

Subtle Activism

Heterotopic Principles for Unsettling Contemporary Academia from Within

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Subtle activism: Heterotopic principles for unsettling contemporary academia from within

Introduction

A number of scathing critiques have recently been levelled at contemporary academia (see Harley, 2019). Among other challenges, neoliberal performativity, an instrumental, metrics orientation in publication, and a highly individualized incentive system and working mode have produced instrumentalist, intensified and individualized workplaces - the three ‘I’s - that give rise to serious doubts about whether academia can still be engaged and impactful, both for society and academics (Harley, 2019; Sandhu et al., 2019; The authors, 2021; Whelan, 2015). As many other scholars have noted, the combined ramifications of the ‘performative university’ shrink the space for how it is possible to be an academic (see Jones et al., 2020), and within that role to conduct excellent intellectual work – as opposed to just academic work (Ang, 2016).

In response to this, some researchers have proposed vocal and radical forms of activism within academia, involving radical critiques and proposals for revolutionizing the system (Contu, 2018; Dar et al., 2021; Parker, 2018), or even leaving it altogether, as testified to by the ‘quit-lit’ movement composed of academics who have left academia in vocal and public ways, sometimes leaving ‘scathing, personal exit narratives’ (Kendal and Waterhouse-Watson, 2020: 560). These forms of activism have tended to ‘foreground and romanticise the grandiose, the iconic, and the unquestionably *meaning-ful*, to the exclusion of different kinds of ‘activism’” (Horton and Kraftl, 2009: 14), and have prioritised the search for alternative models for academia (Contu, 2018). Such vocal forms of activism have proven valuable and powerful in drawing attention to

the need for systemic change within academia (Prichard and Benschop, 2018), and in opening up for the possibility of conducting activism within and about academia.

However, the overt activist path is not for everyone. Overt critique of the university system is a risky business these days, which can result in threats to academics' job security and career advancement (Flood et al., 2013; Ratle et al., 2020). The growing precarity of academic contracts (Kınıkoğlu and Can, 2021), the intensification of academic work (Bristow et al., 2019) and endemic mental health issues (Smith and Ulus, 2020) limit who feels secure and/or has the energy and headspace to openly protest. The risk is that activism within academia becomes insular in the sense that it is increasingly associated with particular groups or movements who have carved successful careers out of systemic critique and who have little to lose by overtly criticizing the system – so-called 'tenured radicals' (Whelan, 2015: 136). Other, more extreme, activist options, such as leaving academia, are, however, usually not accessible, appealing or feasible to the majority, especially since many academics have few alternative employment options, particularly in later career stages (Geppert and Hollinshead, 2017) and cannot indulge in the luxury of quitting. As Whelan (2015: 136) puts it: "Academic precarity ... is real and is really deleterious". Many also remain in academia not out of mere obligation but because they value the intellectual vocation and ethos of knowledge pursuit and sharing (Clarke and Knights, 2015). Overt activism thus risks alienating large swathes of colleagues who might otherwise be prepared to mobilise in less conspicuous ways (see Craig et al., 2014). And since it is overt, it is more vulnerable to being targeted and shut down - its 'power is bound by its very visibility' (de Certeau 2004: 219) compared to subtler forms of activism that can fly 'under the radar' to a greater extent.

In this paper, we¹ argue that there is more to activism than fanfare, revolutionary agendas and overt collective action, as Horton and Kraftl (2009) also point out. Here we align ourselves with other scholars, who have pointed to the important role of downplayed, everyday forms of activism, such as ‘routine resistance’ (Prasad and Prasad, 2000), ‘backstage resistance’ (Ybema and Horvers, 2017), and tempered radicals (Meyerson and Scully, 1995). Thus, rather than ‘screaming’ (Prichard & Benschop 2018: 99) about the need for change, we seek ways to acting and/or model change which, we posit, is ultimately likely to be more effective since it is less at risk of being perceived by management as mere unconstructive protest. We propose the concept of *subtle activism* – as a way of engaging in activism that is ‘small-scale, personal, quotidian and proceed[s] with little fanfare’ (Horton and Kraftl, 2009: 14), yet that still holds the potential to bring about change - if made explicit and practised deliberately so that it can potentially have collective knock-on effects. Such activism is, we propose, potentially accessible, achievable and attractive to a wider segment of colleagues, and is less prone to falling into self-destructive, fatalistic or undermining behaviours, or harking back to a fictional golden age that romanticises university life in the past. Below, we offer empirical examples of how such acts may be mobilised in challenging the ‘*three T’s*’ referred to above, and we derive *three principles* for how academics might engage in subtle activism.

