4 Entangled with everyone else

THREE OF us are on the street outside a supermarket on a Saturday morning, handing out leaflets about an environmental campaign. The long, dark days of winter have recently transformed into cold but bright early spring, and a few people stop to take a leaflet. But the majority of those approaching drop their heads when they spot us; try to walk past without contact. There's no reason to assume they're opposed to what we're leafleting about, since they don't even know what it is. We're not festooned with logos, nor are we stationed behind a table strung with a banner. It's possible that they are just being British: averse to a conversation with strangers so early in the day. We greet them brightly and try to catch their eyes. Maybe they think we are Jehovah's Witnesses. A few more stop to talk and realise it isn't so bad once they do, but many others shake their heads and keep going. This is a reasonable success rate for such an activity, but one of the other leafleters audibly launches into sarcastic comments

to the departing backs. 'Off you go then. You weren't ever going to stop, were you?' she says. While I remain silent, in my head I'm tempted to do the same thing. I'm trying not to form ideas about who will respond, or about those who walk on, trying not to acknowledge us. I'm trying not to feel superior.

Activists are prone to overestimating how different we are from everyone else. We often see ourselves as apart from the people we are trying to change or influence, as well as from those who are not obviously trying to change the world. We are right, and the other people are wrong. At best, they are 'asleep' or they do not 'get it'. I spent years thinking my job was to 'get the bastards' who were responsible for the environmental and human rights crimes that we were investigating. They were the bastards, and they were in the wrong. We, of course, were right. Or my task was to 'wake people up'; I was conscious, and they were not. The same sort of feeling of superiority, of apartness, has been present – more or less aggressively voiced, more or less explicitly acknowledged – in every form of activism I have been involved in, over 25 years.

What I now see, however, is that activists are not as separate from everyone else as we like to think. We are entangled with the people we are trying to change or influence, to the point where the interactions that take place may be helping to cement each 'side' in our identity of 'activist' and 'not-activist', which ends up making us less effective, less likely to be heard. I am using the distinction between an 'activist' and a 'not-activist' as a tool to investigate the reactivities around activism – the reactions that people have to activists, as well as the reactions that activists have to other people – rather than as a statement of how things actually *are*. There may be more variation within the categories of both 'activist' and 'not-activist' than between them. And surely, there is no such thing in reality as a 'not-activist'?[11]

Or is there? Somebody might not consciously think of themselves as 'not an activist', yet that is effectively what is happening when they look at activism and – for whatever reasons – think, 'that's not for me'. And activists might not explicitly describe the people they are reacting to as 'not-activists', but they are seeing them as something 'else'. It is a

'something else-ness' that encompasses the observation that those people are *not doing activism*. When we are speaking as activists, the not-activist is anyone who is disagreeing with us, anyone we are trying to persuade. It is the other side, whether we are in a confrontation or not. It is the official whom we are meeting to advocate for a change to the law. It is the sceptical journalist whom we are trying to convince to run our story. It is the bystanders looking irritated, perplexed or blank as we march or stand in the street. It was my Dad when I was arguing with him about the Iraq war or endless economic growth or whatever was in the news. It was the friend who worked in the City and was defending the current economic system, and it was the hot but annoying guy holding court in the kitchen at a party, who was winding me up over my earnestness about my work. In the moment when we are speaking, acting or thinking as an activist, it is anyone who is not doing the same as us. So I think that people implicitly recognise a distinction between activist and 'not-activist' even if they don't use those words, and I would like to meet them there. My using the distinction as a tool, then, is not to suggest a realist map of the world in which activists and not-activists can be simply identified. But it is a response to what I have heard and observed, and a way of temporarily teasing apart the deep entanglement of activists with everyone else in order to investigate what is going on as they react to each other.

When I started asking people I know who are not activists how they feel about activism and how they feel when they encounter activists, I found myself collecting a list of allergic reactions. Their list of complaints about activism sounded like a typology of inflammation, with a number of common symptoms. Activism is an identity that I don't share, they said. It looks like a performance. It's emotional and irrational, often angry. It's hypocritical. It's smug and it's hiding in a cloak of moral righteousness. It sounds shrill. It's telling me what to do. Crucially, these encounters make people feel bad. They feel guilty at not acting. They feel unfairly demonised. They feel they are being made responsible for the problem when actually they are trying to do their best too, whether at work or in their own lives. They feel that they are not good enough. They resist being told what to do.

Images of protesters in the streets provoke a negative reaction in the majority of people, concluded a study commissioned by climate campaigners seeking guidance on the most effective images to use in their activism. In focus groups and an online survey in the UK, the US and Germany, and regardless of participants' levels of climate scepticism, such images attracted 'widespread cynicism' and 'only really resonated with the small number of people who already considered themselves as activists and campaigners', the study found.[45] Negative reactions to activism come with stereotypical views of activists, and the stereotypes have an effect: they make people not want to join in, and not want to share the activists' views. A study by Nadia Bashir and her social psychology colleagues at the University of Toronto investigated the effect of negative stereotypes of activists. Drawing on research showing that people desire membership only of groups they view positively, and are less inclined to adopt the opinions of stigmatised groups, they found that participants had negative stereotypes of environmentalists and feminists which reduced their willingness to affiliate with 'typical' activists and, ultimately, to adopt the behaviours that these activists promoted.[46] Being what people perceive as a typical activist, the study suggests, can make people not want to be activists.

Activists could reasonably feel cynical about a list of allergic reactions to activism. Provoking discomfort, guilt and the knowledge that the activist is doing something and maybe they should too, might be a ripe moment – ripe enough for a person to make a decision to match their values with a greater action, to do something differently. Whether the target is recruitment to activism, shifting public opinion or prompting behaviour change, then the whole point, activists might say, is to make people feel uncomfortable. ('It annoys me to see people comfortable when they ought to be uncomfortable,' was George Bernard Shaw's justification to critics of his 'preaching'.)[47] I turned to the scholarly study of activism and that seemed to point in the same direction. These allergies to activism that I collected seemed to converge on issues around identity, performance and emotions. For those who study activism, these are all central to activism being what it is. In the fields of both sociology and political psychology, these three themes are key to understandings of what activism is, how it happens and how it works.

