



# Troubling Advocacy

The indignity of speaking for others

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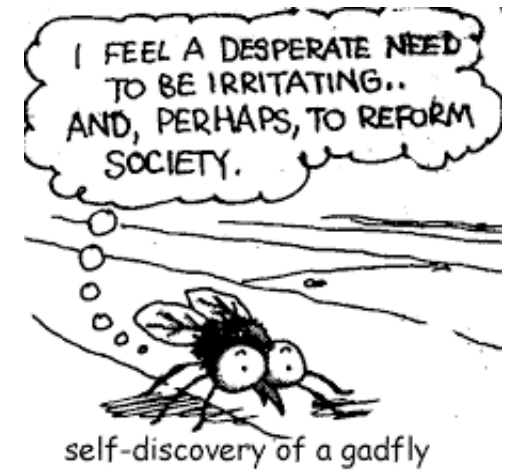
# What this reflection is NOT about

- *why* we, in our field, should engage in advocacy
- *why* promoting self-advocacy should be our goal
- the different forms of advocacy that we can engage
- *how* we can be more effective in our advocacy work



# What this IS about

- more philosophic than strategic
- more discursive than empirical
- the 'gadfly': asking unsettling questions
- troubling concepts normalised in a society's 'public language'
- Our task: render social phenomena their complexity



# Words are important

- 'dirty words' in CG
- *double entendre*: empowering or entrapping?
- Words bear the wounds of multiple oppressions
- Legitimising meanings and practices
- In whose interests?
- Responsibilising and oppressing...

... while claiming the mantle of solidarity



# Ad-vocare



- Including '*advocacy*' in our role
- Including '*systems change*' in statutes and manifestos
- Where do we *stand*? Whose *side* are we on?
- Whose *voice* will we amplify? \_\_\_\_\_
- 'Voice': the *claim* to rights and dignity
- The '*Other*': deficient re the established norm / ourselves?

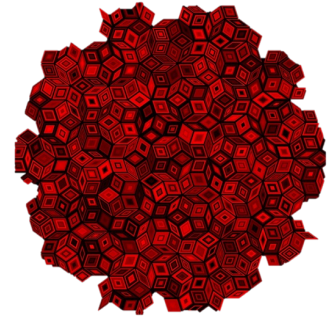
# Troubling times

- deepening *divide*
- *far-right* politics
- discourse of *derision* and *hate*
- *collusion* between state and capital
- citizen losing hard-won *rights*
- manifestations by the *precariat* multitude
- cyclical crises widen and deepen

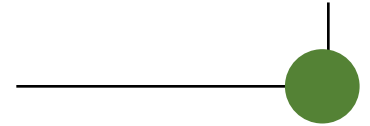


# Simple but not simplistic

- Making sense of complex issues...
- ... a non-recurrent motif made up of same elemental parts
- hyper-complexity: driven by same perennial motives
- Political and existential emergencies
- People of good will
- 'Advocacy': agency / counter-attack



*Penrose tile*



# Signing up to the advocacy agenda



- Signed up to the advocacy agenda:
  - our choice of research areas - our writing
  - our interaction with individuals, groups and institutions
  - the political choices we make - the causes we support and lead
- A 'helping profession' – a 'calling' (innate; a *cultivated* desire)
- Putting the well-being of others first



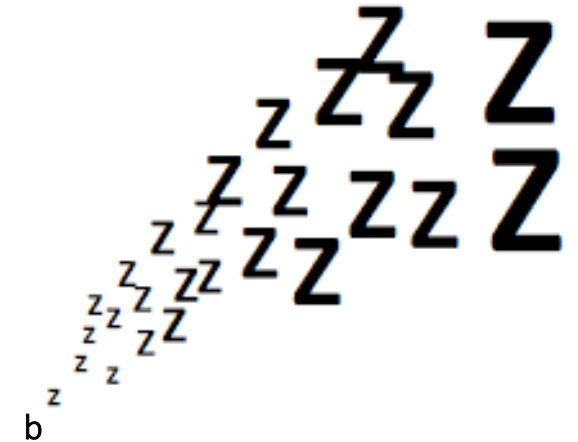


# Being a gadfly

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- Asking uncomfortable questions
- Not to deflate or belittle
- ... or to indulge in one-upmanship
- But to perform our advocacy work 'better'
- Pitfalls when speaking on behalf of...

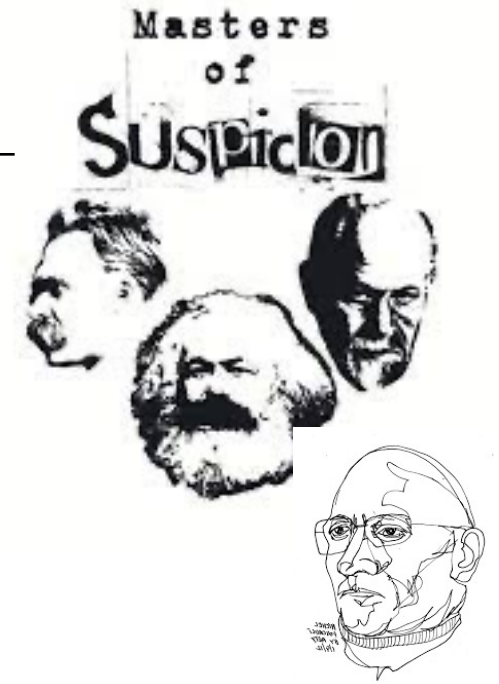
... muted, silenced, unheard, or misheard voices



# PAUSE...

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- Clarity and discernment
- Who will benefit?
- Are these the right battles?
- Repressed motives?
- Says who?



