

University of Louisville

## ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository

---

College of Arts & Sciences Senior Honors  
Theses

College of Arts & Sciences

---

5-2023

### The philosophy of activism and its paradox.

Omar Arar  
*University of Louisville*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/honors>



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Arar, Omar, "The philosophy of activism and its paradox." (2023). *College of Arts & Sciences Senior Honors Theses*. Paper 299.

Retrieved from <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/honors/299>

This Senior Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Arts & Sciences Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. This title appears here courtesy of the author, who has retained all other copyrights. For more information, please contact [thinkir@louisville.edu](mailto:thinkir@louisville.edu).

**The Philosophy of Activism and its Paradox**

By

Omar Arar

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for Graduation *summa cum laude*

and

for Graduation with Honors from the Department of Philosophy (if pertinent)

University of Louisville

March, 2023

## Abstract

Activist organizations have been at the forefront of countless progressive efforts, seeking to ameliorate social injustices, expand the rights of marginalized people, and strengthen democratic institutions. However, the efforts of activists always seem to lead to incremental victories or a minimal change to the status quo. In this paper, I argue that the primary cause of this largely stagnant social justice landscape is the *professionalization* of activism. Activism in its professional form, as people who make a living out of their activist efforts, brings with it numerous issues, the most problematic among them is the manifestation a paradox. Namely, professional activism purports to work within the very system it seeks to interrogate and dismantle. They professionalize a negation of the norm in order to mobilize against it, an impossibility. What can be done to adequately address this professionalization? And are we able to free ourselves of these paradoxes that have become so pervasive within our efforts for change? I will attempt to find a sufficient answer to this question in five parts. In the first three sections, I investigate how activism has become professionalized, the mythos of activism, and two potential (yet unviable) options for change. In the fourth section, I outline the paradox of activism in detail. In the final section, I offer a potential “way out” of this paradox through professional activists’ self-awareness, of the risks they may constantly face and the paradox that can shut down their ability to call for change.

*Keywords:* activism, profession, ideology, disenchantment, Luxemburg, myth, spontaneity, Marcuse, non-profit, rationality, Adorno

## Lay Summary

Activism as a mode of action encompasses everything from lobbying to protesting for change and has been a recurrent focal point of many societal debates. The focus of this paper is to investigate activism and its *professionalization*, or, in other words, the process of activism becoming a source of income, through a philosophical lens. Professional activism may be influenced by different forms of oppression that diminish their ability to fight for change. This phenomenon leads to a distinct paradox concerning the position of professional activists, which I examine at length. The paradox of activism concerns the increased difficulty of creating change when professional activists adopt some social trends to make their work easier, while trying to change those *same* social trends. After looking at two unsatisfactory solutions to this paradox earlier in the paper, I argue for a potential solution. This comes in the form of a warning to all activists, professional and non-professional, of the dangers of this paradox and the risks associated with professionalization.

## § Introduction

Activism is among the most important methods of pushing for social change. For anyone who makes this work a key facet of their life, they are met with the long tradition of resistance that preceded them and commit to continuing this legacy. When any person becomes an activist (either through consistent work or a moment of protest), they usher in a new mode of living. Marcelo Svirsky in *Defining Activism* explains that “the life of an activist is marked by a sense of urgency, anxiety and alertness to a life under attack. It involves both a type of discomfort with the world, and a life-force seeking out the new” (2010, 177). Activism is defined by tension, where activists attempt to define an altogether new future and turn away from the dissatisfactory present they find themselves within. As such, the activist position is a radical one. Moreover, Svirsky’s account of urgency is practiced by the activist through agitation. A sense of momentum and immediacy is formed as activists demand immediate action for a given issue. Svirsky explains that “every activist-machine... comes into being... as a result of (a) given registers of the actualized world, and (b) new imaginations” (2010, 177). The activist’s machinations are a demand for these “registers”, or dissatisfactory elements of modernity, to mold into the “new imaginations”, or potential political futures.

