Activism and Objectivity in Political Research

Michael L. Frazer

There are two opposed views on the proper relationship between academic research and political activism. The first argues that academics who study politics must remain objective, hence precluding activism. The second argues that academics can and should also be political activists, hence precluding scholarly objectivity. This article argues against an assumption shared by these otherwise opposing positions: that activism and objectivity are incompatible. It conceptually identifies and then normatively defends a form of objectivity characterized by active engagement with evidence that is what Max Weber calls "inconvenient" for one's existing beliefs and commitments. Far from being incompatible with political activism, this form of objectivity is essential to its success. Since scholars, activists, and scholar-activists alike would all benefit from active engagement with inconvenient evidence, I conclude that academic institutions should promote this form of objectivity among both activist and non-activist scholars, while political organizations should promote the same virtue among both academic and non-academic activists.

How should academics conducting research on politically salient topics relate to the struggles faced by political actors? Should we practice what Ypi (2012) calls "activist political theory," making common cause with "avant-garde" movements in the "emancipatory task" of making the world a freer, better place? Or is the ethically proper relationship between political research and political practice more indirect? Might political activism prevent us from fulfilling our proper professional role, as van der Vossen (2015) argues?

Those who are opposed to scholarly activism typically argue that academics need to remain neutral, impartial, or objective in some way, and assume that doing so is incompatible with activism. Defenders of scholarly activism might be tempted to grant this claim of incompatibility. While their opponents choose objectivity over activism, and they choose activism over objectivity, both may assume that the two cannot go together. My goal in this article will be to refute this shared assumption, demonstrating the compatibility of activism and at least one important form of scholarly objectivity.

The type of objectivity that I will defend does not imply neutrality; to the contrary, the two are incompatible. And while this form of objectivity is compatible with impartiality, it does not require it; it is also compatible with partiality, including strong partisan loyalty.

My preferred form of objectivity involves actively seeking evidence that is what Max Weber (1946, 147) called "inconvenient" for one's pre-existing commitments. Engaging with inconvenient evidence is important in many spheres of human activity, including both impartial and activist scholarship, as well as both scholarly and non-scholarly activism. Some scholars may need to maintain objectivity not because it will keep them away from politics, but because the political causes that they support need the kind of objectivity that they can provide. Politically impartial scholars will have other reasons to practice the virtue, and the university has good reasons to encourage objectivity among researchers of both kinds.

This article is divided into two main sections. The first identifies exactly what sort of objectivity I will be defending as appropriate for political research, including both the social-scientific study of politics (political science, political economy, political sociology, and the like) and humanistic political studies (normative political theory, political philosophy, the history of political thought, and the like). Once this form of objectivity is identified conceptually, the second section of the paper is then devoted to defending it normatively as a

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morally and instrumentally important virtue for scholar-activists, non-activist scholars, and non-scholarly activists.

Before beginning, however, I should note that the academic profession involves at least two distinct activities: teaching and research. It is entirely possible to endorse some form of objectivity, impartiality, or neutrality in one activity but not the other; Gross (2013, 201) reports that many academics do exactly this. Those who defend activist research may nonetheless reject the politicization of the university classroom (e.g., Caney 2012, 193). I will be limiting myself here to the subject of what forms of activism and objectivity are desirable in political research; the forms of activism and objectivity appropriate when teaching the subject will have to wait for a future occasion.

Identifying Objectivity

Neutrality, Impartiality, and Activism

Before we can identify what form of objectivity, if any, is a good candidate for normative defense, we first need to distinguish objectivity from two other concepts: neutrality and impartiality. Neutrality, impartiality, and objectivity are all different from one another and all have different relationships with activism.

Both neutrality and impartiality assume a situation in which agents external to a conflict need to adopt some sort of stance toward the parties within it. To be neutral to a conflict can be understood as refraining from siding with any of the parties involved, refusing to take a stand on the matter at issue.

Neutrality and activism are conceptually incompatible because activism necessarily involves taking a stand. To be sure, simply taking a stand is not sufficient for activism. Activists, as the term implies, are also actively engaged in a conflict in a way that is intended to make the outcome better align with the stand that they have taken, helping some parties to the conflict more than others.

Sometimes, the term "activism" is reserved for taking a certain kind of substantive stand or engaging in a particular kind of action to affect the outcome of a conflict. For example, Young (2001) paints a portrait of the activist as trying to bring about radical change using techniques deemed inappropriate, or at least uncouth, both by mainstream political actors and by many theorists of deliberative democracy. I will be using the term "activism" here in a much broader sense, one that includes activity in favor of the status quo, moderate reform, or radical change, using either boringly deliberative or rudely disruptive methods. Once agents give up their neutrality by taking a stand (regardless of its substance) and then take action (regardless of its style) on behalf of that stand they have become activists.

The relationship between activism and impartiality is more complicated than the relationship between activism and neutrality. Unlike neutral agents, impartial agents can take a stand in favor of some parties to a conflict and against others. To qualify as impartial, however, they can only do so for a limited set of impersonal reasons. Those outside a conflict are impartial when they do not favor any party over any others because of who they are (Frazer 2014). Impartiality precludes bias or favoritism, what Hobbes called "acceptance of persons" (1991, 108).

