(de)Meaning of Social Activism

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"Democracy begins to fail and political life becomes impoverished when society can no longer translate private problems into social issues."

- Henry Armand Giroux

Introduction

Is social activism important in Singapore? If yes, who are the social activists and what do they strive for? These are indeed crucial but difficult questions that society ought to ask. Yet, the very term 'social activism' itself is often misunderstood and misappropriated by many. When one speaks of 'social activism', many contending images are conjured. For some, the sight of teenagers clad in school uniform and holding a donation box amongst passers-by is an example of social activism in practice. For others, the participation of large numbers of volunteers in humanitarian efforts is an indication of a healthy social activism. If, by 'social activism', one means the mere voluntary participation and involvement in charity works or community services through activities and programmes by various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), then, there is not much to be worried about. According to a survey conducted by the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Center (NVPC) in 2004, the number of participation in such activities has risen from 9.3% to 15.2%.[1] Not surprisingly, the highest percentage came from students (30%) while the highest preferred sector, in general, is fundraising activities (35%). However, the voluntary act of service to the community or society may not be what social activism is all about. Social activists are mediators between those who govern and those who are governed. In other words, social activists act as intermediaries between the ideals of society and the actual organizing of social, religious, political and economic life of members of a community, society or nation.

Considering that activism is an important element in the process of social transformation and a key feature of civic involvement in democratic public sphere, there is a need for us to have clarity in defining the components of activism in civil society. Two immediate tasks lay before us. The first task is to identify and address erring notions of 'activism'. The second task is to identify components of activism that can lead to a more meaningful social participation in civil society.

Erring Notions of "Activism"

The **first** and most common error is to equate *activism* with *volunteerism*. This confusion lies in several obvious similarities that obscure us from fundamental differences

between the two. In both, volunteerism and activism, one spends a considerable amount of energy, time and sometimes money in a voluntary work directed to the cause and benefit of a community or society in general. Yet, volunteerism differs from activism on several important indicators. Firstly, activism is associated with an ideal or a cause that translates beyond mere offering of one's services. Activism, in other words, involves *advocacy*. To be an activist is to be a mover and galvanizer of a particular cause that one thinks ought to form a permanent landscape of an ideal society. It can be a particularistic form of advocacy (such as movements against animal abuse, domestic violence, gender inequality and such) or a more general form (such as religious reform, greater freedom of expression, democratic change and such). Perhaps, the best way of understanding advocacy is the act of translating private problems into social issues. On this, social critic, Henry Giroux, explains: "Translating the private into the public, then, is about more than enlarging the realm of critique and affirming the existence of the common good; it is also about public responsibility, the struggle over democratic public life, and the importance of rethinking…"[2]

In contrast, a volunteer is one who is most often than not, subjected to the kind of programmes offered by charitable bodies and other groups to serve the needs of the community or society. In that sense, activism is 'political' in nature while volunteerism is mere personal contributions in public sphere.[3] Both involve some form of altruistic motives but activism combines altruistic motives with social ideals. Consider, for example, the issue of poverty. A volunteer expresses his or her motivation as "wanting to help the poor and lessen their burden". In this case, organizing or participating in charity events will be an inevitable form of social contribution. On the other hand, an activist expresses his or her motivations in the language of greater humanity and ethical responsibility. An activist does not merely want to help but rather, to eradicate poverty. Of course, an activist understands that it is utopian to think of a society where there is no poverty. Yet, an activist is sensitive to the fact that poverty is a dehumanizing condition that requires society to take responsibility of. This is where the motivation of an activist (i.e. moral responsibility) is driven by an ideal (eradication of poverty). In the process, an activist inevitably becomes critical and subjects his or her intellectual energy and capacities to uncover the root causes of poverty and eventually suggests or develops viable solutions.

The **second** common error with regards to our perception and understanding of activism lies in the tendency to measure the strength and viability of activism quantitatively. The strength of an activist movement does not lie in quantity of members. More importantly, activism is not to be equated with mass movements, although it is true that the former can lead to the latter in some cases. The transformation of an activist movement into mass movement can be detrimental to the very ideals strove for. In fact, in mass movements, rational and conscientious thought is often replaced by sentiments and emotions. As noted by Gustave Le Bon, being in a crowd (read: mass movement) can lead to the weakening of the intellectual aptitude.[4] Activists, under the sway of perceived strength in numbers, will lose their individuality. This weakening of individuality carries serious consequences to one's ability to develop creative intellect and moral sense in addressing social issues. Eventually, the sense of responsibility that was the initial impulse in activism will be replaced by a sense of power. If in activism, one is driven by an ideal or cause, then in mass movements, one is often under the sway of a charismatic leader who, as seen in many cases, uses the mass support for his or her own political ambitions.[5] Under the sway of chanting and slogans,

rational argumentations and dialogue will soon be replaced by sheer display of brute strength in numbers.[6]

Constituents of Activism

How then, ought we to understand what social activism really is? Here, we will like to highlight two important constituents that ought to be present in any forms of social activism. By highlighting the constituents of activism, we hope to develop a more meaningful form of activism that society can work towards.