In conceptualising these examples of subtle activism, we are inspired by Foucault’s concept of heterotopia as ‘spaces that operate to make the existing order legible’ (Beckett et al.,

¹ We write here as an academic activist collective called XXXX, which we established to create a forum in which to think about and practice academic activism with a view to reclaiming space for proper intellectual work.

2017: 171). This concept offers a way to reflect on our experiments with unsettling academia from within, and to purposefully derive principles that can be used, by ourselves and others, to derive further experiments. Unlike utopia, ‘where everything is good [and] dystopia (...) where everything is bad; heterotopia is where things are *different*’ (Beckett et al., 2017: 171). Rather than simply refusing the existing order, heterotopias ‘both relate to their surroundings and produce a difference’ (Beyes and Michels, 2011: 523). Such spaces are experimental and playful (Hjorth, 2005) in the way they violate the ‘common ground while standing in it’ (Beyes and Michels, 2011: 523). Heterotopias are not far from existing worlds and thus ‘a sense of hope and possibility is nurtured’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 551). Accordingly, whereas Foucault himself used the concept of heterotopia to denote physical, observable places like prisons, cemeteries, theatres, ships, and festivals (Foucault, 1984), we follow Beckett et al. (2017: 172) in regarding heterotopia as:

a space in which a certain type of resistance-practice becomes possible or takes place. Heterotopias are spaces where norms are transgressed. Those norms may, or may not be spatial and are certainly not limited to the spatial. (Beckett et al., 2017: 172)

We use the concept of heterotopia to reflect on our ‘real experiments in thinking and being differently’ (Beckett et al., 2017: 174). Thus, the concept of heterotopia is key in conceptualizing such subtle acts as activism since it draws our attention to the way in which subtle acts are capable of producing ‘sites of counter-rationalities’ (Beckett et al., 2017: 172) that tactically play with and distort how one can be within academia, without outright rejecting its very premises.

In line with this understanding of heterotopia, we propose subtle activism as a form of activism towards “micro-emancipation rather than transformation” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Prichard and Benschop, 2018: 99; Spicer et al., 2009) through everyday academic acts (for instance communications with students and colleagues, writing forms, feedback behaviours) that

deliberately unsettle with a view to fostering ‘the imagining of alternative social scenarios, where different relations (...) become possible’ (Graziano and Trogal, 2019). Such acts are already widespread but are usually deployed as ‘privatised tactics’ (Gill, 2009) in an individualised, tacit and/or piecemeal fashion, limiting their potential to raise collective awareness and work towards systemic change. Rather than privatised tactics, however, we follow De Certeau’s (2004) use of the concept of tactics as purposeful actions that in surprising, guileful and opportunistic ways, work to make a difference within existing structures, in line with a heterotopic approach. Thus, while the tactics themselves can be conducted by individuals, they are bound together by a common purpose. Subtle activism, we propose, enables academics to use such tactics to bring about constructive changes within the existing framework, thereby generating heterotopic spaces within academia that quietly challenge the status quo and inspire others. We argue that in the current context, such everyday tactical actions may become activist, if deliberately enacted, insofar as they produce spaces of alternative ordering within the academic regime.

In the following, we describe examples of such subtle activist practices that are targeted at the ‘three ‘I’s of contemporary academic life that we find particularly problematic and disturbing to efforts to sustain meaning in academic life. The three I’s are not intended to be an exhaustive list of what ails contemporary academia, but they do represent key challenges as we and others have experienced them.

The three I’s: Instrumentalization, Individualization, Intensification

The first is *instrumentalization*: that is, that instead of producing ‘intrinsically meaningful research’ (as opposed to ‘instrumental publishing’), many academics, often unwillingly, have become caught up in a competitive, career-oriented ‘publication game’ (Butler and Spoelstra,

2020: 414; Clarke and Knights, 2015). To survive in an increasingly bureaucratic and autocratic academy, academics experience pressure to adapt their behaviour to new forms of organization that utilize systems of surveillance including measurement of performance in terms of number of publications in high-ranking journals (Lorenz, 2012; Parker and Jary, 1995; Seyama and Smith, 2016). This works against the intellectual spirit of autonomy and innovation (Butler and Spoelstra, 2020; Grey, 2010; Parker and Jary, 1995; Tourish, 2020), and it fails to acknowledge that academic '[w]riting is much more than publishing; it is a way of communicating and a tool for thinking and doing research' (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018: 264).