Agents open themselves up to accusations of partiality whenever they abandon neutrality to take a stand on an issue. If they can demonstrate that the identity of those involved played no role in the determination of their stand, such accusations can be refuted successfully. Academics accused of partiality often respond that, while their research may support the policies of one party to a conflict over another, their policy recommendations stem from their analysis of the data, not from partisan loyalty.

It does no violence to ordinary language to describe such impartial academics as activists once they take a stand and work actively for the policies that they support for impartial reasons. More often, however, activists have some pre-existing loyalty for one side in a political conflict over another. Once an impartial agent allies with other activists, moreover, such an alliance will inspire loyalty that may render them partial towards their comrades in future conflicts. Impartiality is thus not wholly incompatible with activism, but it is in tension with it.

It is also important to note that just because a decision is impartial does not mean that it is well made. It is possible to be impartial and yet be wildly epistemically irresponsible, deeply morally misguided, and flat-out wrong. The same is not true if agents are rightly described as objective, which seems to imply, if not correctness, then at least some degree of reliability. The difficulty comes when we try to pin down exactly which desiderata render the choice to reject neutrality by siding with one party over another as objective.

Alternative Forms of Objectivity

Objectivity can be understood in many ways; Douglas (2009) offers an analysis of no fewer than seven distinct meanings of objectivity that cannot be reduced to one another, and others have identified still more forms not included in Douglas's schema (e.g., Reiss and Springer 2020). My goal in this section is therefore not to identity every possible form of objectivity. It is merely to set the stage for the form of objectivity that I will identify in the subsequent section by highlighting key features of some other forms that contrast with mine in illuminating ways.

Both the etymology and the ordinary usage of the term "objectivity" imply an accurate representation of objects as they really are. The most commonsensical account of objectivity is thus *objectivity as faithfulness to reality.* This basic conception is incorporated in various ways into all other accounts of objectivity. As it stands, however, this initial conception is highly under-specified, begging as it does the question of how to explain the distinction between faithfulness and unfaithfulness to objects as they really are.

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One way to do this would be to claim that an objective agent has knowledge of an ontologically free-standing object in an observer-independent world, a *Ding an sich* that exists wholly outside the inescapably perspectival mental states of conscious beings. Such an account of *objectivity as observer-independence* would tie the idea of objectivity to a host of controversial theses about epistemology, ontology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of science. It is understandable that its defenders would wish to detach objectivity from such comprehensively realist philosophical views, while its critics would insist that they cannot.

Both philosophically encumbered and more free-standing forms of objectivity come in a number of varieties. Opponents of academic objectivity often refer to its defenders as "positivists," (e.g., O'Neill 2012, 183). Although some forms of objectivity may have real connections to the original positivism of Comte (1988) and to the later neo-positivists of the Vienna Circle, the term today is more likely to confuse than to clarify the issues at stake. For one thing, talk of "positivist" objectivity fails to distinguish between *objectivity as scientism* and *objectivity as value-neutrality.* While neither of these is a form of objectivity that I will be defending for political research, let alone political practice, these different ideas need to be addressed separately.

Scientism can be defined as a kind of methodological imperialism—specifically, the claim that there is one and only one method for achieving objective knowledge, one best exemplified by the natural sciences. While scientism may be implausible in general, it is particularly so when it comes to the study of politics, a subject examined across the humanities as well as the social sciences. At some universities, a department devoted to the study of politics is located within a faculty of social science, but in others it is part of the humanities. This uncertainty about the proper classification for political studies is no accident. If, as Grant suggests (2002), the humanities are devoted to interpreting meaning and significance, while science seeks to trace mechanisms of cause and effect, then we must reject a sharp distinction between the two when it comes to the explanation of political phenomena. In politics, the meaning and significance that agents attribute to causally determined events are themselves then causes of further events, whose meaning is then also interpreted in turn (Frazer 2020). Any form of objectivity that can be adopted as an ideal for political research would therefore have to be one compatible with humanistic as well as scientific methods.

The rejection of positivistic scientism, however, does not entail the rejection of positivistic value-neutrality. It is entirely possible that humanistic as well as scientific methods can uncover factual knowledge, but objectivity might still require that knowledge of facts be untainted by values. The obvious objection to this position is that it presumes that one can successfully distinguish between facts and values in the first place, something that many philosophers (e.g., Putnam 2002) think is conceptually impossible.

Regardless of whether an abstract fact/value dichotomy can be defended philosophically, many now believe that complete value neutrality is impossible in the practice of academic research, not only in the social sciences and humanities, but even in the natural sciences. Yet even those who abandon the quest for complete, traditionally positivist value neutrality may nonetheless define objectivity as a matter of some less ambitious, modified form of value neutrality. One popular position in the philosophy of science is that science would be impossible without a commitment to epistemic values like parsimony and universality, but that does not mean that science also needs a commitment to liberty, equality, or fraternity (see Lacey 1999, chap. 10, and Doppelt 2007). We can call this account *objectivity as non-epistemic value neutrality.*

Even if natural science can rely only on epistemic values, however, humanistic and social-scientific research clearly cannot. Moral and political values play at least two important and legitimate roles in all forms of research about human life.