Sense of Historical Mission

Firstly, activism requires a **sense of historical mission**. This sense of historical mission is necessary to situate oneself as an agent of social change. Without it, one will not be conscious of his or her crucial role in the process of social transformation. By 'historical mission', we mean the awareness that (1) our present condition is shaped by historical factors, and (2) our present actions will determine the course of history in the future. Through a sense of historical mission, we will see the urgency of (1) drawing lessons from the past that has contributed to our present condition, (2) be conscious of our present doings as it will have an impact in future destiny of our society; and (3) the need to envision the kind of society we want for the future.

Activism is in need of sense of historical mission to avoid sliding into narcissism so often seen in many youth groups amongst us. As a measure of social character, narcissism refers to the preoccupation with oneself or group. A narcissist often has the tendency to center external realities around him/her or the group; thus, everything else revolves around him/her or the group. In social activism, a narcissistic 'activist', for example, sees his involvement in a group as chance to build portfolios that can assist him or her in career advancement, social prestige or simply as an ego-booster. It is easy to identify such narcissistic character: he or she is often present in events or functions where ministers, dignitaries or popular public personalities are present. Such events, typically, are highly publicized, conducted in expensive venues and served with buffets and food spread. In contrast, his or her participation in any forms of meetings and engagements with scholars, academics or non-ministerial community leaders to discuss serious and crucial issues concerning the community, religious thought or societal problems, are markedly dismal and disappointing.

On the other hand, group narcissism is identifiable by the preoccupation with activities that serves the group's interest despite its professed statements that these activities are meant to be 'for the community' or as a form of 'charity or community service'. Group narcissism is often seen in activities organized by several youth groups. The abundance of social-outdoor activities is one example. Another example is the prevalence of the middle-class syndrome. In a project to help tsunami victims in Acheh, a group of youth leaders were more interested in taking photographs and gawking at the sights of destruction while survivors looked at them and wondered whether they were tourists or humanitarian workers. In another project, the participating youth group is more interested in detailing videos of

themselves seen packing boxes and organizing the trip, in which, tears of sympathy flowed as a measure of their 'awakened consciousness' of "their" misfortune and "our" fortunate" lives. These are forms of narcissism in which one's social concerns centers around one self or the group and not on whether their actions actually alleviates the suffering of those whom they professedly intend to help. This rise in narcissism corresponds, to what an American sociologist described as symptoms of "the waning of the sense of historical time".[7]

Genuine Concern for People

The second important constituent of activism is **genuine concern for people**. An activist must, in other words, possess a *deep-rooted sense of empathy*. An activist cannot hope to address the concerns of society on a pedestal, through detached lenses. He/she must, in contrast, be involved in society; to partake in the joy and suffering of ordinary lives; to listen, to respect and to be involved in the historical process and journey of his/her people. In order to develop a genuine concern for the people, an activist must strive to understand the complexities of human interactions. He/she must, in other words, understand the mechanics of society and the processes of social change. An activist cannot adopt a simplistic and naïve viewpoint in addressing issues of the people. He/she cannot, for instance, impute social problems to individual failings. There are structural issues that activists need to contend with. Educational underachievement, unemployment and poverty do not occur because people are simply "lazy and have some attitudinal problem". An activist needs to understand this in order to avoid the all-too-often syndrome of "blaming the victims" for the conditions they are in. At the same time, to have genuine concern for people do not mean that we ought to see ourselves as "saviours" of their condition. This patronizing attitude ought not to exist in an activist. In many programmes aimed at "helping the poor", the tendency is to adopt "tokenism". By visiting them and giving them food packages, we thought that we had done our part in alleviating the plight of the poor. In addition, we often develop our programmes without involving the very target group that we intend to address. Consider, for example, programmes that address the 'wayward youths'. How many of these programmes actually try to empathize and not judge and impose 'the solution' upon them? Too often, there is a tendency to blame parents for not bringing up their children well. Thus, forums and talks are being conducted to "educate" people to be good parents. Yet, in such activities, there is hardly any attempt to address the insecurities and fears of the families in their struggles to make ends meet and being subjected to societal pressures such as the barrage of consumerism that targets their self-esteem, through conforming to what the dominant regards as being "successful" and "the good life". This dehumanizing condition ought to form part of the activist's consciousness if he/she is to have genuine concern for people.