An example of a subtle activist practice that addresses instrumentalization is *intellectual dwelling* where the focus is purposefully shifted to the intellectual process rather than its outcome. This involves reclaiming the right to spend extended periods of time thinking, reading and discussing with others, allowing ideas to emerge and meander (Friedman et al., 2020) rather than letting the publication ethos steer the process (Geppert and Hollinshead, 2017). In other words, to insist on practicing what would normally be deemed 'wasting time' in the current system. Intellectual dwelling is, of course, an integral part of intellectual work but this has come under threat from the above-mentioned productivity mindset that simultaneously promotes intellectually unproductive busywork (Gershuny, 2005) and a sense of time deficit, leading to an unrelenting, shame- and anxiety-driven push towards concrete outputs (Shahjahan, 2020). Intellectual dwelling enables an alternative form of productivity that is not only output-focused but prioritizes the intellectual process and acknowledges that excellent intellectual work takes time to mature. By deliberately experimenting with alternative ways of practicing time in our academic lives, notably with non-instrumental ways of apprehending and spending time, we as academics can try to unsettle the current time-pressured regime. This means, for instance, allowing research discussions

to move in unexpected directions and continuously striving to let curiosity rather than performance indicators guide academic work based on a shared confidence in long-term intellectual processes as the foundation of ‘good scholarship’ (see also Mountz et al., 2015). These experiments with *intellectual dwelling* relate experimentally to the unspoken rules of the current accelerated regime of academia, though with no guarantee of a particular outcome. It goes without saying that in a context in which “speedy scholarship” has become the norm, it can be frightening to spend time ‘to engage in thinking, to immerse oneself in experiential encounters, to synthesize information and reflect upon it [even though] this is how new ways of knowing are formed’ (Hartman and Darab, 2012: 59). In our own practice as a collective, for instance, many of us have struggled to let go of our intense anxiety about ‘wasting time’ (O’Neill, 2014) without clearly defined outputs, leading to sometimes very emotional discussions in our group. Clearly, *intellectual dwelling* is not a quick fix to what O’Neill (2014) calls ‘fast academia’ – but it may offer a plausible antidote if consciously practiced. As Stengers (2018: 2) points out in her discussion of slow science, “‘slow’ does not mean idle’ (Stengers, 2018: 2) – on the contrary, from a subtle activist point of view it is a precondition for intellectual work.

Other examples of practices that challenge instrumentalization include *hacking instrumental practices*, for instance by adopting a vocabulary of quantification, making everything one does ‘countable’ in line with the system’s definition, for instance, counting all the peer reviews or meetings one attends, and flagging these towards management. Another example involves *subversive compliance with institutional rules* that support surveillance regimes such as the installation of glass walls in staff offices. According to reports from colleagues, such managerial control maneuvers lead to many creative forms of subtle activism, such as faculty barricading themselves ostentatiously behind piles of books – a move that can hardly be contested in an

academic context – in order to defend one’s peace and privacy to conduct intellectual work. Similarly, in cases where institutions monitor attendance through electronic office locks, we have heard reports that faculty team up to open other colleagues’ doors in their absence, registering their presence even in their absence.

The second challenge is *individualization*, that is, the increasing atomization of academic life, which is partly a result of the other two challenges (Ashcraft, 2017; Kuldova, 2021; Parker, 2014), and which further hinders broader collective action for the majority. The ‘greedy university’ with its unrelenting push towards excellence, metrification, competition and marketization, has ‘nurtured extreme individualization’, fetishizing individual achievement and compelling academics to compare themselves with others and to always ‘do more’ (Plotnikof and Utoft, 2021: 2), instilling unease with, or even fear of, displaying overt resistance (Jones et al., 2020; Kuldova, 2021). Some scholars have highlighted different forms of resistance to this fragmentation tendency, for instance, Jones’ (2018) account of the Slow Swimming Club – an informal initiative depicted as a ‘counter-space’, a ‘restorative coping mechanism [that] also collectively resists and challenges the fast agendas on campus’. However, unlike the Slow Swimming Club, which ‘represents a collective, embodied meeting space which takes place outside the central university space’, subtle activism is not intended as a mere escape valve or antidote conducted in a separate space, but as embedded into our everyday academic practices and tasks, along heterotopic lines.

