Introduction

I WENT ON some anti-globalisation marches and protests in 2000 and 2001, dug up Parliament Square in guerrilla-gardening efforts, got kettled by the police and spent my holidays volunteering in an off-grid permaculture community, but I didn't call myself an activist.[3] These were things I was doing in my spare time in my twenties, to feed a growing and experimental sense of what my real values might be. I didn't organise my identity around 'activism' until I stopped the work as a newspaper journalist that I'd recently trained for and began a job as a professional campaigner at Amnesty International.

That's when the reactions began: discomfort, arguments, devil's advocacy, admiration. People were never neutral. There are jobs that, when you are asked that very British question, 'so what do you do?' provoke an 'oh, right' answer, intonation dropping at the end to indicate a conversation over. And

there are jobs that elicit the 'oh, really?' upwards-rising reaction, that opens the way to further questions, not always comfortable ones. Campaigning is one of those. It wasn't only the fact of what I was doing that provoked reactions, however. It was also the way I spoke about my work, the intensity of my evident passion. I would get so wound up with righteous fury, speaking so fast and sharply about the people who defended or profited from the bad things I wanted to change, that colleagues, friends and family would regularly be prompted to ask, 'are you ok?' And these were people who knew me, who cared enough to ask. My suspicion is that many of the people I was trying to persuade directly were switching off rather than have to deal with the frenetic force of my arguments.

I used to assume that my speed, forcefulness and fury were part of the territory. I didn't question why I was launching into such frantic behaviour when I went into activist mode, in a way that went far beyond the necessary adrenaline requirements to speak out in public. I thought other people were the problem. I thought that in resisting my rage, they were resisting the political views that lay behind my rage. I assumed that the other problems I noticed in activist circles were part of the territory too: campaigners spending energy fighting among themselves, campaigners treating each other terribly, and endemic burnout.

This is just how it is, activists themselves say. We get emotional and shouty and frantic because it is important and urgent, and we care so much. Our campaigning organisations are badly run and under-resourced, they don't treat staff and volunteers well, lots of people burn out, because we are all so passionate and focused on our task. And that is just how activists are, say observers from outside. They're hypocritical, hysterical, they're often fighting each other, they think they are doing it for love and care but give them any power and they'll be trying to control us all. The fear that activism can lead to the gulag or the guillotine is real: history is full of revolutionaries who became tyrants.

These are bad outcomes, whether on the grand scale of political tyranny or the localised one of toxic working environments that prevent effective work being done. Why do people with good intentions create bad outcomes?[v] The simple answer is that activists are human, just like everyone else. We

do not have all the answers, and are as likely as anyone else to shout, to succumb to fear and violence, to try to control others. There is of course a truth in this. Christians might call it sin, which the author Francis Spufford describes, in turn, as 'the human propensity to fuck things up'.[1] I fuck things up regularly, and I am happy to acknowledge our flawed humanity. But to accept this answer without further enquiry is to accept things as they are. And I am an activist; accepting things as they are is *not* what I do.

I wrote this book to explore a question that had troubled me through two decades of campaigning: why are activists unconsciously replicating so many aspects of the systems we don't want? Behind all my busyness and urgency was an insistent feeling that there was something about the 'inside' of activism, its inner life, that we weren't attending to. It was something about our own emotional lives and how our work was affected by our feelings about it and why we were doing it. And it was something about the inner lives of the people we were trying to influence, with questions about the extent to which their behaviour would really be altered by, for example, a new law that restricted their choices. I couldn't put much of this unease into words, though I knew I wanted to ask other activists whether they were troubled by similar feelings of unease. It turned out that many of them were.

I paused my activist busyness and started asking questions about what I had been doing, and these queries about the 'inside' of activism started to change shape. They brought me face to face with our own deep implication in the problems we want to fix. So while I started off thinking that my question was about tracking down and illuminating the inner life of activism that was missing in all of our non-stop action, my conversations with other campaigners, my reading and reflecting on my own experiences led me, inexorably, to seeing how entangled we are. How the damage that is caused by the systems we are trying to change runs through us too.