First, social-scientific or humanistic scholarship of any sort should be what Weber calls "value-relevant" (Weber 2011b, 21; see also Weber 2011a, 152). Moral and political values help determine what questions humanists and social scientists ask. Most questions about politics specifically are valuable for political reasons, not just cognitive ones. If the questions academics choose to address are of greater value to some parties to a conflict than they are to others, then they are not neutral regarding that conflict. If scholars choose these questions for reasons that have nothing to do with the identities of these parties, then they might nonetheless remain impartial. Our sense of what questions count as interesting and important, however, are often shaped by our pre-existing loyalties, sometimes in ways that might not even be available to our conscious awareness. Since the choice of questions in political research is rarely neutral, and only deep introspection can reveal whether it is impartial, any kind of objectivity desirable in political research cannot entail either neutrality or impartiality of this kind.

We might be tempted to think that, while scholars' choices of questions may prevent their work from being considered neutral or impartial, once those choices are made their research can still count as objective if and only if answers to these questions are obtained in ways that do not draw on non-epistemic values. We can call this *objectivity as neutral methodology.* According to Putnam (2002, 63), however, this account of objectivity is inappropriate for the humanities and social sciences because the concepts and categories used in these fields "are

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invariably ethically colored." The criteria we use to distinguish democratic from authoritarian political systems in empirical research, for example, embody the features of constitutions that we judge to be important politically. Taylor (1985) makes similar arguments for the value-ladenness of other key political concepts such as "legitimacy" (43) and even "function" (76). He concludes that not only the questions that political scientists ask, but also the frameworks of explanation that they develop to answer them, will necessarily include at least implicit endorsement of certain non-epistemic moral and political values.

Since non-epistemic values are inevitably integrated into both the questions asked by political researchers and the explanatory frameworks used to answer these questions, some might think our only remaining option is *objectivity as clarity*. Myrdal (1969, 55), for example, argues that since social science is always imbued with moral and political values, "the only way in which we can strive for 'objectivity' … is to expose the valuations to full light, make them conscious, specific, and explicit." Yet while other forms of objectivity are impossibly demanding for political researchers, the objection to objectivity as clarity is that it is not demanding enough. Clarity about one's value commitments is undoubtedly important, but it is insufficient to capture what we intuitively value about objectivity. While objectivity does not guarantee correctness, it does imply some form of trustworthiness, some admirable effort towards truth or understanding. It is possible to be extremely clear about both one's value commitments and factual beliefs (regardless of whether there is any real distinction between them) while nonetheless arriving at them in highly unreliable or untrustworthy ways.

Objectivity as Engagement with Inconvenient Evidence

It would improve one's trustworthiness considerably if one were not only clear about one's own commitments and the reasons to hold them but also about reasons *not* to hold them. As Mill (2003, 115) famously put it, "he who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that." Someone who understands the reasoning both for and against their views is more trustworthy, embodying more of the relevant desiderata intuitively associated with objectivity, than those who are clear about their own position but cannot understand opposing ones.

Recall that competing accounts of objectivity can be understood as competing accounts of faithfulness to reality, to objects as they are. One clear way to demonstrate objectivity in this sense is to remain faithful to reality even when it stands in the way of one's preferred position. While it is important not to make too much of etymology, it is worth noting that *objectum* (that which is thrown in the way) is a near synonym of *obstāculum* (that which stands in the way), and that "object" can still be used as a verb (to raise an objection) as well as a noun (OED Online 2022; see Popper 1972, 37). To be objective might therefore plausibly be thought to involve proper engagement with obstacles and objections.

Although Weber also offers other accounts of objectivity, it is this idea that is behind his emphasis on the importance of seeking out what he calls "'inconvenient' facts," by which he means "facts that are inconvenient for their party opinions" (1946, 147; see also Weber 2011b, 5).

Yet there is not any reason to limit inconvenient considerations here exclusively to "facts." The fact/value distinction may or may not turn out tenable in either theory or practice, but the important thing is to make sure we separate Weber's conception of "inconvenience" from his larger philosophical system, including all his talk of "facts" as distinguished from values. First, we need to acknowledge the possibility that philosophy, mathematics, and other a priori disciplines may provide evidence about logical structures and concepts without any appeal to empirics. Just as importantly, normative ethics and political theory can provide non-empirical evidence about what ought to be rather than what is. It is thus better to speak of "inconvenient evidence," rather than "inconvenient facts." Evidence, in this expansive sense, may prove inconvenient when it indicates that a claim could be incoherent, inconsistent, or normatively objectionable as well as when it indicates that the claim could be empirically inaccurate.

Regardless of whether the inconvenience at hand involves facts, logic, values, or some combination of the three—regardless, indeed, of whether any real distinction can be drawn among them—the key concern is not to allow wishful thinking to obscure obstacles and objections of any kind. As Douglas (2007, 133) argues, "while there are many legitimate roles that values play in scholarship … using values to blind one to evidence one would rather not see is not one of those legitimate roles."

Mere acknowledgment that such inconvenient evidence may exist, however, is not sufficient for objectivity. First, one must actively seek out and engage with inconvenient evidence however it might be found, using the best means available to uncover it. One who manages to evade inconvenient evidence successfully, and thus never encounters any, does not plausibly count as objective. To be sure, objectivity in this sense is a matter of satisficing rather than maximizing engagement with inconvenient evidence. There certainly could be Hamlet-like figures who seek out too much evidence against their pre-existing beliefs and commitments, paralyzing them from reaching any trustworthy conclusions at all. For most of us, however, the temptation is the opposite; we wish to avoid all inconvenience, evidentiary or otherwise, whenever possible. The virtue of objectivity usually involves taking active steps to combat this tendency.

