates. A managerial response to an employee's innovative idea may sound like, "Which action request are you going to fill out to make that happen? Speak to your ES-5 to make sure that there is a budget for that." In the private sector, the pursuit of profit is meant to drive innovation. If one says, "I am going to overcome climate change," the response will involve, "And how will you make

¹² This should be taken with a grain of salt, as there many foundations, NGOs, and think tanks that do innovative alternatives, and often they do have close ties with university academics. This can be said of both left-leaning and right-wing organizations.

money”? And nongovernmental organizations – themselves activist –that speak out vehemently to poor government policy risk losing their funding stream. In short, the university a unique space where people can dream big, can organize, and, most importantly, can be taken seriously by society in the process. It is even possible to receive research grants for audacity. It is even possible to teach tactics for activism.

The idea for the course *Development and Activism* came from student demand. After multiple consultations with students, the International Development Studies Department heard a consistent critique: while many courses in the program advocated for critical thought on processes of development, the only practicum class involved a skill set that adhered to the system. Students were referring to our *Practices of Development* course, which emphasized negotiating the nongovernmental sector in order to secure funding from agencies such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). As students rightly pointed out, there is much critique against the sort of development that CIDA champions.¹³ Now that CIDA has folded itself into Canada’s Department of Foreign Affairs, the need for critically engaged discussions about the future of international development in Canada is greater than ever.

A battle on two fronts

Courses like *Development & Activism* are on the defensive in universities. At Dalhousie, the idea of engaging students in a form of politics like this was received with concern, suspicion, even scorn. The course runs like many third-year arts and social science courses in terms of requiring students to complete a solid volume of reading, to pass an exam, and to write a major essay. Guest speakers present to the class, as well. Members of the media, parliament, and the police force all appear to answer the question, “How do we, as students, citizens, and activists, engage you?” “What are you looking from us in order to advance progressive social change?” The course also involves an experiential learning component where students work as a group to organize community engagement and political advocacy through protest. The idea of a class awarding grades for students protesting did not go down well with members of the Halifax community or with faculty members at the university. Some students in the international development studies program said that they had not signed up for *Development & Activism* because the title of the class implied left-wing radicalism. In the words of one student, “We didn’t want to be in a course to teach hippies how to bang on drums.”

The ethics of protest

¹³ Huish, Robert & Jerry Spiegel. (2012). First as Tragedy and then as Farce: Canadian Foreign Aid for Global Health (a response to the Global Health Working Group. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*.

Colleagues and the public found the content of activism highly problematic and many deemed it a subject not at all suitable for students to engage with in the classroom. Even though students have had a historical engagement with protest, the idea of validating it on an academic transcript seemed illicit. Many believed that the course crossed the line between the university's purpose as an institution that creates knowledge and the university's facilitation of students' political ambitions. When the Academic Development Committee learned about the course, it called me before it to defend my actions. Many committee members had every intention of seeing the course stricken from the books. One committee member asked me, "What if radical elements hijack the course?" Another wondered, "How can you ensure that nobody lights up a police car or starts smashing windows?" I assured the first member that the experiential learning elements of the course would only look at legal forms of protest, and while illegal dissent would be studied, it would not be part of the experiential learning practicum. To the second committee member, I suggested that the committee take the question up with members of the chemistry department, because I had absolutely no idea how to torch a police cruiser. Following this, I reminded the committee that the class was about exploring avenues of dissent that are within the law and protected by it. A police-car BBQ thus fell outside of the curriculum.

Leftist critics, meanwhile, argued that activism simply could not be taught – that no single course could anoint someone an activist. At that year's Congress of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, for example, a colleague told me, "You cannot qualify someone as an activist. I mean, can someone be an activist and not take your course? Or does everyone need to do it the way that you think that they should do it?" Such critics argued that activism was the result of a deeply personal exploration to bring out an individual's passion for a cause, and that the rather liberal form of dissent in the experiential learning component of my class was hardly authentic.

