

‘Being useful’ after the Ivory Tower: combining research and activism with the Brixton Pound

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This article draws on research and activism with a local currency group, the Brixton Pound, in order to extend discussions of scholar-activism to encompass broad and inclusive notions of activism. As broad and inclusive notions of activism dislodge the boundaries between academia and activism, they have enabled scholars to challenge the idea that it is necessary to keep activism separate from research and to explore why and how activism and research might be combined. Despite this, however, the academic literature on scholar-activism is presently dominated by ‘capital A’ activism and activists, suggesting there is more to do to embed inclusive notions of activism within it. This article makes a contribution to such efforts, positioning involvement in a local currency group, the Brixton Pound, as combining activism with research, in order to provide motivation and resources to a more diverse audience, particularly those who may not have previously combined research with activism or who may be ‘put off’ by narrow notions of ‘capital A’ activism. In light of the continued centrality of concerns about the usefulness of academics in debates about activism and the academy, I choose ‘being useful’ as a rubric through which to organise this article. My involvement with the Brixton Pound suggests that the loss of the privileged position of critique atop the ‘Ivory Tower’ opens up a range of other contributions extending across boundaries between activism and research and between theory and method. I identify three ways of ‘being useful’, including practising ethics of reciprocity, developing embedded research projects through engagement and building more generative critical (geographical) scholarship. Together, these ways of being useful make a contribution towards transforming critical geography into a more hopeful, generative (sub-)discipline, more closely connected with issues of practical significance to (broadly understood) activism.

Key words: activism, scholar-activism, local currencies, Brixton Pound

Introduction

Activists and academics have attempted to reclaim the notion of activism from narrow framings that exclude and disempower others by framing them as ‘non-activists’. As broad and inclusive notions of activism dislodge the boundaries between academia and activism, they have enabled scholars to challenge the idea that it is necessary to keep activism separate from research and to explore why and how activism and research might be combined. In light of the intellectual and emotional difficulties of combining activism with research, however, it is not surprising that committed and experienced ‘capital A’ activists figure highly in academic writing in this field. There is more to do to embed inclusive notions of activism within

scholar-activism, therefore, if it is to avoid the problems of exclusion and disempowerment associated with ‘capital A’ notions of activism. Further, despite understandings about the interwoven nature of activism and research, debates often slip into an ‘Ivory Towers’ conception of universities, in which academia provides a privileged position from which to create knowledge and be useful in social change. The demarcations of research often continue to devalue activism and activist knowledges and contribute to the irrelevance of academic breakthroughs to the groups being studied.

This article therefore aims to make a contribution to efforts to embed inclusive notions of activism within scholar-activism, by positioning my involvement in a local currency group, the Brixton Pound, as combining activism

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with research. In light of the continued centrality of concerns about the usefulness of academics in debates about activism and the academy, I choose 'being useful' as a rubric through which to organise this article. Working with a researcher-centred narrative style (e.g. Maxey 1999; Askins 2009), I discuss three ways of 'being useful' that emerge from my research and involvement with the Brixton Pound which together make a contribution towards transforming critical geography into a more hopeful, generative (sub-)discipline, more closely connected with the issues of practical significance to (broadly understood) activists. My intention is to provide motivation and resources to a more diverse audience, particularly those who may not have previously combined research with activism or who may be 'put off' by narrow notions of 'capital A' activism. I have done so out of a belief – which is tested and examined throughout this article – that universities can make a contribution to social change, and a desire to see more of their resources deployed in this direction.

Embedding broad and inclusive notions of activism within scholar-activism

Involvement in a local currency group has seemed, at times, a far cry from the 'capital A' activism (Askins 2009) associated with direct action, road blockades and occupations. While local currency organisers have been described as activists (see, for example, North 2011 2014), members of the Brixton Pound group did not generally describe themselves as activists. As someone with little previous experience of activism, let alone 'capital A' activism, I was also personally rather wary of taking on this identity as I got involved in the Brixton Pound.