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Second, it is not enough simply to acknowledge the existence of the inconvenient evidence that one has uncovered. To count as reliable or trustworthy, one must also be willing to alter one's beliefs and commitments because of this evidence, should it prove to be sufficiently strong to require such alteration. This openness to change is an important element in any account of objectivity; Longino (1990, 76) argues that a method of inquiry can be considered objective insofar as it enables what she calls "transformative criticism," the provision of evidence with a capacity to change agents' beliefs and commitments.

The better the inconvenient evidence under consideration, the more likely it should be to transform the beliefs of an epistemically responsible person. Objective agents who are open to transformative criticism will thus not seriously entertain all arguments proffered against their current beliefs or commitments, regardless of their strength. Instead, objective agents will continuously evaluate the evidence available against their current position, feeling free to dismiss misleading pseudo-evidence. Appropriately objective agents should thus not be open-minded in the sense criticized by Fantl (2018), which he takes to entail a willingness to consider even arguments that we have good reason to believe are misleading. Evidence only counts as truly inconvenient when it provides good reason for a change in one's beliefs. Objective agents should not change their views until the strength of inconvenient evidence outweighs that of convenient evidence, but they must be open to the possibility that the balance of evidence may ultimately turn against them in this way.

For such an attitude to be possible, individuals cannot be too firmly committed to their current position on the matter at hand. Often, the virtue of being willing to admit that one might be wrong—or, more generally, of having proper higher-order attitudes toward one's first-order beliefs and/or the processes that led to them—is called "intellectual humility" (e.g., Hazlett 2012; Whitcomb et. al. 2017). For some, openness to transformative criticism may indeed stem from an appropriately diminished sense of one's own epistemic excellence. For others, proper higher-order beliefs about one's first-order beliefs may stem less from the kind of ego-diminishment normally associated with the traditional virtue of humility and more from a kind of phenomenological separation between the ego and the first-order belief in question. In such cases, there must be some psychological "space," some metaphorical "distance" between agents, the facts that they believe, and the values to which they are committed. It is for this reason that Douglas (2009, 122-131) calls her version of the account of objectivity as engagement with inconvenient evidence "detached objectivity," arguing that the metaphor of detachment captures most of what we value about objectivity in ordinary discourse.

Variations on these themes have long been recognized as capturing what we value about objectivity in academic research. What Merton (1942) calls "the ethos of science" centrally includes "organized skepticism." While we may have reason to doubt the applicability of Merton's other elements of the scientific ethos to humanistic research, a thorough-going, open-minded, and systematic skepticism remains key to the success of scholarship across the university, including but hardly limited to political research of all kinds.

Although experimental testing or other empirical forms of falsification of the sort that Popper (2002) sees as the hallmark of science are not available when evaluating either hermeneutic or normative claims, interpretive humanists and normative theorists still need to advance a hypothesis without becoming attached to it, seek out evidence against as well as in favor of it, and evaluate all available evidence using the best methods applicable. These methods may have more in common with the *pro et contra* of traditional disputation than with Popperian empirical falsification; some forms of objective research may thus resemble debates in parliaments or courtrooms more than they do experiments in laboratories (see Palonen 2008). In all these contexts, however, the commitment to engage with inconvenient evidence should be the same. This form of objectivity therefore implies adopting the skeptical spirit, though not the methods, associated with science at its best. The demand for such an ethos across the academy may qualify as a kind of "scientism," but it is very different from the methodological imperialism discussed earlier.

Inconvenient Evidence, Neutrality, and Impartiality

It is crucially important to note that evidence can only be inconvenient for those who are already inclined to take a stand one way or another. If agents remain neutral, there is no criterion to distinguish the evidence that is inconvenient for them from the evidence that is not. A commitment to objectivity as engagement with inconvenient evidence is thus not only distinct from a commitment to neutrality; it is incompatible with it.

The relationship between engagement with inconvenient evidence and impartiality is more complex. One way that evidence may be inconvenient is if it is inconvenient to a party in a conflict for whom one has pre-existing loyalty or toward whom one shows some other form of favoritism. Partiality may therefore be one reason why certain evidence may be inconvenient for certain agents. Impartial agents, however, may take a stand on a matter as long as they do so for impartial reasons. Evidence may thus prove inconvenient to the positions adopted by partial and impartial agents alike.

That said, impartiality can sometimes function to make engagement with inconvenient evidence easier. Partiality towards one party over another in a conflict can provide a powerful motive to discount evidence that is inconvenient

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to that party. All else being equal, it is therefore more difficult for a partial agent to engage with inconvenient evidence than it is for an impartial agent to do so.

All else, however, is rarely equal. Once agents take a stand for even entirely impartial reasons, evidence against that position now qualifies as inconvenient for them. The motivations to discount this evidence might then be considerable, even if no partiality has arisen, and then become even stronger if partiality emerges over time.

Consider a scientist who may have had no pre-existing commitment to any hypothesis before conducting a study, but who after publishing their impartial analysis of the evidence begins building a career on the importance of this study and its evidence for one hypothesis over others. Even when these rival hypotheses are of no relevance outside one's academic discipline, it may take considerable strength of character to engage with evidence against them. The difficulty is even greater if one's findings are convenient for one party in a political conflict and inconvenient for another. The temptation to develop loyalty towards one's allies—and to take their side in future disputes, whether related or unrelated to the position one originally adopted for impartial reasons—will be strong.