An identity is central to the creation and maintenance of activist movements. People's individual identities need to include some sense of the political in order for them to be personally engaged when those political issues arise in the world outside them.[48] Then individual identities have to join and become collective for there to be a movement at all: for you to see yourself as an environmentalist, and for there to be an environmental movement, for example. There are different views on how this process works. In the outdated view of American sociologists' 'resource mobilisation theory', which relied on a rational-actor model of human behaviour,[49] mobilisation happens when people with pre-existing values (like environmentalism, for example) join together to take action. European scholarship of social movements emerging from neo-Marxist critical theory sees activist identity as dynamic and socially constructed. An individual changes and redefines themselves in interaction with others as they struggle together, so that a movement develops an identity as it goes along, as an emergent process.[50] Critical race theory and feminist theory argue that the ideology of those in power can hide people's real interests from themselves, and that developing an identity – as a feminist, for example – through sharing personal stories and experiences is essential to escaping oppressive ideologies.[51] With both of these last two sets of theories, belief systems are a means of control by the elites in charge, and while people may not have control over other organs of the state, they can take charge of generating new ideologies and redefining their own identities. It is this work of identity generation that happens in activist movements. Once a movement identity is in place, however, it is not only motivational but also gets defended in 'boundary work':[52] the forging of internal cohesion against external opponents, against factions with differing views within the movement, and against its own members who appear to transgress.[53]

The 'performance' was another aspect of activism that seemed to be riling or discomfiting observers. From the view of those who study how activism works, however, it is essential. It is to ensure that they are seen. Making resistance visible is often what makes it resistance at all. This is true of direct resistance against existing problems – the great protesting 'No' that *is* activism, to so many people observing it – and the kind of 'lifestyle activism' in which alternative styles of living and consuming are modelled in a rejection of current norms and an attempt to prefigure something

better.[54] Social movements are 'a form of acting in public', narrating, dramatising and framing opposition within a storyline, said the sociologist Ron Eyerman.[55] They are themselves a form of 'new media', who through what they do, as well as how they do it, announce to society that something else is possible, said Alberto Melucci.[56]

Emotions, meanwhile, help to create activists. Linguistically, emotion and movement have the same etymological root. Practically, emotions help to create our own actions by directing our attention and are guiding our behaviour. In campaigning terms, movement organisers put great effort into converting fears and angers into action: 'tapping into the wellspring of emotion', as the veteran trainer George Lakey puts it,[57] although non-violent direct action also encourages putting on a calm face in moments of confrontation. Dismissing emotions because they are irrational is, of course, still commonplace in a culture founded on the primacy of reason. It is done by those who are reacting to activism, and it has been done in the past by those who have studied activism. Sociological study of social movements did this until the last three decades of the 20th century, focusing on collective-behaviour approaches that emphasised the irrationality of crowds. Partly in reaction, the following three decades saw studies of the factors that prompted people to mobilise into social movements in terms that emphasised deliberation and rational decision-making.[58] Since the turn of the century there has been increasing study of the emotions of activism: the emotions that provoke or deter it, that sustain it, that undermine it, that cause it to burn out, and that can be suppressed in a hierarchy of emotions within activist movements.[59]

In turning to the academic literature about activism, I wasn't trying to analyse or rank the many theories about how activism arises and how it works. I saw things I recognised in many of them. But it was interesting to note that almost all study of activism ends up looking at these three aspects that were at the heart of the negative reactions among the people I spoke to who were experiencing activism negatively. Identity, performance, emotion: this is what activism *is*, the literature is suggesting – activism as something that is performed, that has a particular, albeit perhaps unattractive, identity, that contains emotion. Allergies to activism on this basis may therefore be inevitable. We could say that people are reacting to activism simply

because they are bound to do so, and indeed, perhaps because they are supposed to do so. But also contained in that list of allergic reactions I was collecting was a set of clues that something else may be going on. People were talking about the righteousness, the hypocrisy and the moral certainty of activists. But they were also talking about how activists made them feel, as someone who is not doing activism. They mentioned their own feelings of guilt, insecurity and resistance to what activists are saying. And there was much less on these topics in the social movement literature that I was reading, focused as it is on what activists *themselves* are doing to generate and maintain the phenomenon of activism.

Regardless of who is experiencing them, guilt, insecurity and resistance are all phenomena that occur when unconscious emotional material is in play. It was this observation that led me to turn from my pile of papers on social movements to the study of depth psychology. This is an umbrella term for approaches to psychology that recognise the role of the unconscious. As a clinical practice, depth psychology includes many forms of talking therapy, each with its different name and tradition. What they have in common is the attempt to bring material that troubles us out of our unconscious mind and into the light of our conscious thought. As a theory rather than a practice, the most widely used general term is psychoanalysis, and when I use this word it is to describe a wider theory of unconscious motivation, not just the specific form of talking therapy that carries the same name.

So much of what makes our inner life 'inner' at all is that we do not have access to it with the thinking tools of rationality in which public discourse is conducted. Our unconscious is not rational and predictable. It is the part of us that makes itself known through feeling, intuition, images and dreams, as well as those moments where we experience that expansive sense of the existence of something larger than our driven, controlling ego. With stillness and attention – some might call this spiritual practice, while artists might call it creative practice – we can learn to cultivate access to it. But the unconscious makes itself known in less welcome ways, too: through emotional pain and trauma and our convoluted attempts to defend ourselves and avoid feeling them. It makes itself known in those moments of reactivity and flare when we do not realise that we are bringing emotional pain from unrelated times, places and people into the moment

we are in right now. When people are experiencing negative reactions to activists, they can feel just that they 'disagree' with what the activists are saying, or that they just 'don't like' activists. I have heard both of these many times. Depth psychology suggests that there can be other reasons. And conversely, when activists are full of righteousness for our issue, we feel that we are entirely justified. Attending to our unconscious motivations brings other reasons for our righteousness into the light.

Without a deep account of how we function, we risk seeing activism through the same lens that activists habitually and often unthinkingly use in our attempts to change the world. Rational thinking is an essential part of our human capacity and we cannot hope for a just public realm without it. The way that populist and authoritarian leaders harness fear is evidence enough. William Davies, a sociologist, describes how modernity was founded on the separation of emotion from reason, making space in public and political life for expertise and discussion. His book *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World* is about the recent erosion of that separation, with eruptions of 'nostalgia, resentment, anger and fear' increasingly disturbing the status quo.[60] He suggests that the origins of this eruption of feeling into public life lie not only in the obvious effects of the digital revolution in undermining trust in fact and experts, but also in the divergence between what the facts and experts say – 'the economy is growing, we're better off than ever' – and the real-life pain and economic difficulty that so many people experience under the West's regimes of growing inequality.

Faced with populism, authoritarian appeals to fear, and nationalist, exclusionary sentiment, it is more tempting than ever for progressive campaigners, who want to insulate themselves from such sentiments, to stick with the rational and argue from the facts. So we are in the habit of bringing only the parts of ourselves permitted by a shared, albeit threatened, public culture based on the terms of rationality. Using only this lens to *do* activism is one limitation. It risks missing deeper aspects of the problem we are trying to change, as I explore in later chapters. But using this lens to *think about* activism is another limitation: it risks missing important aspects of what we ourselves are bringing to our attempts to create change. It's not only the problematic people in charge or the people who are voting for authoritarian leaders who are in thrall to their unconscious motivations.