After stories about the course ran in the newspapers, reader's reactions in the comments section revealed how activism is viewed as out of place on campus. Most comments published in Halifax's *Chronicle Herald* and in *The Globe and Mail* in December 2010 stated that activism was unruly, unlawful, and unnecessary.¹⁴ Readers expressed disdain at the idea that protest could be explored scholastically and remarked that the ethics of dissent was more about inconveniencing law-abiding members of society rather about civil engagement with structures of power. One commenter in *The Globe and Mail* wrote, "They can't do this! They need permits! This is illegal! What about the insurance? They can't go off campus without insurance."¹⁵ Many suggested that the course had

¹⁴ Bradshaw, J. (2010). Marching for Marks. *The Globe and Mail*. December 9. Retrieved from: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/marching-for-marks-dalhousie-students-get-a-lesson-in-protesting/article562695/>

¹⁵ Ibid

“real world value.” As one reader wrote, “What a bird course – a complete waste of money.”¹⁶ These comments largely reflected assumptions that the ethics of protest concerned violent expression rather than as audacious dissent. Critics viewed the course as morally questionable and likely more indicative of physical destruction of public property than of political engagement.

Negative reactions to the articles went beyond the comments section of the papers. The *Winnipeg Free Press* ran an editorial by Carson Jerema, for whom conjoining activism and the classroom provoked serious ethical problems:

The trouble with mixing academics and politics, or confusing the two, is not so much that students' minds will be poisoned or because professors should remain neutral, but because the two have separate goals. Politics is about decision-making and ultimately about the pursuit of power. It doesn't have to be power for a single individual or small group of individuals or power for political parties. It can be power broadly dispersed. Academia is about the pursuit of truth.¹⁷

Jerema thus suggested that seeking truth must take place in a sterile environment free of politics. But is it ever possible to pursue knowledge free of politics? Many scholars argue that it is futile to suggest that truth be separate from power.¹⁸¹⁹

A colleague at a neighbouring university took the time to write a column against the course in his university's student union newspaper. The author claimed that in the case of *Development & Activism*, promoting activism was inconsistent with the university's mandate to educate students in truth rather than in tactics that “seek power.” This colleague claimed that the course seems to “begin with conclusions rather than reach them.”²⁰

These critics went beyond reinforcing the stereotypes of protest, to challenging the legitimacy of knowledge in a class focusing on dissent. Rather than discussing how understandings of power and space are negotiated through protest, these pundits deemed activism a knowledge inappropriate for campus either because it was morally hazardous to produce knowledge of engagement, or because they felt that any layperson could acquire the skills of dissent on their own. In sum, their unsolicited reactions showed that it is easier to conclude that

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Jerema, C. (2010). Keep the search for truth and power separate. from <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/westview/keep-the-search-for-truth-and-power-separate-112493939.html>

¹⁸ Callahan, D., & Parrens, E. (1995). The ends of medicine: shaping new goals. *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*, 72(1), 95 - 117.

¹⁹ Foucault, Michel. (1994). *The birth of the clinic: an archaeology of medical perception*. New York: Vintage Books.

²⁰ Mercer, Mark. (2011, January 26 - February 1). The Cranky Professor: Teaching Political Activism at a university. *The Journal: The Student Newspaper of Saint Mary's University*, p. 4.

activism should simply not be taught, rather than to negotiate a means to teach and practice the subject.

The reaction to this course is telling of Canadian society's lack of appetite for activism. Seen as destructive, redundant, and non-professional, the condemnation reflects a greater sensitivity within the public for expressions of dissent. The course made no attempts to engage in illegal activity, it encouraged direct engagement through legal mechanisms, and it had clear calls for action. In fact the methodology of the course reflects a very liberal form of protest and engagement. Radical elements are hard to find in the curriculum. Still, the reaction positions the course as harmful to society. Why is there such trepidation of students organizing and expressing dissent – even when the topics are quite easy to get on board with (as I have yet to meet someone who argues in favour of increasing world hunger or furthering human rights abuses in North Korea)?²¹ There are three reasons to explain the heated reaction to the course.

First, the course first came about after the June 2010 G20 protest in Toronto. A whole summer of newspaper photos and newsreels showing images of burning police cars and violence led many to view activism as destructive and delinquent. Activists were framed as troublemakers taunting the law rather than as engaged citizens capable of working through legal forms of dissent. Second, the police actions in the summer of 2010 worked to criminalize protest, rather than to approach it as a protected right of expression in society. Orchestrating the largest police collaboration in Canadian history to infiltrate student groups, unions, and others who were planning G20 protests changed the societal narrative of protesters, from engaged, albeit rowdy, citizens into criminally liable radicals. Third, a broader narrative of the university becoming a place to get a job influenced the reaction. A growing tendency is to view universities as places to train for your career, rather than as a place to engage in specialized learning, creativity, citizenship and engagement. Combined, these elements all worked to build critique of the course as something that encourages destruction, radicalism and redundancy.