Maxey argues that a notion of activism that emphasises 'dramatic, physical, "macho" forms of activism with short-term public impacts' (1999, 200) actually risks reinforcing rather than challenging social injustices. Together with others, including Brown (2007) and Routledge (2002), Maxey has highlighted in particular the 'latent sexism' (1999, 200) within such notions of activism. More generally, an activist identity that relies upon the framing of all others as 'non-activists' is exclusionary and disempowering (Anonymous 1999 and Halfacree 2004, both cited in Chatterton 2006).

Activists and academics have attempted to reclaim the notion of activism from such narrow framings. Research has shown how autonomous activists themselves 'express identities that attempt to go beyond exclusionary labels such as "militant" or "activist", which are set apart from the everyday and simply oppose the present condition' (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010, 476). Some have argued that we should 'Give up activism' (Anonymous 1999, cited in Chatterton 2006, 273), while others have

extended their analysis across a diversity of terrains, strategies and practices excluded or marginalised within narrow notions of 'capital A' activism. North's (2011) social movement analysis of climate activism, for example, encompasses both prefigurative Transition initiatives and direct action. Brown's analysis of queer autonomous spaces highlights activities such as emotional support, 'gatherings, parties, and communal meals' and '[l]eafleting, postering, banner making, working on art projects' (2007, 2686, 2691). Maxey develops perhaps the most inclusive notion of activism: '[w]e are in a sense all activists, as we are all engaged in producing the world' (1999, 201). From this perspective, Askins frames her involvement with 'Families Unite in Newcastle' and 'that "direct action", standing-at-the-barricades activity that I've also engaged in' as both being part of 'what I do' (2009, 8, 6).

Such broad and inclusive notions of activism dislodge the boundaries between academia and activism. To follow Askins, being 'part of what we do', many everyday academic activities also potentially fall within the scope of activism. Scholars have emphasised the radical potential of teaching in particular and the need to challenge the neoliberalisation of universities (Castree 1999; Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010). Importantly for this article, broader notions of activism have enabled scholars to challenge the idea that it is necessary to keep activism separate from research (Blomley 1994; Kitchin and Hubbard 1999) and to explore why and how activism and research might be combined (for useful reviews see Pain 2003; Fuller and Kitchin 2004; Kindon *et al.* 2007; Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010).

In light of the intellectual and emotional difficulties involved in combining activism with research (Fuller 1999), it is not surprising that committed and experienced activists figure highly in academic writing in this field. Routledge (1996 2002), Halfacree (2004), Chatterton (2006), Juris (2007), Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010) and Mason (2013) are among those who have offered practical and critical reflections on their work between research and activism. Often describing themselves as scholar-activists or militant ethnographers, they have extensive experience in 'capital A' activism. Researchers involved in other forms of activism have tended to represent themselves rather differently, however. Brown (2007) and North (2011), for example, acknowledge that their activism has informed their research but do not take on the identity of scholar-activist. Cahill (2007a 2007b) presents her work with young women of colour as participatory action research. Gibson-Graham (2006) emphasises the performative potential of research to re-make local economies with communities, terming this method 'participatory action research in a poststructuralist vein' (Cameron and Gibson

2005, 315). Askins makes clear that 'I haven't ever described myself as an activist-academic' (2009, 6). There are, of course, exceptions, such as Lyons' (2014) involvement in organic farming cooperatives in Uganda – not something immediately associated with 'capital-A' activism but which she frames as activist/academic praxis nonetheless. Further, as Routledge (2002) and Askins (2009) discuss, identities are performed, fluid and changing. Overall, it seems there is more to do to embed inclusive notions of activism within scholar-activism, if it is to avoid the problems of exclusion and disempowerment associated with 'capital A' notions of activism.

Furthermore, despite understandings about the interwoven nature of activism and research, Fuller and Askins (2007), Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010) and Pain (2014) have highlighted the ease with which debates about activism and the academy continue to slip into an 'Ivory Towers' conception of universities, which 'implies, wrongly, that as academics we are still the main foci for the production of knowledge, and specially placed to assist the social and political struggles of others' (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010, 250). Such slippages can be identified throughout activist and participatory action research, as well as within recent debates ignited by the inclusion of 'impact' within the Research Excellence Framework in the UK (Pain *et al.* 2011).

