



“Activists” contra democracy: the dangers of rightwing activism and its strategic disavowal

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Abstract

The word activism tends to conjure different imagery depending on the institutional and geopolitical context. However, in left progressive circles it has usually connoted something challenging towards or resistant to injustice, and aligned with broadly progressive and democratic values. As recently as 2012, social media were being lauded as a new means of progressive social change in a bouquet of other tools against autocracy in the Global South. Based on original interviews over the past five years, this article outlines starkly, and from an intersectional socialist-feminist perspective, the dangers of allowing a warm fuzzy conception of activism to divert attention from the fascist politics being enacted online across vast swathes of the Global South, including in Brazil and India.

Keywords: activism, far right violence, trolling of progressive activists, intersectional analysis, social media

Introduction

For the past five years I and my colleagues in multiple countries have been collecting the accounts of activists and ordinary people who *produce and forward* or *receive and survive* mediated hate. Alongside this research and in the years leading up to it, my projects investigated the potentials of various forms of media from films and television to the Internet for encouraging and emboldening pro-democratic and pro-justice activism (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Banaji & Mejias, 2020; Banaji & Moreno-Almeida, 2021). Emerging from the tension between techno-optimist and techno-pessimist accounts of the Internet, some of our initial work found both grounds for caution (online trolling, misogyny, professional and systematic disinformation against racial, religious and other minoritized groups; the growth of supremacist, far right conspiracy theorists) as well as some very specific usefulness to the online and burgeoning social media sphere (an assumed low-cost way of getting diverse opinions to a wider audience when mainstream media is controlled by rightwing or authoritarian ideologues; an invaluable tool for organization and connection, an archive of artistic and creative endeavor). However, increasingly, the types of activism facilitated by the online sphere have correctly been interrogated not only through their actual and intended political outcomes but also in terms of the connections between the far right, unaccountable tech billionaires, and neoliberal political-economic tendencies. One could almost express it in the dictum “Social justice costs; hate sells.”

The fringe becomes mainstream: far right activism’s liberal framing

In October 2022, Worker’s party candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) won a narrow majority in the Brazilian presidential elections. Behind the scenes of jubilation amongst Worker’s party activists and supporters lies a terrifying and

violent reality: large parts of the Amazon devastated by years of nihilist environmental neoliberalism, hundreds of land defenders dead, levels of homophobia and misogyny at an all-time high, and violence and legal harassment of scientists, doctors, and political leftists by conservatives and their chosen media outlets increasing over the past four years. In the wake of Jair Bolsonaro’s election in 2018, as with the election of a Hindu supremacist leader and party in India in 2014, came physical and digital mobs, many with supremacist imaginaries, using hate and lynching as tools of activism (Banaji, 2018; Banaji et al., 2019; Banaji & Bhat 2022; Pirro & Róna, 2019). All of these people, whether ideologues of the far right who blog and videocast about the movement or storm-troopers who intimidate progressive publics into silence, consider themselves to be “activists.” None of these authoritarian groups have ceased to be active just because their leader did not win an election. They are, in fact, continuing their activism, in church congregations, loggers’ organizations, local police-forces, online. Meanwhile, without the tireless organization, fortitude, and groundwork of hundreds of thousands from African descendant and Indigenous groups, Black and Brown feminists, land-defenders in the Amazon and those involved in Afro-Brazilian spiritual practices, de facto fascist leader Jair Bolsonaro and his government would have returned for a second term, as the Indian Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s leader Narendra Modi did in India in 2019, supported by far right party activists and online IT cells whose ideological support trolls form armies of hate.

Strategic othering: when your enemy’s enemy builds your movement

It is worth, however, pausing to engage with arguments which explain why far right and rightwing “activism” infiltrates mediated political vocabularies in ways that destigmatizes those involved even in violent actions on and offline. First, of course, is the political economic interconnection between

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those in government and those heading media and tech corporations. Second, coining the term “strategic frame ambiguity,” [Berntzen \(2019\)](#) whose own position about the so-called “liberal” component of contemporary far right activism is at times slightly ambiguous, argues that it is by maintaining a discursive veneer positioning their activism as upholding ideals such as “free speech” or “civilized values” that, for instance, Islamophobic parties and their activist cadres in Europe have managed to make alliance with some seemingly liberal and centrist movements and institutions. This has been the case with Islamophobic and racist parties in other countries too, including the BJP in India, and is also the case with large swathes of individuals and groups who call themselves Gender Critical and oppose trans rights by fear-mongering about threats to their freedom of speech and appealing to biological essentialist notions of womanhood. While activists of the BJP and of other far right Hindu chauvinist groups in India routinely connect themselves to the global far right via You Tube, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, by far their largest reach is within the Global South and the Indian diaspora through social media apps such as Telegram, WhatsApp and Messenger. In these spaces both national and transnational activists whose activism has been mainstreamed by the media (through a strategic incorporation of racist discourses as a defense of liberalism/civilization and a disavowal of extreme violence as “fringe”) can make calls for violence and/or genocide against refugees, Muslims, Black people, Indigenous people, and so on, with little chance of effective opposition ([Winter, 2019](#)).