That activists are part of what we are trying to change, and that the problems frequently appear in us, too, appears on the one hand to be terribly obvious. Yet at the same time it can be hard to grasp. It certainly took me a long time to grasp. It doesn't help that some of the *ways* in which we are entangled – by being subject to the dominant culture's way

of seeing things, for example – help to obscure the *depth* to which we are entangled. 'You're off changing the world, then,' people would remark to me when I talked about my work. Or sometimes, for those with an even more inflated idea of what activists might be up to, 'you're off *saving* the world'. It is often just a turn of phrase, but it is revealing. The grammatical structure of that sentence uncovers the heart of the problem. The activist is the subject, and the world is the object. In my experience, activists do not claim to be 'saving' the world or 'changing' the world as often as other people describe us as trying to do so. Nonetheless, activists usually share this implicit view that the 'world' is separate to 'us', and that what needs changing is something or someone 'over there': something that is 'not us'.

To think like this is to share the same deep worldview that created the problems activists are trying to tackle. It is the worldview of separation, dominance and exceptionalism (the latter being the assumption that you, your group, your way of thinking or being is special and therefore superior) that has led to ecological destruction and the subjugation of peoples and other species. However we describe it, this worldview involves a narrowing of perception, a closing down to what we might otherwise see and feel. In the terms of complex adaptive systems theory, which challenges simplistic views of cause and effect,[8] our narrow perception does not allow us to see how the world is made of un-ordered interconnections, complexity and non-linear causality. In the terms of deep ecology, it prevents us understanding how we are embedded in the web of life, not above it. In spiritual terms, this limited perception keeps us from recognising the fundamental ground of our being: our connection to all else that is. And in the terms of depth psychology, it keeps us from acknowledging that we are split and that we project what we disown in ourselves onto others. It is of course very useful, however, this narrowed perception that structures 'normal' reality, in keeping us chained to business as usual.

So this book is called *The Entangled Activist* because it is about how activists are always entangled in the problems we are trying to fix or change, whether we realise it or not. It is about how we are entangled, what and who we're entangled with, why it matters and what we can do when we realise it.

We are entangled activists when we campaign for fossil fuels to stay in the ground to prevent climate change while also living a life whose food supplies and other practicalities almost inevitably depend on those fuels. We are entangled activists when we are trying to protect people from harmful exploitation while we continue to benefit from the political and economic systems that cause the harm. These are forms of entanglement that we might already recognise: entanglements in the moral thickets of industrialised consumer life.

But there are entanglements that are harder to perceive, too. We are entangled activists when we are talking about human rights and yet are treating other people – colleagues, collaborators or opponents - horribly. We are entangled activists when we are burning out in exhaustion from working so endlessly to stop an endless-growth economy from burning out the planet we live on. We are entangled activists when we are shouting loudly to 'save' others from harm while, in doing so, placating our own unacknowledged emotional needs for recognition and security. We are entangled activists when we are getting a kick out of attacking and criticising the people on the 'other side' who we think have got it so wrong. And we are entangled activists when our need to be so right and to sound so certain about the problem we're talking about – and it does feel good to sound certain and right in such a confusing world – prevents us being honest about the complexity of our own position.

What are we entangled in? We are entangled in the stories that our culture tells about heroes and saviours, and hard work, and the value of doing over being. We are entangled in the oppressive effects of systems of power upon us, whether we have suffered from them or benefited from them or both, and whether or not we can perceive that there are other more generative forms of power that are based in partnership rather than dominance. We are entangled in the habits and ways of being that are normalised in a culture where truly feeling – our own pain, and that of human and non-human others – is numbed and discouraged.

All of these entanglements affect how we try to achieve change. We may be projecting unwanted aspects of ourselves onto the people we are busy disagreeing with, and they may be doing the same onto us in return. We

may think it is the 'systems', external to us, that need changing, when the problems we are tackling run through us too. And many of the methods we think could work emerge from the same mindsets that caused the problems. But often we don't realise it. I had been a campaigner for 15 years and I didn't.