Katz' analysis helps with understanding why we expect to be able to be useful as academics. She writes that although human geographers 'are always already in the field . . . to have these conversations in a way that is distinct from everyday life, we must have "a field" marked off in space and time' (1994, 67). Benson and Nagar set out how this demarcation 'sidelines the activist parts of the project to "informing scholarly research"' (2006, 585). They implicate such devaluing of activism and activist knowledges in the irrelevance of academic breakthroughs to the groups being studied. Combining activism with research, then, makes fundamental challenges to human geography as a discipline and ideas about its usefulness in relation to social change. In the remainder of this paper, I discuss how the loss of the privileged position of critique atop the 'Ivory Tower' in the case of my involvement with the Brixton Pound opened up a range of other ways of 'being useful', extending across boundaries between activism and research and between theory and method.

So, is it working yet? Researching the Brixton Pound

At the time of my research in 2010, the Brixton Pound took the form of printed local money, which could be purchased with pounds sterling at a one-to-one

exchange rate for use in 180 businesses in and around Brixton. By 'sticking' to Brixton, the Brixton Pound is 'designed to support Brixton businesses and encourage local trade and production' (Brixton Pound nd). It is one of several local currencies that have emerged from Transition Town initiatives in the UK in recent years (see Ryan-Collins 2011; Mason and Whitehead 2012; North 2010 2014).

My initial interest in the Brixton Pound was motivated by a desire to explore how ideas for alternative economies and economics were being put into practice. I wanted to find out whether its high profile had been matched by a greater material effectiveness than the academic literature suggested other local currencies had achieved (a review of this literature is outside the scope of this article, but see North 2014 for a recent discussion).

At the time of my involvement, the Brixton Pound could boast a successful and high-profile launch and an unusually large number of businesses involved. Yet following these initial successes, the number of Brixton Pounds in circulation had stabilised and businesses were reporting a significant falling off in Brixton Pound trade. Interviews I conducted with Brixton Pound users as part of the research activities I agreed with the Brixton Pound group (discussed below) suggested that they used it only sporadically, and weren't finding that it increased their propensity to shop locally. Likewise, with a few exceptions, interviews with participating businesses suggested that they were not re-circulating the Brixton Pounds they received by 'spending them on' through their suppliers but were instead changing them back to sterling. And while some users and businesses told me that they shared the Brixton Pound's vision for a different kind of local economy, most saw it as a way to 'do our bit' for Brixton. Perhaps most concerning, however, was the scheme's lack of appeal to Brixton's low-income and ethnically diverse populations. Rather than building an alternative economy, the Brixton Pound could be seen as primarily benefiting Lambeth Council, which had gained an estimated £100 000 worth of advertising for Brixton through its investment of £6000 in the scheme.

To my dismay, then, the picture of the Brixton Pound that emerged initially from my research activities was very consistent with the broader literature on local currencies. In 'Being useful 3', I discuss how this view was bound up with the 'Ivory Towers' perspectives introduced above and set out the alternative analyses which emerge once the critique practised by the Brixton Pound group is acknowledged and valued. First, however, I discuss how I got involved in the Brixton Pound, opening up a discussion about practising ethics of reciprocity ('Being useful 1') and developing embedded research projects through engagement ('Being useful 2').

Being useful 1: practising ethics of reciprocity

My research into the Brixton Pound evolved to incorporate activism as a result of concerns – initially raised by the Brixton Pound group – about 'give and take' (Kitchin and Hubbard 1999, 196) and 'who-gets-what' in relation to research projects (Benson and Nagar 2006, 589). I had not previously been involved in local currency initiatives, nor did I begin with a firm intention to get actively involved in the Brixton Pound. This quickly changed, however, when I first contacted the Brixton Pound group. As all members of the group were unpaid volunteers, their time was precious and being interviewed by a researcher was not a priority. Relationships with some of the businesses that accepted the Brixton Pound were also sensitive; many had been approached by journalists for interviews on numerous occasions and the group did not want researchers adding to their burdens. The risk that students and academics wishing to research alternative economies unwittingly act to weaken them was confirmed later on when one of the businesses threatened to withdraw from the Brixton Pound after being asked to complete four different questionnaires in one week by different students researching the local currency. As a Master's student approaching a competent, experienced and diverse local currency group, I was not in a position to 'empower' the Brixton Pound group or provide a particularly expert contribution.