Examples of this include rethinking the meaning of authorship by publishing under a collective name, rather than having our own individual names listed as authors, in order to foreground our collective thought process and downplay our individual roles. In fact, in some of our manuscripts, not all the collective members have contributed to the actual writing process, but all were part of the intellectual process that shaped the thoughts in the manuscript. However,

putting this ambition into practice has proven challenging - when we first attempted to submit a manuscript under our collective name, the submissions system required us to list our names in a specific order, and when we queried the journal about this, we received a response from the copy editor: ‘the names have been added during styling as I wanted to acknowledge the contributing authors for the chapter’. Although we did not get our way, and our names were listed in random order after our collective name (The Authors 2021), this incident shows both how difficult it is to open conversations with editors and line managers, but at the same time that it is possible to subtly challenge both academic publishing conventions and individualistic academic reward systems. Other examples of anti-individualist practices include praising collegiality in contexts where individual academic ‘excellence’ parameters are foregrounded and/or celebrated (see e.g. Kuldova, 2021); and de-mythifying the cult of the individual academic celebrity by openly articulating one’s own dependence on colleagues and emphasizing one’s vulnerability vis-a-vis other – especially younger – colleagues, for instance by sharing journal rejection letters. Writing about such experiences is, in itself, a way to make the possibility for subtle acts in such contexts tangible for others.

The third challenge is the *intensification* of work: time scarcity has become the new normal, constituting one of the greatest threats both to academics and intellectual life today (Bristow et al., 2019; Jones, 2018; Meyerhoff et al., 2011; Mountz et al., 2015; O’Neill, 2014; Stengers, 2018; Vostal, 2015) as faculty struggle with ‘increasingly high-paced demands for efficiencies and productivity’ (Smith et al., 2018: 691) that are counterproductive to intellectual development. The meticulously audited divide between what kind of time counts, and what doesn’t, forces a continual stream of micro-choices upon academics about who and what to devote time to. Often, these do not appear as choices at all, as performance pressures force prioritizations that further systemic

goals, masked as individual successes, over collegiality and the sharing of wisdom (Bristow et al., 2019). The system thus forces a view of time as a finite resource, where individuals are pressured to scrape together more time for ever-more visibly productive activities (Meyerhoff et al., 2011).

One example of a subtle act that addresses time scarcity in contemporary academic life is *calendar blocking*. This can take various forms: one can block a calendar to reserve time for specific tasks that are often not visible or ‘counted’ – such as blocking time for reading students’ texts or for responding to emails, transporting oneself between physical campus locations, or simply having lunch; calendars may also be blocked to reclaim space for thinking, idea generation and such, that are not immediately visibly productive but which are essential to intellectual work. Explicitly not using one’s calendar is another way of reclaiming discretion vis-à-vis one’s time. Another example is *tactical postponement*, which can, for instance, be enacted by omitting to bring one’s calendar in order to postpone allocation of tasks in an attempt to buy time. Clearly, such micro-choices about time require a vast amount of energy and agonizing over how to balance career survival and ‘outsmart time’ (Ashcraft, 2017: 39) with staying true to an intellectual vocation (Butler and Spoelstra, 2020). They also involve ethical dilemmas about who is best equipped, experienced enough or craftiest to enact such tactics, since not everyone has this as their default reaction or viable option.

Generating three subtle activist principles inspired by the concept of heterotopia

In the following, we use the concept of heterotopia to reflect on the examples presented above, and based on that we derive three principles that endeavour to trace the contours of ‘subtle activism’. These principles can, we argue, contribute to problematise and unsettle the ‘three I’s’

within contemporary academia. We then discuss some dilemmas that can arise from these principles and the resulting practices. The three principles we unfold are deeply intertwined and overlapping, and not all subtle acts need involve all principles. Our goal is, rather, that they may serve as inspiration for other academics wishing to simultaneously challenge and recraft the existing academic regime from the inside, in their own way, instead of simply undermining or rejecting it. These three principles are: 1) *unsettling while conforming* 2) *tangibility/legibility* 3) *deliberate but non-prescriptive*.

Principle 1: Unsettling while conforming

The first principle of subtle activism is ‘unsettling while conforming’. Such practices aim at producing spaces in which the existing order is simultaneously ‘represented, contested, and inverted’ as Foucault (1984: 3) puts it. In other words, they ‘violate the common ground while standing in it’ (Beyes and Michels, 2011: 523), intentionally experimenting with alternative ways of organising and practicing academic life. Instead of simply rejecting the existing order, then, to engage in subtle activism is to make the regime that one wishes to change legible, complying with it, while simultaneously challenging its norms and opening up spaces for dialogue and for imagining ways to do things differently. This involves pushing and playing with the boundaries of existing practices without knowing exactly, or having an agenda for, where one will end up. For instance, publishing under a collective name conforms to the existing publication regime while at the same time unsettling it by drawing attention to, and protesting, its individualized premises.