While such a dynamic is possible in any field of inquiry, it is most likely when one is attempting to conduct impartial research on matters of political relevance. Whether political scientists can successfully maintain impartiality in the face of these social-psychological forces is a difficult empirical question. The normative question of whether scholarly impartiality is even a valuable goal to pursue is equally difficult. Both are beyond the scope of this article. The ideal of objectivity that I have identified conceptually and will now defend normatively, while incompatible with neutrality, is compatible with both partiality and impartiality. I hope my arguments will be convincing to both academic impartiality's defenders and its critics, though defenders of academic neutrality will necessarily remain outside our overlapping consensus.

In Defense of Objectivity

Important Causes versus Professional Responsibilities

Scholar-activists who take their critics seriously may admit that there might be good reasons for academics to maintain some form of neutrality, impartiality, or objectivity. If nothing else, doing so might enhance the reputation of our profession, allaying public fears about academic bias. There is also a case to be made that the public is not wrong to fear that the research of scholar-activists is not credible. Gaus (2005, 167) argues that philosophers have good reason not to become scholar-activists because activism "corrupts philosophy," turning it into a kind of ideological sophistry, "an intellectual game in which you defend what you want to believe." The danger of sophistic corruption, it could then be argued, is similar in other academic disciplines across the humanities and social sciences.

While conceding that these are good reasons to refrain from activism, scholar-activists can still insist that these reasons are outweighed by the immense importance of the issues that they address. Some focus on the importance of global poverty (e.g., Pogge and Cabrera 2012), while others mention the existential threat posed by climate change (e.g., Caney 2012). While avoiding either the appearance or the reality of the corruption of our work is undoubtedly important, it is nonetheless outweighed by the threat that billions will die in poverty or that the earth will become uninhabitable. Anyone who chooses to protect their professional reputation or integrity at the cost of letting the world burn may be a consummate professional, but only at the cost of being a terrible human being.

Gaus (2005), however, insists that this is not the choice we face; it is possible to fight for important causes without corrupting scholarship at all. He argues that, like all their fellow citizens, academics have both a right and an obligation to participate in politics. To avoid the corruption of their research, all they need to do is make clear that their political activism is not something that they are doing in their professional capacity.

Van der Vossen (2015), on the other hand, argues that scholars who work on political topics cannot successfully separate their vocational and avocational activities in this way. He begins with a review of empirical research supporting the claim that active partisanship makes us predictably worse at seeing the truth about politics even at times when we are not engaged in activism. Since it is the job of political scientists and political philosophers to seek the truth about politics, and all professionals have a prima facie duty to refrain from anything that makes them predictably worse at doing their job, academics who work on political topics have a prima facie duty to refrain from activism. The epistemic harms from even the most avocational forms of activism will, he believes, affect one's research for the worse.

Advocates of scholarly activism in Marxist, critical-theoretical, and other similar traditions would agree with van der Vossen that an individual is an organic whole who cannot adopt one ethos professionally and another politically. Horkheimer (1992, 222) argues that when a single individual tries to alternate between an activist and a neutral ethos the result is a kind of self-alienation or schizophrenia. There would then be two ways of achieving harmony between one's vocational and avocational activities—either through neutrality in both spheres or activism in both. With self-alienation both normatively indefensible and practically counter-productive, the question we face is whether to achieve a healthy psychological unity that is thoroughly activist or one that is thoroughly non-activist.

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Marxists and their fellow travelers think that the choice here is clear because they fundamentally disagree with van der Vossen's empirical claim that activism makes us worse at seeing the truth about politics. To the contrary, like the later critical theorists and standpoint epistemologists inspired by him, Horkheimer argues that allying with the oppressed in their emancipatory struggles is the best path to discovering truth. Despite the evidence to the contrary collected by van der Vossen and others, many continue to insist on the considerable epistemic benefits of either partisanship in general (e.g., White and Ypi 2016, 90-100) or solidarity with the oppressed in particular (e.g., Hendrix 2012). Resolving this epistemological debate, with its complex array of both philosophical and empirical evidence on both sides, would be impossible within the bounds of this article.

Fortunately, however, the ethical debate between scholar-activists and their critics does not require an answer to such intractable epistemological questions. Even if it is not possible to engage in political activism without corrupting scholarship, the balance of competing considerations might nonetheless lead academics to be willing to pay this cost to their professional life in order to practice activism. When civic obligations of world-historical importance are weighed against merely prima facie professional obligations, and one cannot find a way of meeting the demands of both in the way that Gaus argues that one can, it is reasonable to think that urgent political matters must take precedence.

This raises the question of just how urgent the political matter at hand must be to outweigh one's professional obligations as an academic. To answer this question would require ranking political issues from the most important to the most trivial, then placing the importance of academic professional norms somewhere on the same scale. Those political issues that rank above professional responsibilities would then justify academic activism, while those ranking lower on the scale would not. Yet creating such a single, unidimensional scale not only assumes that the weight of political values can be assessed in an entirely agent-neutral way, but also assumes that political and professional values are directly commensurable.