It is all of us – and perhaps the political right has always been better at implicitly acknowledging this.

'The devil has the best lines,' my friend Andrew Simms, an author and campaigner, reminded me when I was starting my research. We were having a long conversation about our campaigning experiences over a veggie fry-up in a south London cafe, dissecting the various forms of unhelpful activist behaviour that we had encountered. 'The political right has understood the contradictions of existence,' he suggested, 'that we're all a mixture of the angel and the beast, and cannot be hermetically sealed good.' He was talking about why the right is perennially more successful at the polls, but these words kept nagging at me. Simms's sense of this is that, as he described it, 'the right is more comfortable with paradox, better at just accepting it, and that liberates them, allowing them more easily to exploit the flow of a human condition which resists moral simplicity, whereas the left is more inclined to tie itself in knots because it is not comfortable with paradox and accepting human complexity.' These are big questions, and they were speaking, I realised, to my instinct that as progressive campaigners we should be looking below the surface, at our shadows (our 'beast') as well as at our high-flown ideals (our 'angel'). The human complexity that I would like us to allow for includes the shadow in ourselves, and in everyone we are talking to and about. The shadow is in us when we are becoming righteous. It is in the people we are talking to, when they are feeling resistant or guilty or uncomfortable. So by proposing that we look at the irrational material that runs below our surfaces, I am not suggesting that we stop thinking or using our rational capacities. I am suggesting, however, that we allow our thinking about activism to include the *effects* of all that cannot clearly be thought about.

That is the problem with the shadow – its very point is that we cannot see it. It contains the emotions and aspects of our personality that we disavow in ourselves and push out of sight. Jung said the shadow 'personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet it is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly'.[61] It's everything our parents, teachers and culture have told us is unacceptable: anger, desire for power, selfishness … and perhaps also our undeveloped talents and gifts.[62]

Acknowledging these hidden aspects of ourselves that we have pushed into our subconscious is painful, and we avoid doing so by projecting: by locating and judging them in others. The advice for identifying our own shadow is simple: work out what we find most irritating in others.[63] The mud-slinging of politics, particularly in adversarial structures that pit one party against another, conceals vast amounts of projection. It's easier to hurl abuse at the other side than to do the hard work of identifying your projections and acknowledging them as part of yourself. On a mass scale, projection can become a demonising of entire groups, or countries, and by turning others into 'enemy' it paves the way, ultimately, to armed conflict – the kind of deadly conflict that activists find themselves trying to prevent, or to solve, or to protect people from.[64] Yet by spending our time looking critically at others, activists have an excellent cover for our own projections. A lens of shadow and projection started to make sense of the reactions I was hearing to activism, as well as the reactivity of activists to everyone else.

What activists project

Anger and righteousness are common observations of activism from the outside; common ingredients of the activist cliché. As with the allergies to activism, which I'll discuss shortly, I've come to see them as clues about what activists are projecting onto others. Indeed, when it comes to anger, it's not even a clue – it often *is* anger that is being projected. The question is: what is the anger about? Sometimes it is anger for the issue in question. But sometimes it is anger about something in our own lives that is not connected to the issue. Righteousness, meanwhile, may offer a clue that something else is being projected; something that the activist does not want to associate themselves with.

Anger is a legitimate catalyst and fuel for campaigning. Many activists will say that anger about the issue they want to change – inequality, violence, destruction of non-human beings – forms part of their motivation. Many movements that have successfully resulted in change were fuelled by anger. It provides spark and recruitment for new movements and is a fuel for difficult tasks that cost activists energy and might make them unpopular. A classic mobilisation strategy by campaign groups across all issues is to

provoke anger by providing incensing information, then asking the recipient if they are 'Outraged by this?' before suggesting that they 'Take action now'. And to question activist anger, to suggest that it is too emotional, can be a way of undermining the activist and downplaying the issue. When men tell feminists that they are too angry, or when the 'angry black woman' trope is used, it is a defence that draws on sexist and racist ideas about who has or doesn't have emotionality, rationality and self-control. Questioning the anger of people who are making complaints can be a form of guilt. 'I cannot hide my anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivialises all our efforts,' said Audre Lorde in her powerful invocation of the 'uses of anger' in fighting racism.[65]

Anger is undeniably powerful: it is useful, it has validity, it plays a key role as a protective response to trauma. Nobody should question the legitimacy of another's anger nor should they grant permission for it. My motivation in asking questions about anger is not to devalue or dismiss activists' anger. I am driven to complicate anger partly with my own behaviour in mind, as well as that of other activists I have worked with and encountered over the years. Political anger, specifically in those who have not experienced the problem personally, is interesting. So is an urgent desperation to get the problem fixed, an urgency that runs close to the need to be in control. There have been times when my rage about the targets of my activism has been incandescent, when it has been hostile and verbally violent. For many years my understanding of this was clouded. I thought that if someone wasn't as full of rage and urgency as me, they obviously didn't care enough.

But once I started looking more closely, I realised that I have met and worked with many people who are deeply motivated to change the injustices, but who do not carry – nor shed all over other people – this excess rage, this desperate urgency. I started to face the uncomfortable possibility that the reactivity I was noticing in activists, including in myself, might be driven by *more* than the issue at stake and the appropriate and legitimate anger that it generates. If it had been the conditions of my own life that I was fighting for, perhaps my anger would have made more sense. But I can't vouch that my anger was entirely for the people and other species I was advocating for, and I suspect this made my activism hard to hear. Ultimately, there is a difference when someone expresses anger at their own experience of

oppression, and when someone is speaking in anger while trying to support others, as I was doing. In the former case, an uncomfortable response on the part of the hearer may be rooted in guilt at their own complicity, which is one of the things that Lorde's 'Uses of Anger' essay is about. In the latter case, perhaps those on the receiving end of the anger are uncomfortable because they sense a dissonance between expression and intention.