Marion Young

... People also suffer disadvantages and injustice  
“because of the everyday practices of well-intentioned liberal society”...

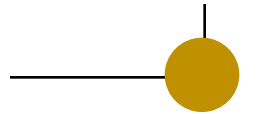
# The indignity of speaking for others

- Harm... when we mean to do good
- Who defines the interests of the 'Other'?
- Foucault: "the indignity of speaking for others"
- 'Difference' absorbed
- Politics of identity
- The struggle for 'voice' is the struggle for dignity



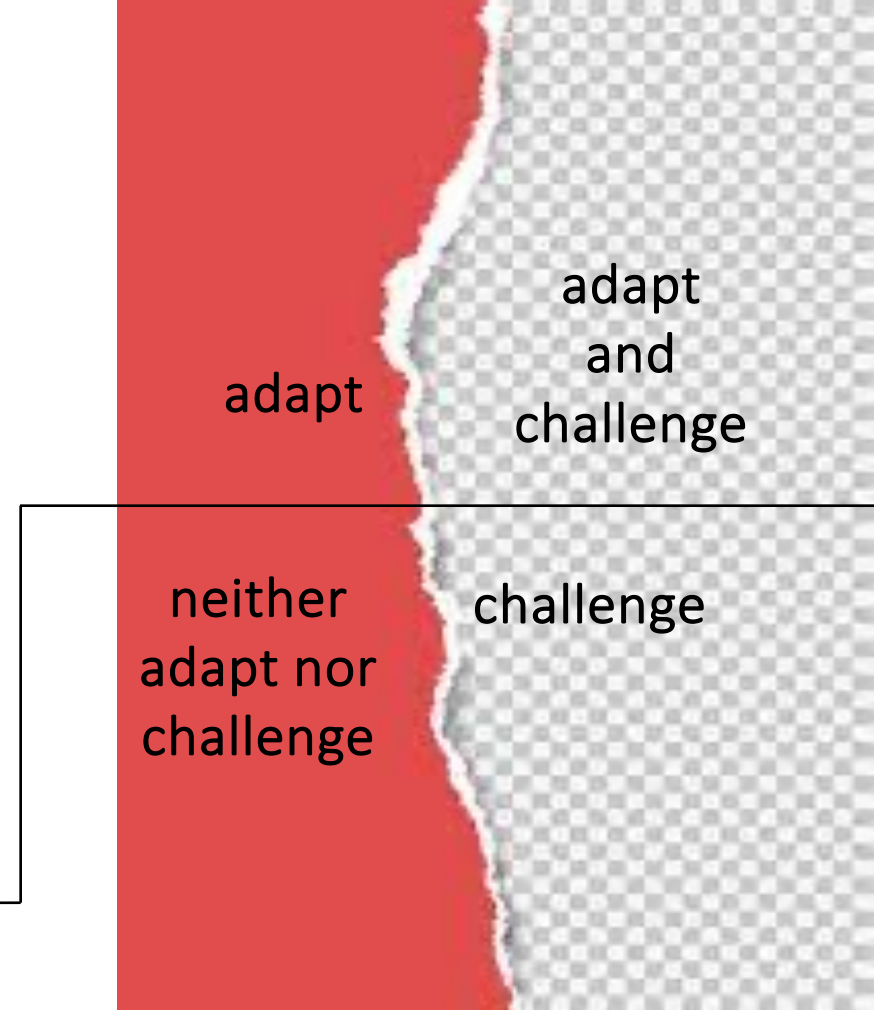
# The indignity of speaking for others

- Foucault's warning: not rebuke, but trigger reflection
- Antidote to facile adoption of mantle of missionary or militant
- Take one step backwards
- Reducing realities and interests of the 'Other' to our own
- Structural reasons: our position in the social hierarchy
- Existential reasons: the 'Other' and 'othering' (Lévinas)