I've worked on successful campaigns for new international treaties, and launched a prizewinning campaign that has since resulted in changes to the law in dozens of countries. I know how to investigate the misdeeds of banks, oil companies and governments, how to get a story onto the front page of a newspaper, how to get policies changed, and how to bring together global coalitions of support around an issue. And after blocking the road with Extinction Rebellion, I know what the inside of a police cell feels like. I care about activism deeply, have spent much of my adult life doing it, and intend to continue. Yet, through my enquiry, I have come to believe that we need to understand activism better. Not so much what it does or does not achieve in the world – there is already plenty of discussion and writing about that. This is about better understanding activism from the inside, in terms of how it is experienced – both by those who do it and by those who receive it. These questions need airing because activism is not well served if they remain subterranean. If we can look more honestly at what goes on behind our desire to change the world, we are more likely to be able to reach a wiser form of activism that goes beyond our own projections and emotional needs, and that avoids the self-defeating consequences that occur when our righteousness and need to be right overwhelm the subject of the conversation.

But the question that arises then, is: what on earth do we do now? What do we do when we realise we are entangled? Acknowledging entanglement could lead to despair. (Which is, of course, why activists don't like thinking about it. Despair is not good for motivation.) If the problems go that deep, if they run through all of us, then what hope is there of changing them? It can sound like we are being asked to change human nature. I choose to see it the other way. If we are so entangled that the problems run through us too, then we know where to start: with ourselves. And in saying this, I am not proposing that activists only retreat to the meditation cushion. Many activists sense that personal transformation alone is insufficient when the

problems are structural, yet we also sense that carrying on as we have been, replicating the habits of the dominant culture until we repeatedly burn out, is not going to work either.

We can do both reflection and action, as long as we acknowledge that the reflection may profoundly alter what we think the task of the action is. Appreciating the depth of our own entanglement is a useful guide to what needs doing. Yes, it is unchangeable that we humans have some psychological habits, like projection and scapegoating, which, mishandled in the collective, have negative social consequences. But the reverse is also true: many of the psychological and spiritual difficulties that we experience as individuals arise from the ill effects of an unhealthy culture upon us. If activists are able to notice what is unhealthy about our own ways of being, we have a compass that points to what needs to shift in the wider culture.

And the world needs activism more than ever. Old abuses and injustices that have never gone away are still causing pain and difficulty, while new dangers continue to emerge. Even when ecological catastrophe isn't in the foreground of what campaigners are talking about, it is now always somewhere close by. Whatever happens to the earth and to us as humans living on it, I don't think we will ever have a human world where activism is not needed. Even if we can mitigate the worst climate change outcomes, human nature – indeed, every human – contains good and bad. We do not reach utopia. Activism is the constant task of trying to mitigate against the worst of what we humans are capable of, while orienting our societies towards the flourishing of the best.

So this book is for anyone who thinks they are doing activism. It's for anyone who is trying to make things better but doesn't call it activism. And it's for anyone who is interested in the world being better than it currently is, but who really doesn't want to be an activist. I say that because it's hard to define what counts as activism and what doesn't: such divisions are often part of the problem that this book describes. Activism is trying to do something to make the world better, whether noisily or quietly, on our own or with others. It can be done in our spare time in our community or as a job with a professional organisation. It can be on a small local issue or as part of a national or global movement. It can be speaking out in one

moment, or the commitment of a lifetime. It can be done through one-on-one acts of supporting others or through big performances of resistance and confrontation, along with everything else that lies in between.

While I have been thinking about how deeply my activism is entangled, I have also continued to be involved in it. I have tried to 'stay with the trouble', to borrow Donna Haraway's phrase.[9] Lying in the road in the dark with Extinction Rebellion, then spending a night in a police cell and a morning in court are opportunities to reflect on the meaning and community generated by such a powerful experience of agency, even while it alienates some of those it is trying to speak to. A local constituency meeting at which feelings are running high about how best to prevent votes for the Conservative candidate when the anti-Tory vote is profoundly split between Labour and the Lib Dems is an opportunity to observe, close-up, the enormous difficulty of holding and articulating passionate views while still communicating persuasively with those who do not share them. All of us in that hall, the week before the 2019 general election, had the same goal: to prevent a Tory MP being returned. Yet one party activist after another succumbed to urgent shouting, oppositional moralising and exhortations that took no account of the likelihood that their listeners would have some views in common, or of what this was doing to everyone's nervous systems. It wasn't the only reason we failed and now have another Tory MP: I live in a conservative rural area. But in terms of my enquiry, it does make me question the effectiveness of this approach.