There would be no need for such a scale, however, if there were no need to weigh political against professional responsibilities. Such a balance would not be necessary if a single set of practices, habits, and virtues—a single ethos—were the key to fulfilling both sets of responsibilities most effectively. The Marxist tradition of both practical and epistemic solidarity with the oppressed provides one highly controversial account of why such a single ethos would produce both the most effective political action and the best scholarly research. The next section will argue that the form of objectivity that I am defending can perform a similar function, albeit in a much less controversial way.

Objectively Helping the Cause

The arguments of the previous section all assume that scholar-activists can successfully contribute to the resolution of political problems. There is no point in academics becoming activists if doing so is useless or counterproductive, or if there can be a fruitful division of labor in which others more qualified to do so perform the necessary work while academics do not. The specific contribution that academics alone can provide to the causes that they support must therefore be one that scholars make through, and not merely alongside, their research. Their role would not merely be to serve as further pairs of hands to distribute leaflets or raise placards, but to do something politically valuable that is unique to the scholar-activist as such.

Caney (2012, 192) points out that the case against trying to make such a contribution can take one of three forms. Attempts by academics to contribute to important political causes may be entirely ineffective, may be too meager to justify the effort required to achieve them, or may be harmful. As Caney recognizes, however, these are not really arguments about whether scholars should engage with politics but rather about how they should do so. It seems unlikely that every academic contribution to politics will necessarily be ineffective, over-costly, or harmful. Some contributions may be ineffective, others over-costly, and others harmful, but still others may be genuinely worthwhile. Scholars must tread carefully to ensure that their political efforts fall into that final category.

For Caney (2012, 211), the key to making the right kind of academic contribution to important political causes is what he calls "epistemic modesty," defined not as "a refusal to take a stand and to abstain from action, but rather a commitment to assess scrupulously the relevant information and constantly monitor new sources of information, and to acknowledge one's own fallibility and exhibit a willingness to learn from those critical of one's policies." While he does not label it as such, Caney is clearly describing a version of objectivity as engagement with inconvenient evidence.

Caney also fails to point out that epistemic modesty, intellectual humility, or objectivity as engagement with inconvenient evidence is crucially important, not only when the academic and the politician are fused in the person of the scholar-activist, but also when each of these practices is carried out separately. This common element of both academic and political activity can be difficult to notice given the very different modes of discourse predominant in each field. The discursive differences between politics and academia have become a common theme in philosophical treatments of the different ethical obligations that apply in these two spheres of activity. While academic discourse is studiously rational and seeks to track

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truth, there is something irrational and even untruthful in even normatively ideal political communication (Jubb and Kurtulmas 2012). It is not just that, as a matter of fact, politicians lie more regularly than do scholars. It is that rhetorical strategies that are normatively appropriate in the political sphere are normatively inappropriate in the academic sphere and vice versa. The philosophical caveats and confidence intervals that are appropriately highlighted in an academic environment would only lead to ineffective communication and misunderstanding in the rough-and-tumble of political discourse.

It is therefore tempting to imagine that politicians and activists need not have much concern for evidence, regardless of its convenience or inconvenience, and hence equally little concern for objectivity. This, however, would be a mistake, confusing rhetoric and external communication with epistemology and internal knowledge-formation. While responsible politicians will not and ought not to talk like academics, they must be reasonably confident that both the policies that they advocate and the rhetorical strategies that they utilize to advocate for them will work as planned. The evidence for these beliefs need not be communicated in political discourse, but they must be present in the mind of the politician all the same. A full understanding of this evidence, moreover, will require a full understanding of the countervailing evidence for the opposite position. Political agents need an accurate picture of the political situation that they face, including all the features of that situation that are most inconvenient for them.

When activists are fighting for important causes, this inconvenient evidence is of utmost importance for advancing their laudable goals. Yet even if their goals are merely sectarian or selfish, ignorance of inconvenient evidence is never a reliable path to success—personal, political, or otherwise. While wishful thinking may be pleasant in the short term, it is a poor strategic choice in the long term. In Freudian lingo, maturity is only achieved when the pleasure principle gives way to the reality principle.

Even in cases where some person's or group's welfare might be improved through the suppression of some particular piece of inconvenient evidence, the claim that suppressing this evidence is better for them than the alternative must itself be grounded in reality and assessed in light of the best evidence against this suppression strategy. While engagement with inconvenient evidence is not a panacea either in politics or in any other sphere of human life, it is remarkably useful, even in testing the limits of its own usefulness.

What is required is therefore a political version of the same active engagement with inconvenient evidence that we have already seen as the most attractive form of academic objectivity. While Weber is famous for contrasting the scientific and political vocations, a similar form of objectivity is necessary in both (see Palonen 2008). What Weber calls a politician's proper "ethic of responsibility" (Weber 1946, 115) is essentially a political form of objectivity as engagement with inconvenient evidence. Without a sense of the reality of the situation, including all the inconvenient considerations involved, irresponsible politicians can end up gravely harming both their own careers and, more importantly, the causes that they are (rightly or wrongly) passionate about. This is especially true of avant-garde politicians in favor of radical changes; Ypi (2012, 160) quotes Brecht's (1974, 41) quip that "a vanguard can lead the way along a retreat or into an abyss."