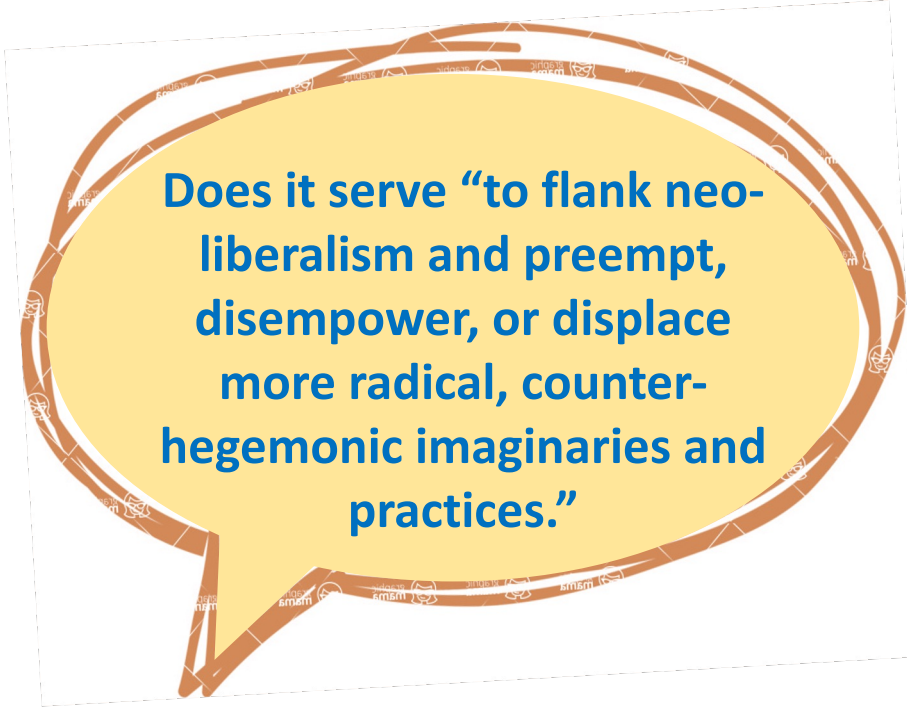
# Structural reasons

- Empathy inflected through our social position
- Impact on what we think is the problem
- ... and on how to solve it
- Assuage or structural change? —————
- Well served by the *status quo*
- Transformative horizons limited by our social position



# Class and the 'decent work agenda'

- Opens up important conversations
- Combats poor working conditions...  
...however slow and incremental the progress made.
- Advocacy: is it hurting?
- Broaden / deepen the decent work agenda ...  
... include counter-hegemonic imaginaries / practices ...  
... requiring a change in our lifestyle



**Does it serve “to flank neo-liberalism and preempt, disempower, or displace more radical, counter-hegemonic imaginaries and practices.”**

# ...the white liberal

- ‘Consuming’ the ‘Other’... seen as a manifestation of ourselves
- Illusion of ‘good white persons’...
  - ... racism embedded through daily interactions and practices
- White liberals “do not get it”: still “grounded in whiteness”
- Hayes: “You do not live in Black or Brown skin
  - ... so do not tell us how to perceive this world”
- Whiteness and human freedom can’t be simultaneously affirmed
- Unhooking from whiteness...
  - ... ridding ourselves of our White gaze



the problem of  
whiteness is not a  
problem of evil...

... but a problem  
of good

Martin Luther King Jr

... “the physical and  
psychological violence  
continually committed  
against minoritized  
peoples ... the majority of  
it by nice people”.

# The 'face' of the 'Other'

- Advocacy: amplifying the voice of the Other...
  - ... not substitute it with our own
- We do not deny the 'alterity' of the 'Other', in their uniqueness
  - ... By reducing them to mirror images of ourselves
- It is the 'Other' who initiates, who proposes a world
  - ... that cannot be reduced, contained, encompassed, and controlled
- When we place ourselves in a submissive position
  - ... an epiphany occurs, as a 'face' opens
- The 'face' is a revelation of the Other: too endless to be comprehended



...trembling in awe  
on beholding the face  
of the Other





# Advocacy and alterity

- Misrecognition of face, losing the sense of awe in the human encounter
- Transforming the Other's voice into part of the totality of my being, making others part of my sameness
- The encounter, despite claiming to be emancipatory, is marked by the will to power, to control, to dominate
- Advocacy may actually reflect hostile mainstream biases, encoded in constructs / categories that describe, classify, dehumanise

- The notion of 'face', imposes recognition of something beyond our sense of Self, our power

- Others separate from ourselves: the right to command power to act ethically.

- The face reveals persons' alterity or 'different-ness' ...of the Other is transcendence, supremacy, uniqueness  
'The face-to-face encounter is the source of responsibility, respect, and justice for the other'

- The face is also a phenomenon of gentleness, vulnerability, and suffering. This is how the face of the other person reveals their ethical content and challenges us to act responsibly



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# On intentions, motives, and outcomes

## NOT my intention

- to argue against advocacy
- to disparage our professional community's efforts (however humble), or
- to fall into the analysis/paralysis trap
- to demotivate by showing the potential complexities and contradictions in motives.

## My goal was in fact simple:

- retreat for a moment in order to better engage
- but to engage in a way that does not reduce the Other to the self

- We are inevitably classed, gendered, racialised  
- inevitably also saturated with norms and desires, preferences and sensibilities common to our respective groups.

- When we advocate, we are giving,  
- We can only give of what we have and are.  
- The ethical and political responsibility and challenge to truly listen, to truly serve.