It was when I spoke about my work from such high-temperature anger that people would ask: 'Are you ok?', which only aggravated me more. Talking about the issues I cared about even outside of my work on them, including at social events, would be enough. I came to dread being asked 'What do you do?' at parties, because my inevitably heated response felt so exhausting. No wonder that guy in the kitchen at parties, whoever he was each time, would wind me up. He knew that he could get some attention and an entertaining 'show' from me, as I inevitably exploded (thus reinforcing the stereotype of the angry activist). Even now, although I have been taking some time to think about it – and, whisper it, although I am now in my mid-forties, perhaps due for some mellowing – if I choose to allow it, my rage is still white hot. Both for issues that don't affect me personally, and those that do. Campaigning for a liveable planet is a question that brings my own children's lives into the balance, as well as the lives of so many people who are already struggling to live with the effects of ecological destruction, or who will have to do so before I or my children have to. My anger, at the accelerating loss of this gorgeous biosphere that is our human home and the outrageous unfairness to those who are already suffering and the many more who will suffer, is real. But I also know that anger burns me up, burns me out and burns too fast to be a sustainable fuel for my activism, which is why I want to be critical about it.[66]

One of my problems with anger was that I was speaking directly from it, rather than digesting it first in order to use it as a more sustainable fuel. Gail Bradbrook, one of the founders of Extinction Rebellion, spoke of 'compassionate rage', which is rage that has been neither suppressed nor thrown away. 'Anger rises up in your body as energy, then if you spit it out, you've given it away. If you can contain it, not suppress it, it's in your back. That's what I mean by compassionate rage. I'm not going to blame someone, slap them, put all my pain about my childhood on them, but I'm

not going to stand for it,' she said.[67] In using those words 'pain about my childhood', Bradbrook is speaking about how the activist's motivational rage about the issue can get caught up in their personal sources of rage that have quite different, often unacknowledged targets.

This is the other risk with anger, that I was beginning to acknowledge in myself: that it is anger about something else entirely. The emotional war zones of our early family life can be carried over into our combative approach to the outside world and then compulsively, repeatedly acted out. This is a dubious campaign strategy when the dynamic that we are re-enacting is our failure to 'win'. A talented campaigner I know stepped back in exhaustion from what he was doing after realising that his whole life had been spent fighting, the first half in his family home and the second half against the companies whose wrongdoing he was trying to expose and prevent. He had at least become aware of it, but it took his exhaustion from fighting for so long to bring the awareness. When the source of the 'something else' that is fuelling our anger is old, we may not even be aware of what is going on. We might not have been able, or allowed, to get angry about the thing that happened to us, but that does not mean the anger is not there. As soon as we encounter an incontrovertible issue that we can get legitimately angry about, it is unleashed. We may be convinced that the anger is about the injustice in front of us – and some of it usually is. I know lifelong campaigners who, while fighting their political battles, may also still be warring with the authority figures of their families or their boarding-school childhoods. I now understand that I was doing the same.

Anger is a 'mask' emotion that many of us feel instead of more painful feelings such as sadness and loss. More specifically, anger is also the habitual cover for other emotions that the majority of men in our culture have been taught from childhood they cannot safely express without compromising their masculinity.[68] (Although conversely, there may be not enough anger from too many women who have been socialised to turn their anger into something else, often tears.) Not everyone is motivated by anger; it is not always going to work as a recruitment tool. Some don't want to be anywhere near it. People may be repelled by it because of early experiences in life, because they are frightened of other people's anger. One activist told me, 'It may be we need the angry voices in the system.

But I don't identify comfortably with the angry voices … for me anger isn't a safe space.' Alternatively, people may veer from activism because they are frightened of their own anger. I was told by a man in his middle years who is not an activist and has never wanted to be one, that fear of his own anger erupting may be behind his reluctance:

> It's not the anger of activists that alienates me: it's the skills of some activists in using their anger that makes me feel powerless by comparison. It's not the world I don't know how to change: it's my own fury. When I look at activists I really admire – Peter Tatchell [the gay rights campaigner] springs to mind – it's their ability to manage, marshal, use anger that impresses me, the capacity to work with it without becoming it. But I don't have those skills. When I get angry, it swamps me, it makes me speak in ways that are self-defeating, ego-driven, hypocritical. It's not a wave I can surf upon; it's a tsunami, and I'm the low-lying island. I don't think most of us are taught or take the time to learn what to do with our anger.

Taking part in activism can itself become a source of trauma and anger, through exposure to upsetting situations and information, experience of police brutality or movement infiltration, and the burnout from repeated, intense efforts that are not met in results. Those who have brought old trauma to their activism, whether consciously or not, can find it re-traumatising to take part in activism. All of this produces distress, grief and anger that needs an outlet. Grief, too, comes from the enormity of what activists feel we are taking on. It can be easier for an activist to express anger at the 'other side' than our own grief at the seeming impossibility of whatever we are trying to do to counter the suffering or death of other people and non-human species. When support is not provided to metabolise grief, as it rarely is in activist circles, or indeed in the culture at large, then activists can attack each other, in toxic movement cultures. We can turn on ourselves, in the form of mental and physical illness. And we can turn on our opponents, in the form of displaced rage. None of this anger is sustainable. It causes burnout, and risks activists' mental health.

The other problematic activist projection that I want to look at is righteousness. The word *righteousness* carries a specific meaning of defining

oneself as right against someone else who is wrong. The split within ourselves is at the root of this process. Activists focus on the wrongdoing of others, perhaps the other person's lifestyle choices, or their 'immoral' job in a company or other institution that the activist wants to change. But in focusing only on the wrongdoing of the other person, activists are pushing away awareness of the part of ourselves that can behave – that is behaving, perhaps – the same way. This could be the environmental activist whose consumption, in relative global terms, is not dissimilar from that of the business leaders she blames. I have been that person, leading an urban life in the UK with plenty of international plane travel while complaining about the bastards in charge. It could be the human rights or humanitarian worker who treats his colleagues in imperious, demeaning or abusive ways. I have worked with that person – indeed with more than one of them. And I have tried, too, not to be that person. I can't guarantee I was always successful: at my least awful I still have a sharp tongue and can be horribly impatient. As activists we want to identify with the 'good' and dissociate from the 'bad', as we define them. But the problem with the shadow is its tendency to emerge in unforeseen ways, erupting out at others. The activist and author Alastair McIntosh calls it 'shadowstrike'.[69]

When focusing on the external power structures we want to change, activists deflect attention from ourselves. Activism is inevitably about engaging with power, whether by directly opposing it, or constructing something new as an alternative to it. But as Laurie Michaelis, who coordinates Living Witness, a Quaker organisation, points out: 'The problem is partly about power, but that's putting it "out there" … it's hard with the power frame to really be looking at ourselves and our own role in the problem.' He has found the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas on cleanliness rituals in her book *Purity and Danger* helpful in recognising the purity thinking that activists are caught up in when we define ourselves against what we would like to change. She was observing how our tendency to impose separations, demarcate what is pure and punish transgressions is a human attempt to impose order on the inherently untidy business of life. It can only ever be an attempt, she said, because 'that which is negated is not thereby removed'.[70] There's a dualism, Michaelis continues, 'in the way we separate ourselves off from stuff that's unclean …. Recognising my own capacity for being there is an important part of learning to live with it in other people.'[71]