Despite these challenges, the course was approved by the Academic Development Committee, and was later praised by the university administration. In response to the critiques, I told the Academic Development Committee members that they were looking at protest through a narrow lens that satisfies such stereotypes, and that we had no intention of breaking laws or putting the university in a libelous position. The course allows students to study a wide range of activist movements, but the practicum remains completely legal and encourages peaceful dissent in public space. I acknowledged to the media and to other colleagues that protest is meant to create bother. It is meant to disrupt.

²¹ This claim no longer holds. Since drafting this paper, and since the conclusion of the course, I, and my students have been bombarded with emails and Facebook postings from North Korean sympathizers asking us to “shut up” and to “quit spreading lies about the glorious DPRK”.

Even at the core of non-violent action is the desire to draw out aggressive reaction to make the opponent look bad in the eyes of the public. But how that reaction comes about, and how that message is controlled, is what matters in forming counter-hegemonic resistance to power. This is why tactics need to be studied, tested and critiqued. Protest is incredibly powerful to the point where it can overturn a government. But such power does not come by accident. It is the product of careful coordination and organization. After contemplating this response, the Academic Development Committee approved the course and the local office of the CBC called me in for further interviews. Only this time, instead of stigmatizing the course, the interviews asked for my opinion on protests. Today, the course is praised at university convocations and the university's marketing office tells stories about it to guidance counselors and high school students.

When you take it to the streets

Had the class carried out the experiential practicum on campus property, the public reaction would not have come about. Had students not marched through public space, and had they kept their messages to the limited campus media rather than spread it on national outlets, I am certain that it would not have garnered attention or critique. But because students took control of public space, even in a perfectly legal manner involving peaceful assembly and the freedom of expression, the idea of students controlling space created a contestation of the right to expression within that space. Simply put, if protest remains meek and quiet rather than capturing public attention, then it generates few objections. But when society is made to listen to calls for action by controlling public space, it can provoke hostility among some while instigating solidarity among others. This tension – a tension caused by transforming public space into a political message – invites questions about the normative ethics of protest. Is protest an action that is fundamentally necessary for society? Or is it fundamentally bothersome to the democratically accountable structures within society over which citizens are supposed to wield power?

The class itself emphasizes that space matters for protest in order to create legitimacy between “the political agenda going on in a particular place at [a] particular time, and global forces that are at work, and global issues which have been put on the agenda”.²²

The role of space and place is essential to activism. When protest takes to a particular urban space, the goal is often to control that space and to create relationships across it so that the message dominates the place.²³ Organization

²² Harvey, David. (2004). *Conversations with David Harvey*. Institute of International Studies. University of California Berkeley. Retrieved from: <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people4/Harvey/harvey-con3.html>

²³ Della Porta, Donatella, & Diani, Mario. (2006). *Social Movements: An Introduction*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

within strategic locations matters in order to communicate to structures of power through space and place.²⁴ In urban centres, on any given day, hundreds of thousands of people negotiate landscapes dominated by capital and consumption. They shop, consume, transact and keep the consumer economy going. In such spaces, people do not seem out of place as long as they are facilitating the normative behaviour of capital flow. But if a smaller group enters an urban space of consumption and attempts to disrupt such normative behaviour, then those individuals become out of place. When a small protest begins to control highly valued urban space, even if temporarily, authorities respond, whether to a protest outside a retail chain, to cyclists taking back streets en masse, or to students waving placards on a sidewalk in a busy shopping district. Authorities react because of the disruption to the normative uses of the space that society and government deem appropriate and morally good. Contestation of space thus gives protestors an opportunity to draw attention to their cause by disrupting the public and engaging the media. In these moments, protesters have a chance to represent themselves and to communicate a message, and to negotiate their interaction with authorities. Aggression towards authorities can sour the public's attitude towards protestors, but aggressive law enforcement, if represented by the media as heavy-handed and unnecessary, can build sympathy for the protestors. How the group is able to harness its message by tactfully controlling spatial mediums matters enormously to the effectiveness of its action.