However, there also seems to be a phenomenon that plagues our callings for change. Progressive efforts are simultaneously met by immense resistance in the form of reaction. What may result is an *almost-there* phenomenon, where we feel so close to radical shifts in the “status quo” while also being so far from this future. What is being fought for (or against) in this battle may be the rights of countless people and marginalized groups. Any potential for progress may be taken from activist organizations at any moment by counter-activist groups’ reactionary

impulse. The seemingly constant high stakes motivations for progressive activists, driven by a urge to define a new reality and a fear of sliding into reactionary tendencies, tends to be coupled with minimal victories or little change to the status quo. The motive of this paper is to investigate why such a stagnation may be occurring, and to provide an account of an alternative. Here, I critique activism and its *professionalization*, including the many problems that typically occur as a result of this process. The key difference between activism and its professional counterpart is the troubling paradox that manifests in the latter. This is due to fundamentally different methodologies and systemic pressures that actively influence professional activism writ-large. Finally, I hope to outline a potential solution out of this paradox, and how activists can be mindful of professional activism's risks.

But before we fully understand what is at stake in this critique of professional activism, I must clarify what I mean by the "status quo". How can we understand progress in relation to the current state of the world? And how does the status quo function in relation to activists seeking meaningful change? We may broadly define the status quo as our historically grounded social and political landscape. It is not static and absolutely unchanging, but rather, it includes a sense of progress that is well within its limits. And it is dynamic, meaning this landscape may move into relative reaction or relative progress in order to preserve its own existence. While this may initially sound like I am including all that exists into the idea of a "status quo", there are clear limits to its domain. "Progress" as I use it in this specific context relates to seemingly reasonable or imaginative changes to the state of affairs. As we will investigate shortly, while there have been meaningful markers of progress within the last two to three centuries, the underlying structures of capitalism remain in function (and in many cases, have strengthened legitimacy). While voter suffrage, the right to marriage, and workers' rights have all been expanded, the basic

mechanics underpinning all of these developments have remained the same. This mechanical underbelly of society, one closely integrated with (and defined by) capitalism, is the focal point of the status quo.

Due to this surprising consistency in the status quo's internal logic, progressive activists must always account for reaction when calling for any amount of disturbance to the state of affairs. Progress is intrinsically bound to a status-quo preserving group, as the existence of the latter is contingent upon the callings of progressive activists. Therefore, any potential gains that progressives achieve are constantly at risk of being erased by this other group. With the legalization of gay marriage comes the constant risk of dismantling this landmark law. The conversation around gay marriage largely never moves away from its existential defense, as there seems to almost be some amount of surface tension that may prevent activists from making radical and swift changes.

But exactly how is this status quo constructed, and what phenomenon makes it difficult for activists to dislodge this dynamic? To answer the former, this common perception of the current state of the world is a reflection of ideology and myth. Here, I borrow the notion of ideology from Herbert Marcuse, as a process that molds our needs, beliefs, and actions that we take to be both necessary and eternally justified. This is propped up by our wider social-political institutions, and the profound influence that capital materially has on every facet of life. From ideology comes the key ideas of one-dimensionality and false consciousness, both of which play vital roles in understanding the risks facing activism. For the latter, we may define one-dimensionality as an inability to truly criticize or understand reality from a multi-dimensional lens. Instead, modes of resistance are mediated by our false needs – or needs that have little connection to what we *actually* need in order to survive – and functions as a way to strengthen

the position of the status quo. The ability to negate what reality purports to be (as is ideologically communicated) largely disappears. For the former, false consciousness is the perceptual façade that purports to be the *actual* state of our own conditions and the world at-large.

On the other hand, my understanding of myth is based off of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, whereby rational (or enlightened) thinking is an extension, if not intensification, of myths of ages past. A desire to map out all that exists from an objective point of view inevitably creates a human-centered narrative, leading to a purported rationalization being a mythification. Both groups of concepts, largely concerning ideology and myth respectively, have massive implications for the systemic effectiveness of activism. In order to tie the problematic nature of the status quo (and its composite parts) to professional activism, we must understand what the "professional" looks like in an activist lens. Moreover, I argue that activism's professionalization was a historically grounded phenomenon, therefore it is useful for us to understand how this process occurred. In my critique of professional activism, I will borrow from sociologist Max Weber's conception of the profession, from his *Vocation Lectures*. Made up of two main lecture series, the first being *Science as a Vocation* in 1917 and *Politics as a Vocation* delivered in 1919, Weber's analysis illuminates the professional activist's function. In both, he explains that professional politicians either live for politics (as in, primarily not due to the financial incentive of engaging in politics) or live from politics (or making their primary livelihood out of politics). Moreover, he argues that with any profession that deals with scholarship, a disenchantment of the world takes place that greatly affects the actions and behaviors that are expected of professionals. I will examine all these key concepts in greater detail. First, I will clarify the relationship between professional politicians and activism, then I will explain how professional activism incentivizes a disenchanting outlook on the world. In the