The purity thinking extends to activists' views of other activists. There is a rich literature within social movement studies looking at policing of activist identity and opinion, both on the borders of activist groups and within them. This can include ideas of what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' activist.[72] (It is also a rich subject for comedy, like Monty Python's 'People's Front of Judea' sketch in *Life of Brian*.) Purity thinking can have painful roots in real experience: deep pain and trauma, and years of feeling invisible and angry, can make people uncompromising. It can also be a way of drawing boundaries to make ourselves feel better. Frances Lee's essay, 'Excommunicate me from the church of social justice', went viral in 2017 as they pointed out the fundamentalist religious overtones of activist dogma in the queer, trans and leftist movements they were involved with. They confessed:

> I self-police what I say in activist spaces. … The amount of energy I spend demonstrating purity in order to stay in the good graces of a fast-moving activist community is enormous. Activists are some of the judgiest people I've ever met, myself included. There's so much wrongdoing in the world that we work to expose. And yet, grace and forgiveness are hard to come by in the broader community. At times, I have found myself performing activism more than doing activism. I'm exhausted, and I'm not even doing the real work I am committed to do. The quest for political purity is a treacherous distraction for well-intentioned activists.[73]

It can also prevent participation. The author and activist Jonathan Smucker, who was involved in the New York Occupy camp in 2011, observed how enthusiastic offers of participation and support from 'mainstream' public figures were rejected in case they sully the movement.[74] This is purity thinking in action. The split within each activist, between the good parts that they like and want to identify with, and the bad parts they hide from, is mirrored in the split between an activist group and everyone outside it.

On the other side of purity is disgust. Once activists have projected unwanted aspects of ourselves onto not-activists – or, indeed, other

activists who are taking a different approach – we can then view those other people with disgust, which is how humans react to something that is 'unclean'. I started noticing the disgust that would be triggered when people, institutions or even other activists transgress in areas that activists hold sacred. 'That's disgusting' is a response that I've often heard among campaigners when a problem is being discussed. It is rampant on social media, although that may be a social media thing as much as it is an activism thing. But it pre-dates social media. I saw it – and would take part in it until I started noticing it and cringed – during NGO campaign strategy meetings. They would have been convened to plan what we were going to do about a problem, and we did do some planning, but we'd also spend time talking enthusiastically about the awfulness of the people responsible, eventually declaring, 'let's get the bastards!' It sometimes went beyond that, into an obsession with particular characters: arms dealers, timber traders, warlords, tax-haven defenders, kleptocrats. It is not uncommon, in the type of morally infused investigative reporting I was doing, to be consumed with one person or company, not least because it takes such a punishingly long time, on limited resources, to find and stand up the information and sources you need in order to publish without ending up in a libel court. Now, though, I wonder what else we were up to.

What is disgust really about? On an evolutionary basis, it makes sense to recoil from bad smells and things that look unclean. But this adaptive response is also triggered by moral violations. Jonathan Haidt, an academic psychologist who studies morality and politics, suggests that the human mind perceives a vertical scale, with 'God' – or moral perfection – at the top, down through humans, animals, then monsters and evil at the bottom. So people feel moral disgust when they encounter or hear about people whose behaviour puts them low on this dimension. 'If we had no sense of disgust, I believe we would also have no sense of the sacred,' says Haidt. This idea that sanctity and disgust are on the same spectrum helps explain activists' common allergies and infatuations. But as Haidt warns, this 'ethic of divinity' has a dark side. 'Once you allow visceral feelings of disgust to guide your conception of what God wants, then minorities who trigger even a hint of disgust in the majority can be ostracised. The ethic of divinity is sometimes incompatible with compassion, egalitarianism, and basic human rights.'[75] Most obviously, Haidt is describing what happens

when populist or authoritarian intolerance takes hold, of which there are currently too many examples. But if we substitute activists' own sense of sacred ideas for 'God' in that sentence, it becomes clear how activists can start to judge our opponents with disgust, in a way that is hard to square with our professed values. It's something of a strategic error, too, to say the least. Do we really expect to win if we treat the people we are trying to influence with disgust? We see how easy it is as activists to lose our compassion for the humanity of the people who are doing things we disapprove of and how easy it is to dehumanise some people in order to humanise others.[76] We can also see how activists end up treating people in our own movements badly.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum, whose work elegantly unpicks the emotions underlying our supposedly rational thinking, digs deeper into the roots of disgust. In her account, disgust is what keeps us separate from our own animality and mortality, and is easily projected onto other people and groups. All forms of prejudice are different, but running through them, she says, is 'the intolerance of humanity in oneself'. The aspects of our humanity we find hardest to handle are our bodily vulnerability, our ongoing need for interdependence and cooperation with others and, behind these, our certain knowledge that we will die. We find them particularly hard to handle, she says, drawing on John Bowlby, Donald Winnicott and Ronald Fairbairn's foundational work on attachment and child development, if our vulnerability has not been appropriately met when we were infants.

What does this mean? The vulnerable infant doesn't know if its mother will respond to its cries. It wants to be omnipotent, to control her. With steady responsive care, a baby learns it doesn't have to be omnipotent to get its needs met, that others can be relied on, and this is the beginning of understanding that we are cooperative beings. It is the beginning of tolerating vulnerability. But if such care is not available, or if it is too controlling, the infant 'will cling, in later life, to its own omnipotence, demanding perfection in the self and refusing to tolerate imperfection either in [other people] or the inner world'. Nussbaum calls this 'primitive shame', and suggests we all have some form of it – some a lot more than others. 'One might say without exaggeration that the root of disgust is primitive shame, the unwillingness to be a needy animal,' she says. The

central challenge for society is therefore to produce people who can live with their humanity: 'surrendering omnipotence is essential to compassion'.[77]

Attachment theory tells us that our capacity to tolerate vulnerability in ourselves and others is shaped by the care we receive as babies. I hadn't even heard of attachment theory until I had my first baby and was baffled at the incompatible advice I received on how to manage this small and awake-all-night human. 'Hold her close, she needs you to soothe her,' on the one hand. 'Put her down, she needs to learn to stop crying by herself,' on the other. I started reading, and learned that the former is the view informed by decades of research into how babies form an 'attachment' with their primary carer that sets their template for being able to relate healthily to themselves – and thus, ultimately, to everyone else.[78] The latter – 'let her cry' – is the advice and practice that has been passed down generations of parents, a cascade of insecurity and reduced capacity to tolerate vulnerability. Larkin said it most simply: 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad'. The psychologist Oliver James used those same words as the title for a book that explains simply, even to the most sleep-addled, how a parent whose own attachment needs were not met in infancy may become triggered by their baby's overwhelming needs and find it challenging to meet them.[79] Now, there is the potential here for loss of nuance. For loss of recognition that exhausted parents who have to go to work or stay sane may, at some point, need to sleep-train their baby by leaving them to cry. For loss of recognition that being isolated on your own in a dwelling-place with a new baby is not how humans evolved to raise their young, and puts appalling mental pressure on that isolated parent.[80] There is great potential, too, for mother-blaming, which is another old story that needs to stop. I've written about this, and its political implications, in more detail elsewhere.[81]