I have done the same, so many times: failed to see that the starting place does not have to be me and my views; failed to see that starting with me and my pressing desire to speak may not be the best route to the fairer world I want to help create. I am still not yet always able to stop myself doing it. I am quick to anger, quick to find words ready formed in my mouth, words which want to come out. But now I observe it happening in others and I see its limitations. I have also, while writing this book, continued to do my other job: sharing with my husband the job of looking after our two small children, including through the pressure cooker of spring 2020's coronavirus lockdown and school closures. When the mood is turning

fractious, as it so often does when tea is still half an hour from being on the table. I have begun to observe, in my own nervous system, the switch from calm functioning to escalation. I have observed the strength of my instinctive desire to exert forceful control when things feel uncomfortable and I am moving into that quick-fire heightened state. I have observed the difference in outcome, in the reaction of these small, tired people to the way that I am comporting myself, when I can find a way to drop back down into calm functioning and not act or speak from what I call 'the heightened place'. These are valuable daily opportunities to reflect on where the stridency in activism can come from and to consider the risk of unleashing the inner authoritarian in all of us.

So this book has an autoethnographical aspect: it is an analysis of personal experience in order to help understand a cultural experience.[10] That cultural experience is the attempt to bring positive change while being part of the unhealthy culture that needs changing. Most of the activists I interviewed were in the UK, though I also spoke to people from Brazil, Ethiopia, Germany, Uganda and the US. Some worked in NGOs, some in community initiatives. These interviews did not span every issue that activists work on, nor every context in which they work, and I will inevitably have heard their experiences through the filter of my own, however openly I have tried to listen.

I am talking, unless I say otherwise, about activism in the UK. Some of it may be applicable in other countries and I look forward to conversations about what resonates and where. Throughout this book, when I say 'we' it is deliberate: unless I specify otherwise, I mean anyone who thinks they are doing activism, anyone who thinks they are working for positive change in the world whether or not they call themselves an activist, and anyone who is thinking about making the world more just. Yet even within the context of the UK, I am making inevitable generalisations about who 'activists' are. There are times when I am painting in broad strokes and, at any point, I may not be speaking for everyone who considers themselves to be doing activism. I am willing to take this risk, for which I apologise in advance, because I think there are some things that are worth saying about activism as a phenomenon. (Nor, indeed, am I speaking for right-wing activism, though perhaps some of my observations might apply to it.)

That said, if I mean specific types of activists, or activists in specific places or engaging in specific behaviours, I say so. I acknowledge the profound differences between fighting for our lives, with lived experience of the problem that we are campaigning on, and intervening on principles of justice because we want to help others. The difficulties that arise when activists coming from these different starting points encounter each other are at the core of many of the entanglements in this book. One of the many challenges in writing this book was the articulation and differentiation of its 'voice'. Who is it that I am speaking for when I say 'we'? The challenge was to be clear when (a) I am speaking for myself, when (b) I am speaking for other people like me who have approached activism, however unconsciously, from a white-saviour perspective, when (c) I am speaking more broadly for anyone who is trying to do activism or is thinking about it, and when (d) I am speaking about our universal human nature.

The universalising tendency which presumes that the experiences of one's own 'we' are more worthy of attention, or can encompass and speak for the experiences of anyone else's 'we', is one of the foundational assumptions of whiteness. And as a white woman, whiteness has been foundational to my experiences, upbringing, education and perspectives. I have learned, through the process of writing this book, that whiteness is not, as I used to think, 'only' a suite of implicitly held racist assumptions and a related tendency towards defensiveness and fragility when confronted with evidence of them. Whiteness encompasses, at its broadest, an unconscious approach to perception, epistemology (how we know what we know), our approach to our work, and our encounters with everyone we meet. It underpins the dominant culture in which I'm entangled, as I explore throughout the book. This means that it doesn't only affect how white people relate to people of colour. I have noticed, for example, how the lessons that I am learning about the dominance tendencies and subject–object perceptions of whiteness are applicable, in certain ways, to class privilege and prejudice, which remains a live issue in many types of helping-others activism and politics within the UK.