Ypi (2012, 177), however, replies that this objection "seems to challenge not so much the mode of political engagement reflected in avant-garde political agency as the substantive set of commitments promoted by avant-garde political agents." What this response fails to recognize is that certain modes of political engagement, by promoting a certain ethos, may make it more likely that we will fall under the spell of a substantively wrong-headed set of commitments. An alternative mode of engagement, with a different ethos, might lead to a psychological state more amenable to revising one's commitments and strategies in line with available evidence.

For Weber, cultivating the proper mentality, integrating warm attachment to a cause with a cool appreciation of inconvenient evidence, is the key to political success. A politician must combine passionate commitment with "a feeling of responsibility and a sense of proportion… This is the decisive psychological quality of the politician: his ability to let realities work upon him with inner concentration and calmness" (Weber 1946, 115). Such a paradoxical ethos, however, is a considerable challenge to achieve. "The problem," Weber writes, "is simply how can warm passion and a cool sense of proportion be forged together in one and the same soul?" (Weber 1946, 115).

Objectivity and Ambivalent Partisanship

A century after Weber posed this problem, empirical research suggests that his preferred psychological profile for responsible political actors is still rarely achieved. Just as van der Vossen draws on a large literature to establish that partisan passion destroys any cool sense of truth and proportion, there is also a large literature establishing that the converse of his claim is also true. Independents without a strong partisan identity generally lack any passion for politics (see Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Even among those who have a definite partisan identity, Mutz (2006) finds that those in ideologically diverse social networks are more aware of the rationales for political points of view opposed to their own, are more tolerant of them, and more likely to see their merits. Unfortunately, partisans in diverse networks are significantly less likely to engage in politics at all than are blinkered partisans who live in homogenous echo chambers. The result is that

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those with the objectivity needed in political life are the least likely to participate in it, while those who are most likely to participate are the least likely to have the necessary objectivity.

These social-scientific findings could be the basis of an empirically grounded objection to my thesis. One could grant both the conceptual possibility and normative desirability of combining activism and objectivity but nonetheless claim, based on a review of the social-scientific research, that integrating the two is unlikely to prove successful in the real world. There may be possible worlds filled with objective activists—and these worlds may even be preferrable to our own—but it might still be too difficult for creatures who happen to be like us to combine passionate political commitment and engagement with inconvenient evidence. Since ought famously implies can, empirical evidence that actual human beings cannot successfully integrate activism and objectivity suggests that we ought not try to do so.

Some political psychologists, however, suggest that there is empirical evidence of at least one kind of political agent who manages to combine objectivity and political commitment. Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen (2012, henceforth "LJS") call the small but nontrivial portion of the electorate who escape both political apathy and ideological bias "ambivalent partisans." They report that ambivalent partisans deliberate more carefully than their nonambivalent comrades, revising their beliefs and commitments based on new information. LJS call this epistemic and political virtue "critical partisan loyalty."

Over the course of the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, for example, ambivalent partisans successfully updated their policy preferences based on economic self-interest as more information about the effects of proposed policies filled the media. High-income ambivalent Republicans and high-income ambivalent Democrats alike moved to the right on taxes, health care, and prescription drugs, while low-income ambivalent partisans from both parties moved to the left on these issues. By contrast, nonambivalent partisans from both parties simply became more polarized over the course of the election. Nonambivalent Republicans from all income groups moved to the right on all issues and nonambivalent Democrats from all income groups moved to the left (LJS 2012, 203).

It is important to be clear on what this ideal of ambivalent partisanship and critical partisan loyalty does and does not involve. First, it is not a matter of cognitive ability or intellectual sophistication. While political sophistication does facilitate understanding, it also increases one's ability, and perhaps even one's desire, to find rationalizations for predetermined conclusions and to discount inconvenient evidence.

Second, and even more importantly, partisan ambivalence is quite different from weak partisan loyalty, let alone impartiality or nonpartisanship. Conceptually, it is not only possible, but necessary, to remain steadfastly attached to a party or other group to act as a "connected" or "internal" critic as opposed to an "external" critic (Walzer 1988). Empirically, LJS (2012, 207) report that ambivalence and nonpartisanship were associated with different patterns of behavior. While both increased ambivalence and decreased strength of partisanship are associated with a reduction in bias, only increased ambivalence is also associated with increased deliberative political thinking.

What makes partisans ambivalent is neither their cognitive sophistication nor the weakness of their partisan loyalty, but the internalization of negative considerations about their own party and positive considerations about other parties—that is, their engagement with inconvenient evidence. This will in part be a function of the ubiquity of such considerations in the larger political environment, but it is also a function of the sensitivity of individuals to inconvenient considerations—that is, their degree of objectivity in the sense being defended here.

Some of this inconvenience-sensitivity may be a function of unchangeable personality traits; LJS (2012, 220) report that some individuals seem to be psychologically inclined toward ambivalence while others are not, regardless of the circumstances. There are ways, however, that partisan ambivalence can be deliberately cultivated through both individual effort and institutional design.

Critical thinking and ambivalence can be valued within a party, not as a sign of disloyalty, but as a needed service to the cause. Janis (1982) maintains that what he famously called "groupthink" can be avoided if group leaders encourage critical thinking, rewarding group members for expressing objections and doubts, and making it clear that the group values open, skeptical inquiry and those who contribute to it.