The point is that our culture still does not systematically support parents in a way that recognises the primacy of attachment needs. Indeed, for more than a century it has continued to promote as fashionable, legitimate, morally necessary or economically essential those styles of infant care and childrearing that can work against the formation of healthy attachment.[82] Many of us, then, have insecure attachment styles in the way we relate to others. Even if a 'good-enough mother' creates the holding environment in which healthy attachment bonds are formed, a person's ability to tolerate

their own vulnerability, to not split it off and project it onto others, is always going to be contingent.[83] We are formed in the back and forth between our infant feeling of dependency and, with loving help, our slow mastery of ourselves. But our vulnerability is never eliminated.[84] Displacing our horror of this fact into disgust at others is always going to be a risk in the human condition, until each person can find a way to integrate their dependency and vulnerability into their full sense of self.

Nussbaum has used her thinking on disgust to great effect, arguing that disgust plays too great a part in the laws governing family life, sexual conduct, reproductive decisions and same-sex relationships.[85] I find her thinking a helpful reminder that the disgust which activists sometimes feel for people doing the things we don't like is part of a wider human problem. We are all likely to experience discomfort at our own vulnerability, a discomfort that is easily armoured and protected by disgust at others and the comforting hierarchy this creates. I was certainly making myself feel better when I sat in campaign meetings complaining about awful arms dealers or the bankers and lawyers who helped corrupt politicians steal the healthcare budget of their country. Environmental campaigners do it when they gripe about the people whose habits are creating more carbon dioxide emissions than their own.

It is easy to mistake what's going on when a mechanism for making ourselves feel better creates as strong a sensation as disgust does. But the fact that we feel disgust is not, in itself, an indication of our superiority. We are not necessarily better than anyone else just because we have different values, and it is useful to hold this awareness even when we think those values are worth fighting for. Nor is feeling disgust a confirmation that we have successfully differentiated between right and wrong. It is possible, with awareness and practice, to hold the view that someone is wrong and that the alternative to their view is worth fighting for, without being overwhelmed by disgust. Understanding disgust and how it fuels righteousness can help us, too, in starting to distinguish what kind of anger we are hearing – or using. Is it a principled and justified anger, or one which emerges from righteous disgust?

What 'not-activists' project

If splitting and projection are human, then of course activists are not the only ones doing it. The people who see activism and feel uncomfortable are busy projecting back. 'Taking up the identity of feminist has always meant weathering projections,' says the psychologist Jan Haaken in her study of the women's movement through a psychoanalytical lens.[86] What are the people who do not see themselves as activists projecting onto activists? What unacknowledged aspects of self are not-activists defending themselves against feeling or acknowledging?

One projection by not-activists can be their own unwanted emotion. In a culture that has until very recently repressed expression of emotions, particularly in the realms of the public sphere, work and politics, people who do express their feelings induce discomfort because they are doing the thing that we cannot. A parallel dynamic is at the heart of men's regular discomfort with female emotionality. If men receive cultural messages that emotional display (or dependency, or vulnerability) is not compatible with masculinity (and although things are changing, I still regularly see, in playgrounds, small boys being indoctrinated with this message by their parents), they can split it out of their self-image and project it onto the women in their lives.[87]

Activists are expressing the emotion about shared human and environmental problems that many might like to feel, but cannot allow themselves to. This operates strongly at work, where organisational cultures are still based on the principle that dispassionate behaviour and judgements are required in order to be effective, and that emotions will have a disruptive effect.[88] A person in their work role, encountering activists openly expressing feelings about the consequences of that work – and I have many experiences of being the passionate activist in the room – is likely to experience discomfort that can be relieved by projecting those feelings outwards.[89] This discomfort will be heightened if the job requires them to be engaged in activities that are in some way socially or environmentally destructive, as many jobs in a capitalist economy do. You have to switch your emotions off in those circumstances. It can be upsetting for people who have worked hard to avoid experiencing disturbing feelings about environmental destruction to

encounter activists who are refusing to do this; it suggests that they may have badly misdirected their own efforts.

Another not-activist projection is guilt at not acting in a way they feel they are being told to. The guilt can be quite direct: feeling bad because 'maybe there's something I should change and I can't be bothered', as one person put it. Or there is guilt that is more aware of itself. Another person said: 'I admire people who have the energy, and feel that I should have it. But I have an inkling in advance that it wouldn't solve the issues. If I take action, it will assuage guilt, but I see futility and exhaustion.' Guilt isn't an inevitable response to awareness of a problem and not acting on it. The not-acting can come from a belief that nothing can be done because nothing will work. Not-acting can come from unconscious psychological coping mechanisms to protect us from despair, as Renée Lertzman's work on people's responses to information about ecological catastrophe shows. The so-called 'value-action gap' between people's values and the action they often do not take is not a gap at all, she argues: it is a space filled with a tangle of anxieties, fears, losses, anticipations and desires.[90] And multiple defence strategies can be employed even to reject the incoming information, as Irene Bruna Seu's research into the strategies that people use to 'do denial' when they receive humanitarian appeals demonstrates.[91]

What I noticed, in my conversations with not-activists in which guilt came up, is that guilt may be tied up with agency, which is our personal feeling that we can be effective in the world. 'I just want somebody to tell me what to do,' said one self-described 'in-activist', who in the same conversation also said: 'Don't give me any more things I have to do. Either I comply, or I don't and I feel guilty.' Wanting somebody to tell you what to do, or resenting somebody telling you what to do – or, indeed, both – sounds like not having agency. Ruth Potts, one of the 'Stansted 15', who were convicted in December 2018 under anti-terrorism laws for lying down in front of a plane being used for deportations to prevent it taking off, defines activism as 'a realised sense of agency'.[92] Feeling agency makes us freer to act. Yet it is also part of the human condition to fear living our agency fully. Existential philosophy recognises this: Sartre's 'bad faith' is the self-deception that we do not have freedom to make choices. Existential psychotherapy recognises it, seeing freedom and the associated responsibility as one of four existential

'givens' that everyone has to grapple with (the others are death, isolation and meaninglessness).[93] We find complex ways to avoid acknowledging that we have freedom, that we could have done things another way.[94]

Tied in with all of these possible reactions to activism, there is also the dawning realisation of complicity in the problem that the activist is talking about. If the subject is ecological breakdown, then anyone in an industrialised consumer nation with an industrialised food system is ultimately complicit, although of course meat-eaters, regular car users or frequent flyers are consuming substantially more than others. Denial of that reality gets thrown back at the activist, as some of the reactions to Extinction Rebellion's protests have shown. Interviewed by local media, members of my local Extinction Rebellion group were repeatedly asked how they travel to protests: a car, even if shared, is jumped on as evidence to take them less seriously. It is easier to focus on the green campaigner's hypocrisy and fossil fuel-powered travel habits than our own, though this tendency has been encouraged by long-standing efforts, from those with most to lose from pro-environmental action, to frame green questions as moral issues of individual consumption rather than structural ones requiring concerted political action.