I would not have been able to 'see' aspects of the systems of power I want to change – those aspects in which I am particularly entangled by my own starting position of being white and middle class – without learning

from the writing of activists and thinkers who have been marginalised by those systems and can thus see them more clearly from 'outside'. I'm profoundly grateful to all of the activists and thinkers whose work informs my explorations of my own entanglement, perhaps especially to Black feminists such as Audre Lorde, who raised these same issues that I have only now been waking up to, in the years before I was born. The subtitle of this book comes from Lorde's essay, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', and I am using it both because of its astuteness and relevance, and also to pay tribute to the legacies of critical thinking about activism on which I am drawing. I encountered Lorde's essay in the months when I was first allowing myself to think about the limitations of the activism I had been doing. Her words were from a speech criticising white feminism and its reinforcement of racism, and they remain applicable not only to that ongoing problem but to any form of activism that cannot perceive what it is reinforcing.[1] They rang through me, and grew in profundity and resonance throughout my enquiry, throughout my realisations of how I had repeatedly been wielding the master's tools, had sometimes myself been one of those tools, and throughout my slow process of learning to recognise some of them.

The Entangled Activist begins, then, with how I stopped doing the form of activism that I had been absorbed in for so long. Chapter 1 describes my experiences in campaigning, my growing unease with my job at an NGO, and the questions that were forming as I decided to turn away from it. Chapter 2 offers several answers to the question of 'why?' Why should we even stop to think about how we approach activism, when the tasks activism takes on such as halting ecological destruction, and threats to democracy and justice are so very urgent? Chapter 3 introduces some of my own entanglements, to open up the topic of how our starting points affect the ways in which we try to create change.

The following two chapters look underneath the surface of classic activist behaviours. Chapter 4 explores how activists are entangled with our opponents. It makes the case for examining our unconscious motivations, and looks at what lies underneath the projections that often occur, in both directions, when an activist speaks. From the activists: anger and righteousness. From their audience or opponent: guilt and resistance.

Chapter 5 investigates three further activist tendencies: trying to carry the world on our shoulders, saviour heroics and status-chasing.

Part 2 then explores more deeply what it is that we are entangled with. Chapter 6 goes in search of an appropriate language which we can use to speak about the overarching framework of unconsciously held ideas and assumptions that condition our thinking and actions. How do we describe what it is that has to change if we too are part of what has to change? That it is hard to find the right words is an indication of the problem: we are not accustomed to seeing ourselves as part of the world. Chapter 7 is about our entanglement in the stories of our culture and how we react to them. Activists may develop a critical stance on some aspects of a story, while other aspects hold them firmly, which leads to some of the contradictions. I look at what happens when activists try to disentangle themselves from an ideology.

Disentangling ourselves from stories and ideology is, however, a tall order when stories have been made concrete in the institutions that govern our lives. Chapter 8 looks at the ways in which activists are entangled in the practical effects of the political and economic structures they are trying to change. These can alter activists' strategies, behaviours and even perceptions. Responding to the challenge of decolonial thinking, I reflect on my experiences of doing forms of activism that try to 'help'. Chapter 9 turns back to our inner worlds, and the deep ways that we have been shaped, at the level of our nervous systems, by the effects on us of the systems that we are trying to change. I introduce trauma-informed thinking, which allows us to see collective cultural patterns, including unhealthy habits that shape activism, in a new light.

Chapter 10 explores activist 'over-forcefulness', which is what can result when activists sense the depth of the wounds in themselves and at the heart of the dominant culture and launch themselves with heightened efforts over the gap between how things are and how they want them to be. Other sources of forcefulness include the need for certainty and the need for meaning, human traits that are heightened by the effects of the systems that activists are trying to change.

Part 3 is about next steps and the future. We are not going to disentangle ourselves from the problems we are working on. But we can become more aware of our entanglements. This allows us to start our activism in a different place, and Chapter 11 offers some outlines of what this different place feels like. It is an approach to activism that includes time for stillness, embodied practice, reflection and self-honesty.

The book ends with some questions for entangled activists to use in their own reflections. If, by this point, I have encouraged any reader to think differently about how they engage with the problems of the world, whether or not they call themselves an activist, then I will be pleased.