Alternately, critical loyalty and ambivalent partisanship can be encouraged by giving individuals a firm basis for their sense of self-worth independent of their partisan identity. In one experiment (Cohen, Aronson, and Steele 2000), supporters and opponents of abortion rights were more willing to take evidence against their position seriously when their self-esteem was temporarily boosted through reference to a source of self-worth independent of their political commitments. There may be less need for partisan bias to defend the worth of one's partisan identity when the worth of other facets of one's identity are already firmly established (Sherman and Cohen 2002).

Academics are perfectly situated to make use of both of these strategies. Even if they join political parties or other activist organizations that do not value internal dissent, they have also been socialized within a profession that is built (or, at least, that should be built) on a foundation of organized skepticism. They also have a sense of self-worth based on their professional identity independent of their

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partisan identity. Horkheimer may be correct that a scholar cannot adopt an entirely different persona when entering politics without falling prey to a kind of damaging schizophrenia. Yet rather than a reason to abandon scholarly objectivity, this provides scholars with an opportunity to practice politics while maintaining their academic virtues of clarity, critical thinking, engagement with inconvenient evidence, and the avoidance of wishful thinking. Through their teaching and public engagement, scholars can encourage their non-scholarly comrades to adopt these virtues as well. One does an important service for a partisan cause by encouraging one's allies to engage with inconvenient evidence, helping them escape from the dangerous illusions encouraged by partisan echo chambers.

It is also important to note that, regardless of whether they are communicating with allies, opponents, or non-partisan colleagues, partisan scholars must always be clear about exactly where their political loyalies lie. Not only is clarity on this subject important in itself, but it is also necessary to make sense of why the evidence these academics are gathering qualifies as inconvenient to them, and hence why they and their research qualify as objective.

Conclusion

This article has sought to identify and defend a virtue—objectivity as engagement with inconvenient evidence—that is valuable for both political research and political practice. While some may choose to cultivate an ethos of objectivity as both scholars and activists simultaneously, doing so is equally important for those who pursue one of these vocations but not the other.

What is needed, then, is a university that promotes a similar form of objectivity among both activist and non-activist academics. Though the motives of these two kinds of scholars are different, their engagement with inconvenient evidence should be the same. Both kinds of academics, moreover, are tempted to abandon their objectivity. Activists may be lured toward wishful thinking out of groupthink or a misguided sense of partisan loyalty, while apolitical scholars are more likely to be tempted by the psychological and professional rewards that come from seeing their previous work confirmed, but both need to be tied to the mast of organized skepticism all the same. As a result, they should both benefit from being governed within a single institutional structure. What they each need is a university system built around their shared commitment to objective scholarship, a commitment that both know is vulnerable to many and varied forms of academic akrasia.

One aim of my argument has therefore been to help provide a kind of "rational reconstruction" of the university—just as Habermas (1996) reconstructs the modern legal order or White and Ypi (2016) reconstruct the political party—revealing the normative presuppositions embedded in existing social institutions that only imperfectly realize the ideals that they nonetheless genuinely embody. To be sure, any actually existing institution as complex as a university will be home to multiple, competing "rationalities," many of which have nothing to do with promoting the ethos of objectivity being advocated here, or may even stand opposed to it. Yet many, though not all, of the university's most important practices—from post-lecture Q&A to pre-publication peer review—can be interpreted as imperfect instantiations of the kind of objectivity under analysis in this article. Rational reconstruction of these institutional features can serve a variety of practical purposes, often suggesting reforms that can help institutions better achieve their implicit normative goals (see Gaus 2013). A better understanding of the value of objectivity will therefore be of more than just theoretical interest.

My main hope is that an appreciation of the importance of objectivity for both activist and non-activist scholars might help bring peace to a profession bitterly divided over its proper social role. The terms of this peace are familiar from Rawls's (1993) stylized account of political liberalism as a solution to religious conflict: Warring factions must agree to disagree about final ends, safe in the knowledge that those divided over these ultimate questions can nonetheless join in shared practices justified by an overlapping consensus composed of common but non-ultimate values. Just as it is not necessary to agree on a conception of the good in order to share a conception of justice and build the basic structure of society around it, so, too, is it unnecessary to agree on the ultimate purpose of academic activity in order to agree on a conception of objectivity and build the university around it.

This parallel between the liberal arts university and liberal democracy is, in turn, one of the reasons why objective scholarship is politically important. The objective academic, whether partisan or impartial, is one species in a larger genus that Dzur (2008) has identified as the "democratic professional." The vocations, Dzur argues, can serve democratic politics without exchanging their professional activities in favor of what is usually understood as political activism. Abiding by established professional norms not only allows these professions to each contribute to informing the demos in its own unique way, but also can model norms of collaboration, communication, and reflection that should be followed in both the political and professional spheres. In this way, Dzur concludes, "the microethics of professional life can resolve macroethical problems in larger society" (53).

A secondary aim of this article has thus been to provide practical guidance to all those fighting for political causes, regardless of whether they have any academic affiliation. A political movement cannot function effectively based on shared delusions and wishful thinking. It is the responsibility of activists to wrestle with reality in all of its inescapable

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inconvenience. Engagement with inconvenient evidence is therefore needed in political practice just as much as it is needed in political research. While many are bemoaning the corruption of the university through an invasion of partisan politics, what we need is not a wall of separation between town and gown, but the improvement of partisan politics through the infusion of virtues ideally embodied in the university.

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