Principle 2: Tangibility/ legibility

The second principle is ‘tangibility/legibility’. Although the acts may be subtle, they must also be tangible and legible – that is, people must be able to see or apprehend them in order for them to have an effect on the world. As Beckett et al. (2017: 170f) argue heterotopias make the existing order legible exactly by juxtaposing ‘the normal ordering of things’ with a ‘different ordering of things’. However, in order for this juxtaposition to have the startling ‘effect of revealing the usual “order of things”’ (Beckett et al., 2017: 171) it must be tangible for others and legible as a ‘marked’ as opposed to a merely random act of individual resistance. Thus, while individuals can practice subtle activism ‘alone’, this principle obliges some form of outreach towards others - here the academic community - with a view to enhancing awareness and impact. For instance, explicitly praising collegiality, acknowledging one’s own ‘failures’, and one’s dependence on colleagues for one’s success, and writing about these issues, are all tangible means to communicate one’s activist intentions to others, rather than risking that these just pass unnoticed.

Principle 3: Deliberate but non-prescriptive

The third principle is that subtle activism is deliberate but non-prescriptive in the sense that it seeks to unsettle the order of things without pursuing a clear, pre-defined alternative. As such, subtle activist practices hold, as Johnson (2006: 87) puts it, ‘(...) no promise or space of liberation’. In fact, liberation is not a possibility from a Foucauldian point of view since power, as Foucault (1978: 92ff) taught us, is an omnipresent and relational phenomenon, rather than a repressive substance that someone holds and uses to keep others down. However, there is always the possibility of changing the existing order and even though heterotopias do not hold the promise of

a utopian alternative they do open up for new approaches by problematizing ‘dimensions of the present ways of being, thinking and acting’ (Beckett et al., 2017: 174). In this way, subtle activism is subversive but non-prescriptive in line with the idea of heterotopias that offer ‘escape routes from the norm’ (Beckett et al., 2017: 172) by illuminating ‘a passage for our imagination’ (Johnson, 2006: 87). For instance, *intellectual dwelling* distorts the rules of the game in today’s hyper-speeded up academic regime, as does the deliberate refusal to define pre-specified outcomes and instead linger in process.

Subtle activism: tensions and ways forward

Our goal with this paper has been to sketch the contours of the concept and practice of subtle activism by outlining examples in key problematic areas in academia (the three I’s); to propose a set of principles for subtle activism inspired by the concept of heterotopia; and based on this, to inspire others to challenge the status quo and expand the space of what is possible. Subtle activism is, clearly, fraught with tensions. We regard these tensions as opening up a space for alternative ways of doing academia that are activist but more feasible to enact in the current academic context compared to more overt/radical forms of activism or resistance. That space also enables constructive reflection on the ‘irresolvable and permanent tension’ between intellectual and academic work (Ang, 2016: 32), on what needs changing, and how small acts can work towards this.

Practicing subtle activism involves a constant and ineluctable tension between resisting the existing managerial regime and reifying it through micro acts that might appear too insignificant and ‘quiet’ to elicit significant change, not least because they deliberately comply with the system. As Fleming & Spicer (2003: 157) point out, certain forms of resistance risk ‘inadvertently

reproduc[ing]’ existing power structures within academia. Many otherwise critical academics perform ‘as perfect neoliberal academic subjects committed to given performance requirements and delivering on quantified targets’ (Kuldova, 2021: 3), causing ‘nice people’ to enact the monstrosity of neoliberalism (Whelan, 2015: 141). For this reason, informal/routine resistance has been accused of being futile, since it is often covert, not necessarily intentional or ‘owned’ by its practitioners, nor easily recognised as subversive (Prasad and Prasad, 2000). Thus, its very subtlety risks undermining its *raison d’être*. As some scholars have recently argued, there is no more time for niceties and ‘polite debate ... we need agile activism that agitates for transformation’ (Dar et al., 2021: 701) – and not an anodyne form of ‘decaf’ resistance (Contu, 2008; du Plessis, 2018). Others have similarly pointed out that ‘subtle forms of resistance can be risk-free, ineffective and counter-productive, lacking strategic and subversive potential’ (Ybema and Horvers, 2017: 1247), constituting an empty ‘escape valve’ and creating merely an ‘imaginary sense of power’ (Richards and Kosmala, 2013: 67).