third section, my critique will give way to describing a troubling paradox. Finally, I examine if there is a potential way out of this paradox and the multitude of risks that activism faces.

### § *The Professionalization of Activism*

To begin on a primary level, I will look at Weber's definition of the political profession. In his *Politics as a Vocation*, Weber explains that two variants of the 'political' profession are living *for* politics and living *from* politics. For a professional who lives for politics, they engage in political action out of an interest in the field. At no point are they compelled to do so at risk of losing their livelihood. Instead, a person finds a sense of purpose, and in doing so, they engage in political action as a part-time endeavor<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, someone who lives *from* politics seeks to "make it their permanent source of *income*" (Weber [1919] 2004, 40). Here, they are incentivized to work to engage in politics due to a financial incentive. This is not to say, however, that the professional living from politics does not have altruistic aims. On the contrary, they may have chosen this vocation out of a virtuous desire to engage in politics justly, but this additional income adds a layer of complexity to their political process.<sup>2</sup>

Countless other leadership activities or organizations may push to influence the policies of a nation, such as think tanks, large interest groups or businesses, as well as activist

---

<sup>1</sup> Living *for* politics is also typically reserved for the wealthy, as a prerequisite for pursuing this line of work is a semblance of comfort, whether from property or capital. Due to this, there is a clear class divide between living *for* and *from* politics. While the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, professionals making a living from their political work have entirely different material interests from those who are strictly working *for* politics

<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is not necessarily mutually exclusive that one either lives for or from politics, *both* can manifest in the same individual's livelihood. There may be a significant portion of one's income that derives from political endeavors, while also holding monetary/business interests in other spheres of their life.

organizations. In fact, Weber makes clear that “living from politics” is not only reserved for politicians or government officials, elaborating that it is “the leadership, or the exercise of influence on the leadership, of a *political organization*, in other words a *state*” (Weber 2004, 32). This position of living *from* politics is where the professional activist finds themselves, since they make a livelihood out of these political endeavors. Their work in activism constitutes an attempt to exercise some form of influence upon the state (e.g., encouraging policy change). In effect, they are paid to call for change. This professionalized form of activism has enjoyed proliferation in the contemporary landscape. Pier-Paolo Pasqualoni and Alan Scott in *Fate in a Contemporary Social Movement/NGO* (2005) explain that “A number of political sociologists and analysts of social movements have noted... the increasing professionalization of collective action” (154). Speaking from the vantage point of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, this professionalization of activism is in stark contrast to the general mechanics of activism outlined by Svirsky. But in what ways does professional activism differ from activism at-large, and *how* was activism professionalized in the first place?

One historical trend that provides some clues is the rise of the *project-oriented regime*. From a Weberian perspective, Pasqualoni and Scott argue that the project-oriented regime is a marker of a new chapter, or ‘spirit’, within Capitalism’s history. They explain that this ‘new spirit’ “emerges as a response to, indeed partial absorption of, the capitalism critique of the 1960s” (Pasqualoni and Scott, 2005 150). The place of a stereotypical industrialist within a seemingly bygone era is challenged by the prevalence of temporary contracts, networking within business, entrepreneurialism, and ‘project-oriented’ work. Not only this, but an increased emphasis on ‘personal freedom’ (that being the potential freedom to choose one’s workplace, or to personalize one’s work in a superficial manner) finds a central role in our lives, as a result of

systemic critiques found within the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That is, protest movements of the 1960s that sought to combat the most egregious aspects of capitalism have been quelled (in part) by superficial changes to the status quo. Instead of a radical shift to a different mode of society, this project-oriented phase is merely a continuation of past capitalist attitudes, but the distinction is that these “already present aspects of capitalist production have recently... taken on a central legitimizing function” (Pasqualoni and Scott, 2005 151) to capitalism at-large. Project-oriented work is now the lifeline of capitalism, meaning that a sense of entrepreneurialism and this same emphasis on personal freedom have pervaded nearly all aspects of society. Pasqualoni and Scott explain that the worker now exists within an environment where “results trump correctness”, and if this is followed, they are rewarded with “an increase in *employability*” (Pasqualoni and Scott, 2005 152)<sup>3</sup>.