Another factor is what space is being occupied. Protests in highly visible urban landscapes that facilitate the flow of capital can generate reaction more easily than isolated suburban protests. Consider the numerous union protests in France in 2010. Tens of thousands of protestors shut down main avenues in Paris to communicate anti-austerity messages to the French government and also the international media. Unions organized catchy banners, colourful costumes, and memorable sound bites. The world watched Paris come to a halt. In the end, pension and retirement reforms went through despite the enormous pressure against the Sarkozy administration. This raises the question of the effectiveness of protestors' control of space.

In Santiago de Chile and in Montréal, Quebec, students took over campus and city spaces to protest their governments increasing tuition fees. The protests took place over months. In some cases, the actions drew violent reactions by police. Two protestors in Québec lost eyes from rubber bullets.²⁵ But one of the most recognizable occupations of space came with what was known in Quebec as the *ccasseroles*: civilians taking to the streets to bang their pots and pans.

²⁴ Denardo, James. (1985). *Power in Numbers: The Political Strategy of Protest and Rebellion*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

²⁵ CBC NEWS (2012a). Student Requires Eye Surgery after Quebec Protest. May 14. Retrieved from: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/story/2012/05/04/victoriaville-student-protest-liberal.html>

Both in Chile and in Québec, this action garnered international media attention. In Québec, after negotiations with the students failed, the provincial government took a brazen turn and declared protests illegal, threatening to fine and arrest any student organizer \$35,000 for encouraging protest and awarding police new powers to disperse crowds of more than ten.²⁶ In essence, protest became illegal in Québec. *The Economist* compared Premier Jean Charest's actions on this head to the tactics of Vladimir Putin for cracking down on protestors.²⁷ Indeed, Charest's actions could have been taken from the police playbook of the G20 summit in Toronto in 2010: make protest illegal, brand dissenters as criminals rather than citizens, and secure public space from dissent. The cases testify to a growing trend of government willingness to constrain political freedom and to governments' belief that they will act with impunity and that the public will go along with their narrative. But in Quebec it backfired. After the government labeled all protest illegal, popular opposition soared, outstripping student protests. In both Chile and Quebec, student protest drew harsh reactions from the government and from the police, but ultimately it caused political transformations – all around expression in public space.²⁸

Effective instances of protest challenge the hegemony produced by spaces of power. Activists' taking control of spaces built to encourage commerce will almost always generate a reaction, sometimes an undesired one. Mitchell sees such expressions of control as a class struggle.²⁹ The control of space – how it is used, who has access to it, the messages and norms it conveys – varies according to the party that controls urban space. But other spaces exist within the city. Public spaces like parks and gardens can attract protesters as they can also attract festivals and concerts. Assembly in these sorts of spaces tends to be more tolerated. It is accepted that people may assemble and communicate a message in a public space if they wish, and rarely will assemblies in public space disrupt broader operations of society. As long as the assembly remains peaceful and it does not go beyond a designated space, authorities' response will be minimal. Many of the Occupy movements across Canada and the United States were tolerated for months before mayors started ordering evictions from public parks.

Mitchell states, "To control space is to control the politics of place....those who command space can always control the politics of place."³⁰ Yet some spaces are easier to commandeer than others. From the examples listed above, it would seem that the control of urban space dedicated to consumption and

²⁶ THE CANADIAN PRESS (2012). Emergency Quebec Legislation Could See Students Fined Up To \$35,000. *The National Post*. May 18. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/05/18/emergency-quebec-legislation-could-see-students-fined-up-to-35000/>

²⁷ The Economist. The Empty Kremlin. July 21st, 2012

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Mitchell, Don. (2008b). The Insidious Work of the University. *Human Geography*, 1, 1 - 11.

³⁰ Mitchell, Don. (2008c). Which Side Are You On? From Haymarket to Now. *ACME*, 7, 59-68.

commerce can be effective in communicating a message of disobedience. Since the Battle of Seattle in 1999, taking control of urban space has become increasingly difficult for protesters, especially for events like the G8 / G20 meetings, climate change summits, and other assemblies of world leaders. In such forums, space is dominated by landscapes of power. Capturing space to disseminate demands and positioning movements as having more reputable narratives than those of world leaders is enormously difficult. Increasingly, large summits are designed so as to control space and render dissent ineffective.³¹ At the G8 / G20 summit in Toronto, the cost and enormity of the police presence in an urban space garnered media attention in its own right, well before the event itself. But the presence of police in the urban space is often organized so as to restrict space and provoke violent instigators, with such methods as kettling (herding protesters into a confined space). A \$1.1 billion security force for the G20 summit in Toronto requires justification.³² Restricting activists to designated protest zones and physically restricting people's movements in urban cores invites conflict more than it secures public safety.