It is disturbing to hear stories of academics who come and go without a trace, the promised copies of research outputs never forthcoming (see also Lyons 2014). Further, as Mason *et al.* acknowledge, despite our good intentions, 'we frequently find ourselves complicit in professional circumstances that prioritise some forms of knowledge over others, and ignore the economic precariousness of those we wish to work with' (2013, 254). But perhaps most worrying is that well-intentioned students and academics might unwittingly damage the social movements, autonomous projects or alternative economic experiments they are researching. It seems to me, therefore, that there remains much to do to embed basic elements of an ethics of reciprocity into teaching and research activities in relation to diverse activist groups, whatever the method being pursued.

Gillan and Pickerill (2012) write, however, that 'immediate reciprocity' in and of itself is no answer to unequal and complex power relations between researchers and researched, and generates ethical problems of its own. They are concerned, like others (e.g. Askins 2009; Cahill 2007a; Lyons 2014), to resist the idea that 'any dogma that one form of knowledge production [scholar-activism in this case] is superior to all others' (Gillan and Pickerill 2012, 138). They suggest instead that it is important to

'shar[e] the stories of ethical issues and approaches and move towards a more collective sense of the responsibility for these ethical dilemmas' (2012, 140) – this article is in part a contribution to such efforts, alongside my involvement in groups such as the Participatory Geographies Research Group and the International Network of Urban Research and Action. While like others I wish to avoid methodological essentialism, I do not wish to confuse this with the need for a basic ethics of reciprocity in research on activist groups.

Reflecting on the fragility of the Brixton Pound and the superior knowledge and experience of the group compared to my own, I had cause to re-consider my plans. I contemplated choosing a different case study where I might not face such complexities. However, despite his warnings and concerns, the Brixton Pound organiser I met had also suggested that I come along to their meetings. This opening led me to pursue the research, albeit rather differently than I had intended. So I set aside my initial research proposal and started getting involved in the everyday aspects of the Brixton Pound, such as coming to meetings and helping out at events on weekends.

Being useful 2: developing embedded research projects through engagement

Being involved in the group's everyday activities gave me the opportunity to learn about their issues and to explore with them potential research activities that might enable me to write a dissertation and also feed into ongoing Brixton Pound projects. My initial idea to use interviews to investigate whether the Brixton Pound was working evolved into three mini research projects embedded in efforts to make it work better. I interviewed several businesses accepting the Brixton Pound for a project mapping local supply chains in order to help businesses identify how they could 'spend on' the currency they received from customers. Taking on a 'business support role' for two groups of businesses in Brixton additionally gave me the opportunity to interview businesses informally about their experiences in using the Brixton Pound or their reasons for not doing so. I also interviewed several Brixton Pound users, following up on a short online survey which the group had previously organised.

These mini research projects are small examples of mutually beneficial research projects directly linked with the concerns of activist groups as well as the debates in academic journals. As Katz writes, working from 'spaces of betweenness' may make it possible 'to frame questions that are at once of substantive and theoretical interest as well as of practical significance to those with whom we work' (1994, 72). Lyons (2014) describes a much more substantial embedded research project than that described in this paper, which arose through her

engagement with an organic farming cooperative in Uganda. As she returned to make successive visits to the cooperative, she learnt of their desire and efforts to establish a health and medical centre. She writes that '[c]ollaborating to establish the health and medical clinic became my research method' (2014, 109).