Thus, to have a genuine concern for people is implicitly linked to have a genuine concern for those who suffer as a result of social processes, be it historically determined or socially engineered. Activism must be directed towards the concerns of the poor, the marginal, the voiceless, the underrepresented, the oppressed, the victims of violence, the abused and those in misery in general. It must also be directed to the non-human world – environmental degradation, structural violence and unjust systems. In short, activism is an act of galvanizing thought and resources and channeling it towards addressing problems in society and in the process, leads one to develop a greater sense of humanity.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Paolo Freire, an educationist and social thinker, once said, "A change in understanding, which is of basic importance, does not itself, however, mean a change in the concrete."[8] The task in rejuvenating activism in its true spirit is a difficult task. This is especially so amongst the younger generation. There is somehow an eerie silence amongst the Malay/Muslim youths when it comes to addressing social problems and issues affecting society. Here, we will like to propose some schema that ought to guide our attempts to create greater awareness of our responsibility as citizens in the process of social transformation.

First and foremost, there must be a constant effort within the community to **raise social consciousness** amongst the general public, not just amongst youths. Both, community leaders and intelligentsias have an important role to play. The absence of activism amongst our youths is not a problem that must be blamed on the youths. In any society, youths act as a mirror to the type of society and social structures in place. If our youths are "too self-centered", "morally lax" or "socially passive and oblivious to social issues around them", it is perhaps a reflection of our own societal neglect. The "problem of youth" is, in essence, a symptom of bigger problems within our community or society. What is needed then is an attempt to identify these underlying factors and diagnose them with all sincerity. We must not allow our moralizing voice and moral panic to overcome our moral responsibility to act.

Second, the **will to think** must be made central to any social activism.[9] The will to think is, in essence, (1) the willingness to identify and define problems in society, (2) the ability to diagnose these problems, and (3) the courage and ability to offer possible solutions. Activism without the will to think is mere "busyness". We are seeing this "busyness" in many of our youth 'activism'. The amount of programmes we run and the amount of time and energy spent in organizing events and activities, are not the measure of the value of our contribution as an activist. Rather, it is the ability of our activism to generate long-term solutions to social problems and issues that ought to be measured. For activism to be effective, we must have continuous engagements with our own intellectual processes. Knowledge is central in our attempts to uncover the "whys" of our social ills and the "hows" in addressing them.

Third, social activism requires **moral courage**. If activism is a conscious act of being on the side of those who suffer, then there must be conscientious attempts to articulate these concerns. The act of articulating an issue is an arduous task. It requires deep thinking and reflections. Through articulating our concerns, we ensure that our own thought processes are subjected to scrutiny. As such, moral courage involves both (1) the persistence in raising issues despite being against popular and dominant thinking in public; and (2) the integrity to subject one's own position to scrutiny. Moral courage is the root of *praxis*, that is, the action that is grounded in sound understanding or theories. Those who calls for action and not to engage in "too much thinking" is a manifestation of misguided recklessness. In the long run, misguided recklessness will create more damage to the cause of social upliftment.

Last but not least, social activism must be guided by a **moral vision** that is embedded with a deep concern for fellow humans (and his natural surroundings) and the desire to create meaningful social existence. Without a moral vision, activism can easily be politicized and serve group or individual interests that no longer put the community or society as its ultimate concern.

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ENDNOTES

[1] See Survey on Individual Giving 2004: Volunteerism Findings. Available online:
http://www1.nvpc.org.sg/sub_page.asp?pid=99&sid=225

[2] Henry A, Giroux, *Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism: Global Uncertainty and the Challenge of the New Media.* Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2006. p. 5

[3] By 'political', I mean active participation in civil sphere as democratic individuals who are conscious of the workings of society. It does not refer to involvement in party politics.

[4] "…the individual forming part of a crowd acquires, solely from numerical considerations, a sentiment of invincible power which allows him to yield to instincts which, had he been alone, he would perforce have kept under restraint. He will be the less disposed to check himself from the consideration that, a crowd being anonymous, and in consequence irresponsible, the sentiment of responsibility which always controls individuals disappears entirely." Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind.* New York: Dover, 2002. p. 6ff.

[5] On this point, read Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movement.* New York: HarperPerennial, 1989.

[6] I am not denying the fact that some mass movements had been effective in ushering revolutionary changes in society, especially when a gradual transformation is deemed as impossible. Many mass movements who took it to the streets in public demonstrations and protests do manage to awaken some form of consciousness to their cause, despite some sliding to violence and even anarchy. But as noted by Bertrand Russell, "All movements go too far". Mass movements cannot ensure that rationality and individual responsibility reigns. The lure of power in a crowd will eventually robs one's conscientious actions and sense of individual responsibility needed to awaken the passion of serving for a cause.

[7] "To live for the moment is the prevailing passion – to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future. It is the waning of the sense of historical time – in particular, the erosion of any strong concern for posterity…" – Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979, r1991), p. 5.

[8] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope.* New York: Continuum, 2004. p. 19

[9] I am using this term as expounded by Syed Hussein Alatas. Read, "Backwardness and the Will to Think" in Syed Hussein Alatas, *Modernization and Social Change.* Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972. pp. 164-173.