Authorities can control space and dismantle activists' ability to communicate their message. This power to distort and manipulate activists' messages can play out with peaceful and legal protest as well. The simple act of organizing a public rally, let alone having students organize it in order to change policy, brings up flag words. Students + protest + activism = rabble-rousing trouble, not civil engagement. Canadian society continually vilifies protest as synonymous with criminal activity. The most stigmatized by these actions are students. The largest inter-agency-coordinated police spy operation in Canadian history was not aimed at the mafia, Hell's Angels, foreign gangs, drug traffickers, or weapons dealers,³³ but at students protesting the G20. With such overwhelming government interest in criminalizing and estranging dissent, the very act of students wanting to learn more about protest draws a ferocious reaction, even when their demands are liberal, peaceful, and progressive.

We just don't have the money for this sort of thing

Although the idea of teaching classes on activism eventually gained support at my university, partly thanks to high enrollment, there are greater challenges to the audacity of dissent within the university system. The single most important challenge? Austerity. It is no secret that provincial governments are serving up budget cut after budget cut. In Nova Scotia, universities have faced systematic cuts for three years running. Administrators' response is to say, "We're broke" or

³¹ Lipsky, M. (1968). Protest as a Political Resource. *The American Political Science Review*, 62(4), 114 - 1158.

³² Groves, T., Dubinsky, Z. (2011). G20 Case Reveals Canada's 'Largest Ever' Police Spy Operation. CBC NEWS. November 22. Retrieved from: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2011/11/22/g20-police-operation.html>

³³ *ibid.*

“We need to save money and balance the books.”³⁴ But countries from Australia to Cuba facing their own economic challenges chose to invest enormously in education rather than cut it to the bone. Perhaps Canadian society could realize that higher education is a benefit, and not a burden, to provincial economies. In Nova Scotia alone, universities contribute over \$1 billion to the provincial economy.³⁵

In facing budget cuts, universities often ask students for more tuition while increasing class sizes. This strategy is often sold under the auspices of maintaining, if not improving, the quality of education. But in truth, it is more indicative of the university administration’s attempt to achieve economies of scale. The idea is quite simple, really. It involves putting too many students into too few classrooms, then hiring too few faculty members to teach too many students. In the end, the university is made up of enormous, and anonymous, classes. The result: budget cuts are partially offset, class sizes swell, professors frazzle at taking on 400 students each year, and students become numbers rather than names. Once the university runs out of space to accommodate the larger classes, it turns to distance learning, online lectures, fewer office hours, less research, and less innovation. All the while, students pay more and more for the privilege of earning a degree.

For the professor trying to cope with large classes, the “go to” learning tools are multiple choice quizzes and exams. It is impossible for a professor to interact with each and every student in a class of 200. That size of class is equivalent to the population on a Boeing 767. Any flight attendant will testify that getting 200 densely packed people to pay attention to life-saving information is far from evident. And that is for a life-or-death situation for which you can’t download the notes online the next day. The university lecture hall is just as challenging.

Budget cuts lead to universities running out of physical room in their attempt to achieve economies of scale. Inevitably, faculty members are encouraged to conduct more e-learning, for which class enrolment can be limitless.

E-learning can be a fantastic way to learn languages, some mathematics, and basic science. But what sort of audacious ingenuity can result from current e-learning platforms? Even the digital education experts tell us that that we learn far more from face-to-face interactions than we do from the online format. Whether answering a multiple choice quiz online, reading 12 chapters for a textbook, studying lecture notes posted on the Internet, students miss out on the intangible qualities of in-class interaction and engagement. If we approach e-

³⁴ CBC NEWS (2012b). Nova Scotia University Funding To Be Cut by 3 Percent. May 14. Retrieved from: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/story/2012/01/05/ns-university-funding-cut.html>

³⁵ Gardner, P. (2011). Export Value of Nova Scotia Universities. Retrieved From: http://www.atlanticuniversities.ca/system/files/documents/CONSUPReports/Export%20Value%20of%20NS%20Universities_Final.pdf

learning as a response to austerity rather than as a mode of innovation, we are likely to create an educational experience of lesser quality.