Then there are problems that specific groups of people can be complicit in: those who are 'in power' in some way. Their reactions here depend on who is confronting them. An activist who could in other respects be just 'like them', who might, if they hadn't reacted against their context to try to change it, be doing the same job as them – this activist, merely by *being* an activist, is making an implicit judgement about what the other person is doing in their work, a judgement that the other person may feel sensitive about. The judgement can be felt even before the activist opens their mouth; it is announced by their very presence, which can be enough to trigger a defensive reaction. The reaction is stronger, of course, if the activist does make their judgement explicitly known. In this light, I now wonder about the bankers, lawyers, oil company executives and IMF functionaries I was beseeching to change their ways, on behalf, so I believed, of the citizens of African countries who were adversely affected by their activities. Those encounters were frequently awkward and defensive, occasionally stunningly so. My view at the time was that these were people who had the

same opportunities as me, attended similar universities, but had taken this 'wrong' turn and ended up on the wrong side. My judgement of them was, I now think, palpable. I have heard, since, from people in similar positions of power on different issues that they find the righteous judgement of activists on the 'other side' extremely uncomfortable, and unlikely to make them shift their views.

And then there is the privileged person who is confronted by an activist who is naming their complicity in systems of oppression that the activist is personally suffering. I have observed, in men I know, their discomfort when women are speaking about men's complicity in ongoing systems of male dominance. I have felt, as a white woman, the discomfort that white people can experience when people of colour are speaking about white complicity in ongoing racism, or when I read the work of women of colour such as Reni Eddo-Lodge and Guilaine Kinouani, who write about it.[95] This discomfort can go further than discomfort, than reactivity; it can become resistance, a resistance that is thrown back at the activist's initial work of resistance. The feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, who resigned her post at Goldsmiths, University of London, at its failure to tackle a culture of sexual harassment, sees blaming the messenger – the activist – as a way for nothing to change. Those who describe a problem *become* the problem. Their reactions to the problem become the issue at hand. Writing about feminism, and particularly being a feminist of colour, she describes the multiple patterns of reactivity that the person who protests experiences:

> When you speak of something as being wrong, you end up being in the wrong all over again. The sensation of being wronged can thus end up magnified: you feel wronged by being perceived as in the wrong just for pointing out something is wrong. It is frustrating! And then your frustration can be taken as evidence of your frustration, that you speak this way, about this or that, because you are frustrated. It is frustrating to be heard as frustrated; it can make you angry that you are heard as angry. Or if you are angry about something and you are heard as an angry person (an angry black feminist or an angry woman of colour) then what you are angry about

'complaint'

> disappears, which can make you feel even angrier …
> We are dismissed as emotional. It is enough to make you emotional.[96]

Ahmed is writing here about the experiences of women of colour raising complaints about diversity and equality. These are activists who are fighting for their lives. In her view, a focus on the purported wrongs of the activist is an old story, a way of not listening to uncomfortable truths. There are reasons why people who are not activists are reacting to activists, and they go to the heart of why activism is still needed: we are talking about stories that are not yet over. To those who are reacting to the activist pointing out ongoing problems, this should be 'over': the discriminatory laws have gone. Yet discrimination and prejudice continue; new discriminatory and prejudicial legislation continues to appear. 'You are asked to get over it, as if what stops it being over is that you are not over it,' says Ahmed.[97] Those who react to the people pointing out the problem may still be implicated in the problem, may be helping to constitute the problem as it still stands. Activism may be resistance against power, but there is much resistance to the truths being named by activists.

In the psychological literature on threat and coping, derogation of the messenger is a way to deny responsibility and protect ourselves from the threat being posed to our self-identity as a good person. Both the method and consequence of this defensive mechanism is to deny responsibility, shift blame and reinforce in-group/out-group distinctions.[98] When an activist is fighting for liberation from an oppression, their message can be uncomfortable to those who may be complicit in that oppression by benefiting from it, whether currently or historically. And it is uncomfortable in a very particular way to those who like to think they are not complicit, who think they are part of the solution. Some of the men who are most scratchy when women use the word 'patriarchy' consider themselves supportive of gender equality. White 'progressives', who find so hard the suggestion that they are complicit in racism, believe in racial equality. Men who have benefited from patriarchy often don't enjoy being reminded of it. The defensiveness about race can be 'white fragility': an inability to tolerate the slightest 'racial stress' – even in the form of difficult conversations – in a culture that protects white people from having to think about race.[99] To that

inability is added the human tendency to reject vulnerability in ourselves. Difficult conversations can trigger, in white people, uncomfortable feelings about the unacknowledged vulnerability in them, which has been hiding behind a dominant social status and has benefited from continuing to be projected onto others.[100] If your whiteness or your maleness – or both – makes you feel implicitly or unconsciously superior, then it will be hard to be reminded, by conversations about racism or patriarchy, of your real and human vulnerability. The result is defensiveness, denial and a complete inability to listen.

Awareness of privilege, and guilt about it, may have already driven people to activism themselves: there is a truth in the cliché of 'middle-class guilt'. Many activist organisations are trying consciously to help participants become aware of their own privilege. But a broader point here is that even activists can be triggered by activists, though our reactivity may have a different flavour to the reactivity of the 'not-activist' I described earlier. Privileged-activist guilt can then be displaced – projected – onto those activists' 'targets', and so the dance continues. It was terribly convenient for us, white middle-class people working for a well-funded NGO, to demonise as 'the bastards' those arms dealers, oil companies and timber traders who were trashing human rights and the environment so obviously. It was much easier to do this than seriously to question our own consumption patterns, flying habits and cumulative historical benefit from misery elsewhere, let alone the fact that we were still, by having paid NGO jobs, benefiting from global inequality while trying to change it.

Working alongside all these projections is the shared cultural baggage about activists that is in place before an activist even appears on the scene in a current scenario. It can start early in life, and quickly become solidified. Laurence Cox, an activist and scholar of activism, spoke of how people's first encounter with activists will set their view of such people: 'it's their peers in college who were working out their own identity stuff, and in quite destructive ways, it was pretty visible. You decided at that point, no, I'm into sports, or that's such a nerdy loser thing to do, or whatever particular set of clichés are around it at the time.'[101] Strong cultural ideas about activism, whether negative or hero-worshipping, are also spread by the media. The projections help to create an activist.