I certainly benefited from these mini research projects, as they generated data with which I was able to produce a dissertation that met the academic requirements of the university. Some of the empirical material I generated through interviews was also used by the group in presentations and funding bids, and the interviews I conducted with businesses got the supply chain project off to a start. It is harder to identify whether my dual role as researcher and activist was more of an asset or a liability for the group, however. Sometimes I was able to move productively between these two roles in order to open up a dialogue with businesses by being able to hear their complaints without immediately needing to spring to the defence of the Brixton Pound, for example, or to provide practical information about how to obtain Brixton Pounds during an interview. At other times, however, I found myself expanding on issues of interest to my research and missing details that were more important to the Brixton Pound in the process. With hindsight, it could have been useful to produce a more directly relevant summary of my research for the Brixton Pound group.

Being useful 3: building more generative critical (geographical) scholarship

My initial interest in the Brixton Pound was to find out whether it was any more successful than the academic literature suggested other local currencies had been. As I began to write up my dissertation, I was dismayed to find that it appeared to have fared no better, beyond a high-profile launch and a larger than usual number of businesses involved. I felt an increasing disjuncture between the energy and engagement that characterised the Brixton Pound group's activities and my initial analysis of the local currency as constrained and contradictory. This was a difficult and painful experience initially, but eventually yielded a more generative critical analysis of the Brixton Pound.

Critical geographers, among others, have become rather better at identifying problems than generating ideas, with the effect of disabling, narrowing or even denying the possibilities of alternatives and routes for progressive change (Gibson-Graham 1996; Harvey 2000; Blomley 2007). Disturbing and re-working relationships between research and activism is one way in which geographers have tried to re-discover a hopeful impulse within critical scholarship. As Routledge describes, critically occupying a 'third space' between activism and research

evokes 'a tension *between* studying resistance from a distance, and becoming uncritically involved in a struggle' (1996, 410, emphasis as original). Closely related is Gibson-Graham's suggestion that we take an 'open' stance in engaging with economic alternatives, which 'recognizes that what we are looking at is on its way to becoming something else' (2008, 628).

Combining activism with research offers the possibility to work with a more extended notion of reciprocity that recognises a diversity of ways of knowing as having legitimacy and authority. Benson and Nagar argue for the need to recognise the authorship of 'not only the activities that translate into concrete products of collaboration . . . but also the labor of sustaining long-term, on the ground [sic] struggles' (2006, 589). Participating in those everyday activities of activism, as a researcher, is one way in which to both learn from and develop such ways of knowing. Lyons, for example, highlights how her activist research with the Katuulo Organic Pineapple Cooperative (KOPC) opened up a discourse 'that has demonstrated the agency of researchers, smallholder farmers and other local-level actors . . . [and] has provided a site for KOPC members to demonstrate their negotiating and bargaining power' (2014, 111).

In the early stages of my research, it had been fairly easy to move between the roles of researcher and activist, and I had not had to reconcile the different emotions, stances and interests that I pursued in each role. As I began to prepare my dissertation, I came to appreciate how the method I had used had itself led these two perspectives to emerge and was now forcing me to confront their contradictions. In the rather painful process of acknowledging and working through these varied feelings and perspectives about the Brixton Pound, I found the work of Routledge (1996), Fuller (1999), Maxey (1999) and Maxey (2004) on critical reflexivity and Gibson-Graham (2008) on the open stance particularly helpful. I saw how my initial reading of the Brixton Pound as a limited and constrained alternative to a dominant mainstream economy was related to my desire for it to be materially effective and powerful as an alternative economy. This desire had become translated into questions with disappointing answers: no, the Brixton Pound wasn't working yet; it was very inefficient; it wasn't transforming the local economy; it wasn't providing an alternative for people with limited access to sterling; etc. I saw how my discomfort with this narrative had arisen because of its divergence from the energy and activity of the Brixton Pound group that was directed towards growing and strengthening the currency.

In contrast, my involvement in the everyday activities of the Brixton Pound gave me the opportunity to direct my critical faculties and energies towards the identification and gradual resolution of problems and limitations,

something like Routledge's suggestion to 'live theory as a series of practices – experimental, experiential, imaginative' (1996, 403). From this position, it was much harder to fall into two common traps: to idealise alternative economies through romantic celebration or even fetishism or to hold them up to wholly critical scrutiny against imagined ideal-types. Taking an open stance and critically occupying a third space between activism and research involved giving up the comfort of distance, developing critical engagement through involvement in the messy process of making alternative economies.