Take note of the acceptance speech of any Nobel laureate. Not one has attributed his or her prize to acing a take-home exam in “Intro to Economics.” None have proclaimed that after gazing at their undergraduate professor’s lectures online, they arose from their chair and exclaimed, “Yes! My gawd! It all came to me as I was staring at grammatically incorrect notes my professor posted online. It truly inspired me to innovate in a new direction and to challenge the very systems with which I disagree.” Not one has ever said that, and likely none ever will.

Universities used to have a monopoly on knowledge. They created it, they taught it, and they disseminated it. In the twenty-first century, however, all of this can be done off-campus. Today’s think tanks and private sector create knowledge, and despite its inability to inspire social change, e-learning can teach us things such as languages and science. Forums such as TED talks also disseminate knowledge at an amazing pace. University administrations that attempt to make ends meet through larger class sizes, e-learning, and fact-based examinations will be playing eternal catch-up against other sectors that can do it better and more efficiently. This is why the university has to find its own niche that no other institution can offer. That niche is a space for audacity, organization, and dissent that gives individuals a venue in which they need not content themselves with being dissatisfied with the world, in which they need not take the status quo as blanket reality.

It’s complicated

As a global society, we are facing some of the most complex challenges in human history: from entrenched poverty to climate change and human rights abuses in North Korea and elsewhere. Fostering the ability to address these concerns is perhaps the greatest crisis facing the university. There is no textbook solution to any of those issues, and no multiple-choice quiz is going to make them go away. There is no e-learning course for a certificate in audacity. Yet the university’s ability to play a role in important social change is by no means trounced. The opportunity comes in claiming the ability to organize dissent and complex social issues. The university’s role is not just to teach students the technical skills to organize, but also to challenge the dominant narrative that protest, dissent, and audacity are out of place within society.

This has been done before. During the civil rights movement in the 1950s, Professor James Lawson’s courses taught students how to protest at Fisk University in Tennessee.³⁶ Professor Lawson’s seminars focused on tactics to occupy lunch counters and ways to bring down segregation through non-violent

³⁶ Lawson, S. (1991). Freedom then, Freedom now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement. *American Historical Review*. 96(2), 456 – 471.

resistance. The students were so well organized, right down to the details of their attire, that they totally controlled the narrative of space when police and mobs tore them away from the lunch counters. They had arranged for photographers, videographers, and writers to be present so as to portray the brutality of segregation. It was no accident that the images of police dragging well-dressed university students away from the lunch counters struck a nerve with broader society who morally opposed segregation. In this way, defying the law may have been deemed ethically inappropriate, but it moved societal conversation in such a way as to deem the law itself unethical.

Alice Paul was a university student when she went on hunger strike to convince President Wilson to grant women the right to vote in the United States. Paul was charged on numerous misdemeanors, such as obstructing traffic. But while in prison, Paul refused food, and her hunger strike put enormous pressure on President Wilson. Wilson eventually conceded and granted women the vote as a temporary war measure. To be sure, other politics were at play, but the pressure on the White House out of sympathy for Paul cannot be underestimated.

The greatest Vietnam War protests were organized on university campuses across the world. It was student organizations that pushed for universal suffrage, civil rights, women's rights, gender equity, even the downfall of Slobodan Milošević. The Egyptian revolution and the occupation of Tahrir Square were not accidents of Twitter: in an organization called the April 6 Movement, students had organized the revolution three years earlier. In Canada, too, student movements played an enormous role in bringing down the Charest government in Quebec. Students organizing are a force too powerful for governments to suppress. This power helps to explain why Canada spent the largest police budget in history on infiltrating student groups.³⁷ The university treating students as numbers or as clients strains this capacity to organize, to dissent, and to challenge unethical laws and social norms. Many professors, including myself, are not willing to settle for that. I and others offer classes that encourage students to engage in the theory and practice of activism so that students can be audacious and can challenge issues directly by seeking change.