Valeria Pecorelli, another activist and scholar, notes how these ideas can trap activists in certain ideas of activism if they are not aware of the risk. 'A "shabby" outfit, a radical sentence on a red t-shirt does not transform an individual into an activist,' she writes.[102] But conversely, these ideas and images condition the reactions that not-activists will have each time they encounter an activist. I was told a story from the Occupy camp in Bath in 2011, in which the teller, who was participating in the camp, was shouted at by a young man who yelled 'Get a job!' He was invited to come and sit down and talk, and asked why he shouted those words. He was 16, and he started crying. 'I don't know why,' he confessed. 'It was just what everyone else was saying. You're a nice bloke.' He had been conditioned to assume, from the shabby visuals of the Occupy camp, certain things about the people in it.

The creation of activists and not-activists

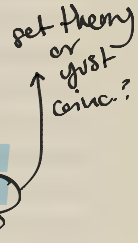
Perceptions of how activists are, what activism is like, arise inseparably from these negative feelings that are triggered by activism. Reactivity to hypocrisy, righteousness and emotionality may have an objective-observation component: activists really are doing those things. And at the same time, some of this will be not-activist baggage, projected onto the activist. So not-activists are projecting their discomfort about what activists are saying about the problem, their own sense of implication and guilt, their powerlessness and their insecurity about not knowing enough about the issue (another thing that came up in my conversations) back onto the activists. But meanwhile the activists are projecting our own implication in the problem, our fury, our insecurity and disgust, onto the not-activists. At the centre of this interaction is the creation of two categories: an activist, and a not-activist. They seem ontologically separate categories – two different things.[103] But they are bound together by the way that they create each other, are constituted against each other.

→ Neurotypical / Neurodivergent as similarly emerging

I have found psychoanalytic thinking helpful in understanding what might be happening here. Lynne Layton, a psychoanalyst, describes how:

[[Burnout]]

> when splitting occurs, each side of the polarity becomes a monstrous version of whatever it once was: when autonomy and dependence are split (and gendered, or raced, or classed), for example, we find that autonomy is lived as omnipotence and dependence as helplessness, clingy and hostile. We also know that whatever is split off continues to haunt the psyche; although the split polarities may seem independent of one another – and are constituted to seem so – they, in fact, live off each other alternately as host and as parasite. The form taken by the interdependence of the poles is thus as monstrous as each pole itself, monstrous because it is a form built on the repudiation of the actual interdependence of the sets of human attributes that were artificially divided in the first place.[104]



What does this mean in practice? Layton is saying that if we push away the side of ourselves that is dependent, we become excessively identified with our independence. If we push away our autonomy, we will become over-dependent on others. And when we do this, whatever it is that we have pushed out of conscious sight has not in fact gone away. It is hidden in us, and we are drawn to it in other people. The unwanted aspect 'appears' in someone else. Our strong identification with the aspect of ourselves that we can live with works only in relationship – entangled – with what is hidden. This entangled relationship, both with the hidden aspect within ourselves, and the visible manifestation of it in other people we encounter, will be difficult.

I have come to think that something like this, each side holding some characteristics of the other, is what is happening in the creation of activists and not-activists. Each side of the activist/not-activist polarity becomes a 'monstrous' version of what it was. Each needs the other in order to exist: there's a mutual fascination. So the activist is shouty, passionate, righteous, busy and frequently burns out. The not-activist is passive; they don't need to do anything because the activist is so busy doing it. The activist needs the not-activist to blame and shout at, to feel superior against, to define herself against as an activist. The not-activist needs the activist to do the work of

speaking up on issues they care about, though they may criticise the way in which the activist does it. Action and inaction have become polarised, and located in different people. We each need the other to receive our own projections. So both the activist and not-activist are entangled with the other, different as they both think they are. There is no activism that is not entangled with the people it is trying to convince or change. And there is no reaction to activism that has not got something of the activist in it.

Meanwhile, each are guarded, by our own defences, against observing what is going on. Activist busyness can be a defence against admitting lack of agency – or, in other words, powerlessness. Joanna Macy observes that we fear admitting powerlessness against the enormity of the problems because it might cause us to collapse.[105] Not-activist passivity and non-engagement can be a defence against the psychological threat of acknowledging the enormity of the problems.[106] But in sending out and receiving these projections, both forget the 'sets of human attributes that were artificially divided in the first place' – the agency and capacity to act, the potential to participate in the shared social space in some way or another, that is possessed by everyone.

One of the apparent paradoxes of 'progressive' activism is how it can appear to preach tolerance of all diversity, except those who do not agree with its view. Viewed through a lens of unconscious motivation, however, the paradox dissolves.[107] Unconscious responses, and unwitting displacement onto others of the parts of ourselves that are uncomfortably close to those we criticise, help to explain activist reactivity towards not-activists. It is hard for us to see what we are up to. But likewise, the reactivity of not-activists towards activists can come from an unacknowledged place in which all manner of denial, defences and guilt might lie.

Any projection is a form of defence. We are defending ourselves against feelings, experiences and parts of ourselves that we cannot bear to acknowledge, whether good or bad. Here is Toni Morrison, whose novels repeatedly explore the link between projection and exploitation; how domination cannot happen without the oppressor splitting off parts of themselves – vulnerability and violence included – and projecting those parts onto others.[108] I have yet to find better words on the phenomenon

than hers. Describing how she learned to withdraw the projections she had made onto a beguiling woman she once met briefly, she says that she came 'to understand that I was longing for and missing some aspect of myself, and that there are no strangers. There are only versions of ourselves, many of which we have not embraced, most of which we wish to protect ourselves from.' The alarm we feel at being confronted with unacknowledged parts of ourselves 'makes us reject the figure and the emotions it provokes' and 'makes us want to own, govern, and administrate the Other.' But in doing so, she says, 'we deny her personhood, the specific individuality we insist upon for ourselves'.[109]

'There are only versions of ourselves, many of which we have not embraced.' The activist may not have embraced the side of themselves that is defensive, unsure and terrified of doing nothing in case the feelings that all this activity and noise are keeping at bay begin to surge. The not-activist may not have embraced the side of themselves that can speak out and take action. Both, as is human, may be avoiding acknowledging their own vulnerability in the face of a very uncertain world. Both, perhaps, could be more effective in the world if they were able to acknowledge that they hold some attributes of the other.

Interesting ch - I can see it being easy to oversimplify as "both sides bought" but then perhaps that is because that's how a pre-burnout self would approach it.

I have seen a lot of examples in myself and the various activist circles that can be interpreted through this lens, and I think the emphasis of commonality and shared fears, Self-Un-Other is a useful lens, as is the attachment stuff.