Taking an open stance, my attention was drawn to early debates within the Brixton Pound group on which currency model to adopt. I found that the group had analysed and debated the 'pros and cons' of potential models over a six-month period before a paper currency model was decided upon. They were aware of the strengths and weaknesses of different currency models, and anticipated many of the implications of their choice. Although the weaker links between a Local Exchange Trading Scheme (LETS) or a time banking model and the mainstream economy might have made them more use to Brixton's poorer communities, media interest, the experience of other 'Transition Town' currencies (Ryan-Collins 2011) and desire to build from a model acceptable to local businesses gave greater momentum to the paper currency model. This had clearly not been an easy process and a small group splintered off as a result of the decision in order to pursue their own projects.

Once the Brixton Pound was up and running, possibilities were opening up that might provide a means of incorporating aspects of some of the reluctantly-discarded alternative models. Some members of the group had always seen the paper currency as a first step and talked about their hope that the connections they had built with businesses would lead to new developments. Joining with a LETS or time bank was a particularly popular idea, because it was seen as a way to broaden the currency's reach so that it offered a real alternative to people on lower incomes. Momentum was also building around the idea of developing an electronic version of the Brixton Pound, which could reduce the high transaction costs involved in obtaining Brixton Pounds and make it easier to build in incentives to encourage use of the currency. The group was also open to more radical ideas, such as backing the currency with green energy rather than sterling in order to decouple economic activities from carbon. As Brixton did not have its own energy source at this time, the option was not explored as a practical development. Instead, its discussion widened the possibilities being considered by the group and reminded them of the limitations of the sterling-backed model.

Analysing how the Brixton Pound group were imagining and exploring possibilities and opportunities to

develop the currency model highlights the ways in which their critique was bound up with action. Critique as practised within the Brixton Pound was pursued with the deliberate intention of creating, sustaining and strengthening the local currency, nurturing a nascent alternative economy.

Conclusions

My research and activism with the Brixton Pound confirms the view that academia provides no privileged position from which to conduct critique. Yet, as one anonymous reviewer of this article commented, if activists are already aware of the critical analysis that an academic might make, 'it is a bit unclear what they needed an academic for'. I agree that valuing 'diverse forms of knowing' (Kindon *et al.* 2007, 13), such as the everyday activism and actively practised critique that sustain the (re-)making of alternative economies, certainly poses fundamental challenges to ideas about the usefulness of academics. More hopefully, however, my involvement with the Brixton Pound suggests that the loss of that privileged position of critique atop the 'Ivory Tower' in fact opens up a range of other contributions spanning both activism and research that 'challenge the false dichotomy between research "of use" and theoretical engagement' (Cahill 2007b, 299).

In light of the centrality of this issue within the academic literature, as well as in conversations with other students and researchers and in the privacy of my own research diary, I chose 'being useful' as a rubric through which to organise this article. I have identified three possible ways of 'being useful' that together make a contribution towards transforming critical geography into a more hopeful, generative (sub-)discipline, more closely connected with the issues of practical significance of (broadly understood) activists. Throughout, my intention has been to provide motivation and resources to a more diverse audience, particularly those who may not have previously combined research with activism or who may be 'put off' by narrow notions of 'capital A' activism. I have done so out of a belief – which has been tested and examined through this article – that universities can make a contribution to social change, and a desire to see more of their resources deployed in this direction.

I regret not having been able to sustain a longer-term involvement with the Brixton Pound, nor engaging members of the group in the concerns of this paper beyond a discussion of my dissertation at a group meeting, shortly after it was completed. I rely instead on the notion of an ethics of general (rather than immediate) reciprocity (following Gillan and Pickerill 2012) to reassure me on this article's usefulness outside the academy. Transforming critical geography into a more hopeful,

generative (sub-)discipline, more closely connected with issues of practical significance to a diversity of activists and activists would, indeed, *be useful*.

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