Audacity over austerity

For course credits, students of the *Development and Activism* class at Dalhousie University took to the streets to demonstrate against human rights atrocities in North Korea. Organizing into committees, they created slogans, engaged traditional and social media, wrote speeches and songs, and mailed their textbooks of Blaine Harden's *Escape from Camp 14* to members of parliament – all with the demand that human rights be placed at the forefront of discussions about North Korea. Their message was that North Korea was not

³⁷ Groves, T., Dubinsky, Z. (2011).

just a bothersome issue defined principally by the threat of nuclear war, but that human rights was *the* issue.³⁸

Through media coverage of the marches and the photos, Shin Dong-hyuk heard about the movement and wrote to say that he was on his way. The class fundraised to cover his ticket, spread the word that he was coming, and brought him and Henry Song, his friend and translator, to Halifax. When Dong-hyuk and Song arrived, we held a public talk attended by 600 people in a space that could only hold 250. Again, critique of the course appeared in the Halifax newspapers. This time, however, the critique was not about students' protest. The critique came from citizens unable to get a seat in the room.

During the event, Shin Dong-hyuk told us his tragic story and called for action against the regime of Kim Jong Un, a despot who continues to torture and brutalize North Korean prisoners. Every day, North Korea violates every clause of the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. Even so, world leaders are often tepid about bringing up human rights issues in the nation.

Dong-hyuk also told us why he came to visit us in the first place and why he told US military generals and ambassadors to the United Nations why he couldn't accept their invitations. He came because he felt that he needed to meet a group of students who gave him hope. He said that in the camp, it was hard to feel emotion. A survival mechanism was at work. He told us that when he saw students organizing, when he saw them taking to the cold to send a message not of sympathy but of action – he felt something he had not felt before: he felt hope. He asked us to keep the struggle going and to act, organize, and keep the pressure real to address this travesty of people detained in North Korean gulags.

Dong-hyuk's message touched many students. It touched me as well, because I believe that Dong-hyuk is correct. When it comes to North Korea, politicians have put human rights in the back burner, behind the country's nuclear threats. The media makes fun of North Korea as quirky, with a baby buffoon for a leader. Oddly, the mainstream media often stays mum on human rights, worrying instead about the threat of Pyongyang launching a nuclear weapon. Military leaders are constrained by politics, as are United Nations ambassadors. The place where hundreds of people have been able to come together to openly and critically discuss North Korea's refusal to respect human rights, was the university. The message has been heard around the world, and the Camp 14 project is now being organized on university campuses from Texas to South Korea.

Shin Dong-hyuk reminded us about human rights crises in history that seemed impossible to solve, about regimes impossible to overthrow – Nazi

³⁸ Brooks Arenburg, P. (2013). Live Free or Die. *The Chronicle Herald*. March 8. Retrieved from: http://dev.thechronicleherald.ca/novascotia/903545-live-free-or-die?utm_source=website&utm_medium=banner&utm_campaign=most_read

Germany, the Khmer Rouge, Stalin's USSR – even about slavery in nineteenth-century America. His point was that dictators and despots, apathy and neglect, can all fall away quickly and ethics transformed into a moral consciousness that demands immediate action at all costs. For this reason, the university should embrace dissent. It should recognize that few other spaces have the capacity to foster audacity, and that faculty, students, and community members can employ university space to take on some of the most pressing challenges that face society today. Universities once changed the moral compass of dissent for the audacious. We can do it again.

When it comes to solving a problem like North Korea, however, can students really help to topple a dictatorship? Some say that it is impossible for action to have any reasonable outcome on the Korean peninsula because the situation is socially complex, politically perplexing, and financially burdensome. But the same excuse has been used throughout history to tolerate gross human rights atrocities. The same things were said about Nazi Germany in the 1930s, about Stalin's gulags in the 1940s, and about slavery 150 years ago. Numerous arguments stated in those times claimed that it was ethical not to act.

But history shows us that the refusal to ignore and the insistence on becoming involved in change can be a global force so powerful that no dictatorship can suppress it. This is the role of action, of activism, of solidarity. While some may be trepid about professors legitimizing protest, critics would do well to remember that the success of organized dissent can influence the moral values of a nation and a society.

The university can foster audacity, social movements and progressive change. From Martin Luther to Martin Luther King Jr., the university has played an important role in changing dominant narratives. Rather than seeing the university as a costly social burden for the privileged few, society should recognize the university as an institution with a fundamental potential to push for a progressive moral good. No textbook or multiple-choice quiz can inspire action for addressing climate change, human rights abuses, or social marginalization. But those complex problems can be addressed by affording students the space and willingness to organize so that the most complex social problems in the world can be made to go away, and so that audacious dissent is recognized as a vital form of civil engagement, rather than pesky and dangerous knowledge.

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