We follow Ybema & Hovers (2017) here in resisting an either-or response to these critiques. Clearly, subtle activism is a tightrope act. However, because it does not refuse the existing order, but rather challenges it through various forms of alternative compliance, it holds the potential to be effective since it becomes more difficult to clearly identify it as resistance and thus to sanction it. We are inspired here by tempered radicals, who are both insiders yet at the same time outsiders with other interests and agendas that might not always be compatible with workplace conventions. However, rather than being ‘isolated’ and ‘lonely’ (Meyerson and Scully, 1995: 591) and resorting to ‘privatised tactics’ (Gill, 2009), subtle activism obliges its practitioners to make their acts explicit in some way to the broader community, thereby raising awareness about the need for systemic change. Moreover, unlike routine or informal forms of resistance, subtle

activists claim ‘personal ownership’ over their acts, explicitly identify with them, and make them intelligible to a broader audience. They therefore seek not to resist per se, but to comply *differently* in a deliberate effort to bring about change, destabilizing the hegemonic regime though with no predefined goal. Subtle activism is nonetheless still political inasmuch as it holds the potential to expand our room for maneuver – to gently ‘stretch the iron cage’ (Prasad and Prasad, 2000) of academia. Working through a heterotopic lens thus means that subtle activists both engage with their surroundings and try to reconfigure them. In that way, subtle activism bears a resemblance to ‘queering’ practices that are used for ‘unsettling complacencies, for making something strange and hence forcing thought’ (Parker, 2016: 73) and thus making the everyday a site for activism (see Steyaert 2010 on Derek Jarman’s activism through his heterotopic gardening). Queering taken for granted aspects of academic life for example, the academic curriculum vitae (Lipton 2022), socialization into academia (Weatherall and Ahuja 2021) and suggesting alternative pedagogy through dis/orientating management learning (Steyaert 2022), are inspiring forms of academic activism, if not always subtle, but which can provide academic activists with provocative tools for political change and social justice (Weatherall 2023).

The alternative, for instance resisting university publication strategies is, we suggest, not feasible for the majority. In fact, some might argue that academics who behave this way are simply not doing their job. Also, particularly (but not only) early career researchers (Bristow et al., 2017) would probably prefer not to saw off the branch they have chosen to sit on – even though it may be slightly rotten. Seen from this perspective, overt forms of activism may seem like a privilege restricted to academic ‘elders’ (Dar et al., 2021) who are safely tenured. The dialectic space between resistance and compliance that subtle activism offers both protects its practitioners and

makes intervention possible, enabling even more vulnerable groups to start to shape their academic existence for their own ends (Bristow et al., 2017).

As exemplified by the subtle acts presented in the section on the ‘three I’s’, the above tensions often manifest as ongoing ambivalences and choices, in academics’ lives, between self-defensive tactics designed to protect oneself and one’s intellectual work against the system, but which may remain isolated and privatised; and community-nurturing actions that require more energy but which can support intellectual life. Both can potentially be impactful, but can also undermine one another - for instance, spending unremunerated time to mentor a younger colleague’s paper can erode time available for one’s own research. Community-oriented actions are, therefore, often the first to crumble under pressure. Subtle activism practices must therefore be explicit in some way, so that through the resulting sense of community, individual academics may be better equipped and supported to withstand such pressures. There is also a danger that subtle acts can slip into cynicism or naivety, if not purposefully enacted. All of the examples we outlined above are inherently potentially ambivalent. For instance, tactical postponement achieved by emphasising one’s busyness is similar on the surface but is not at all the same maneuver in spirit as emphasising one’s busyness in order to gain status (cf. Gershuny, 2005) – a common tendency in today’s academia.

This paper has tried to unpack what subtle activism might look like within an academic context, but our framework is arguably potentially useful in organizational contexts beyond academia, and we invite others to experiment with this. By reading examples of our own and others’ practices through Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, we have identified a set of principles that may serve as inspiration for other academics who wish to participate in unsettling everyday practices that challenge status quo and contribute to opening the possibility of opening up

alternative spaces for conducting intellectual work. Our aim has not been to define how a particular kind of activism should unfold or to make the case for subtle activism at the expense of more overt forms of activism. Rather, we propose an alternative that is viable for academics who are not able or willing to participate in more noisy and blatantly oppositional acts of activism.

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