Couched in the language of White or Hindu supremacy, patriarchal control, and misogyny, but also masquerading as a defense of women’s rights, liberal values, civilization, or democracy, the online hate directed at pro-trans, socialist, and pro-democracy activists in Brazil and India, as in Europe, the US and UK, by ubiquitous far right activists reflects intersectional patterns of historical oppression, discrimination, and violence. From the images of guns, nooses, crosses and rape sent to African-descendant, Indigenous, Dalit, and Muslim activists as death and rape threats, to the ubiquitous fetishization and dehumanization of their communities in mainstream and social media, the virality of hate transnationally is an extra burden that many ordinary people and progressive activists carry, affecting everything from their sense of physical security as they leave their homes to their mental health and the well-being of their families in the long term. And, as if this were not enough, they are subjected to elaborate scams and threats of spyware, with phone hacking, as well as legal and political harassment from the so-called “authorities” high on the list of issues to watch out for.

The toll of far right activism for progressive activists

In order to understand how radicalized rightwing activists target both ordinary people and activists from disenfranchised groups, let us briefly consider the everyday experiences of those targeted by institutional and independent far right activists as told to us and our researchers over multiple interviews and focus groups in the years between 2018 and 2022.

If you posted something about gender equality on Facebook, people write so obscenely, they start commenting on your private parts like vagina, breasts, on your

weight. They think that if you comment on a woman’s body, her sexuality, then she will feel shame and she will become silent. It is used as a tool [by Hindu fascists, upper caste men, even men from my community]. I face it every day so I have learned to deal with it by closing off my panic, by blocking, not thinking. But there are other girls who work with me [who cannot bear it]. (Dalit activist, India, 2021)

In India, hate is backed by the state (...) you can see that many [Muslims] have been beaten, arrested in the name of this term “love jihad.” You have seen how (...) lynching and hatred has become mainstream. I’m not saying this doesn’t happen to my counterparts in Pakistan: It has. It does. People start abusing just because of my name and my religion, even if I’m just commenting on cricket which leads to low mood, and friends, family telling to get offline. Nothing is fringe now. (Journalist, India, 2021)

My photo [as a woman journalist who fact-checks the far right] has been used again and again in rape threats, death threats, hate online. And getting Facebook or Twitter to take it down is no use when they [the fascist activists] have made a very well-produced dossier, documenting 2–3 pages about all of us liberal-left leaning journalists and fact-checkers across Brazil which they distribute openly. It’s a “watch-list” and they do more than watch us. (Journalist and information rights activist, Brazil, 2021)

The trouble is that even if I wanted to, if anti-racist, pro-trans, anti-misogyny activists wanted to, we could never, would never use the strategies of the far right. And we are not protected by the state, by the Church, like those far right cadres are. Their violence is considered activism in defence of religion, of the white cause. Our self-defence is considered as a crime, as illiberal because we are trying to stop them from expressing themselves, expressing their hate. The media plays into this narrative. The tech corporations definitely do. (Black feminist teacher, Brazil, 2021)

I didn’t even talk about the tremendous strain that being a queer, pro-trans activist puts on us every day. To feel so constantly hated and belittled, afraid at church, on the street, can’t watch the news, can’t walk into a bar without hearing hateful things but also angry and confused. What did we do, apart from ask for the right to life and dignity? And I know that some anti-trans activists do think they are fighting for their dignity and rights. But there’s a difference between real and imagined (Black LGBTQ student activist, UK, 2021).

Theorizing such testimonies suggests the importance of both political economic and critical race/critical caste frameworks: tie-ups between tech corporations, rightwing state parties, and far right activism leads to a downplaying of anti-Black, anti-Dalit, and Islamophobic othering as well as intersectional misogyny. In fact, where violence against citizens might be treated with caution or opprobrium, progressive activists appear to be fair game, when it comes to how the carceral state views the harms they endure. Trolling, violence, hate, and bad-faith legal action, as well as police complicity, and policy are then incorporated with - and become embodied forms of - strategic communication that undermine and delegitimize

further the rights, lives, and demands of historically minoritized and disenfranchised populations. Meanwhile it suits neoliberal and authoritarian activists of the right and far right to disavow the label activist, referring to themselves as “entrepreneurs,” “concerned citizens,” “pilgrims,” “volunteers,” or “party workers,” phrases which are often reported uncritically by journalists who share similar moral and political frameworks or even socialize with members of these groups. This, in turn, fuels the electoral success of the far right and builds alliances and financial resources for authoritarian take-overs of institutions and platforms.

Conclusion

Activism involves an enactment of principles with the aim of bringing about some form of societal change. Mainstream media and academia across the globe has often used the term “activist” in a derogatory or inflammatory manner to deride critics of capitalism, racism, and misogyny who work in communities, demonstrate or come to the streets, while disguising or disavowing the political actions and even the political violence of those with authoritarian and neoliberal goals. Meanwhile, naively perhaps, in progressive circles, the moral weight of political activism has too often been elided with ideals of fairness, equality, and justice. Yet there are far greater numbers of rightwing activists across the globe than of progressive ones, many with implicit or even explicit backing by governments and financial support from powerful elites. This allows their activism to be more systematic, more sustained, and more extreme, on and offline than their social justice oriented progressive counterparts. With this in mind, any simplistic assumption about who or what an *activist* is, or *activism* is, in the current context, must be relegated in favor of more theoretically and contextually nuanced analysis of the histories, goals, alliances, networks, and communities that “activists” come from, belong to, and work towards.

Data availability

The data associated with this research is explored more extensively in the book *Social Media and Hate* (2022) free to download (<https://www.routledge.com/Social-Media-and-Hate/Banaji-Bhat/p/book/9780367537272>), and in the free to download report WhatsApp Vigilantes ([https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/projects/WhatsApp-](https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/projects/WhatsApp-Misinformation-Report.pdf)

[Misinformation-Report.pdf](https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/projects/WhatsApp-Misinformation-Report.pdf)). The raw data are part of a data set protected for ethical reasons.

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