The material shift towards project-oriented work in the activist sphere is evident with the proliferation of the non-profit (or NGO) model<sup>4</sup>. This, I argue, is a key signifier of activism’s professionalization. Andrea Smith in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (2007) gives us a historical account of the increase in NGOs, stating that “Since the late 1970s, social justice organizations within the US have operated largely within the 501(c)(3) non-profit model, in which donations made to an organization are tax deductible, in order to avail themselves of foundation grants” (INCITE! 2). This donation model to social

---

<sup>3</sup> Scott and Pasqualoni simultaneously take this increase to be relative to previous stages within capitalism’s development, as well as an increase in the *promise* of employability. This follows, as their previous argument explains that this ‘new spirit’ of capitalism is merely a redress of the same underlying modes of production. This meager relative increase is coupled with an unending illusion (or promise) that, if one were to shift priorities according to this new spirit, then they will be rewarded (regardless of the chances that this truly occurs).

<sup>4</sup> To be fair, there may also be *grassroots* organizations, or a group that is funded in large part by a multitude of small donors and may enjoy a wider base of popular support, that follows a similar funding and structural model. This includes professional activists playing a large part in their organization. However, this is context specific to each organization and additional research is required in order to delineate the different modes of grassroots activism.

justice organizations incentivizes the creation of an activist class that lives *from* these foundation and government grants<sup>5</sup>. This, coupled with capitalism's absorption of critique to create a new entrepreneurial model of the individual, greatly incentivizes the professionalization of activism. Instead of altruistic or ephemeral pushes for change that is ultimately limited by time and funding, a professional activist can now push for this same change that they *really* believe in seemingly without these limits. This opportunity is afforded to them due to the ability to live from their activism, just as the Weberian politician can derive a source of income from their work. Upon further examination of this new model of activism, however, we find numerous potential problems.

To begin to see why professional activists occupy a disadvantaged position (relative to non-professional activism), we must look at their personal and professional fates. One's professional fate is their trajectory and existence within an organization, in this case a non-profit activist organization. Given the characteristics expected of an activist within this professional framework, where do they end up? On the other hand, one's personal fate is their *entire* life trajectory. While professional fate is tied to the organization, personal fate is purely about the individual. However, Pasqualoni and Scott explain that for professionals, "[o]ur personal fate cannot – or can no longer – be disentangled from our professional fate" (2005 148). The fate of one's being within a profession is also inherently tied to their fate as a whole. 'What becomes of them?' is no longer restricted to the professional. Instead, their professional actions, attitudes, callings, and trajectory have a weak distinction from their personal being. In practical terms, we

---

<sup>5</sup> Pasqualoni and Scott make a distinction between grassroots (or social movement) efforts and the NGO, stating that while the former is "on a collision course with established political forces, NGOs seek to become co-drivers and to participate in governance" (2005 156). Of course, there may be grassroots organizations that simultaneously hold to the non-profit model to some extent, and non-profit organizations in general may be more fluid in their activist approach.

may see this with one's professional fate if they were to be laid off from their profession in the political sphere. In this scenario, their professional and personal fate collapse into one whole, as they lived from their politics to make a livelihood. Once this support ceases, they are both (personally and professionally) at risk of losing access to their immediate needs, such as food, shelter, and other necessities.

This conflation between personal and professional fate, spurred by the activist non-profit model, is precisely the source of many problems of professional activism. As the professional activist derives their entire livelihood from their work, and as their entire fate is wrapped into it as well, they are in a vulnerable position. That is, the source of their income is from government and foundation grants, meaning they must seemingly call for change on a structural level while deriving income from businesses that may benefit from these same oppressive structures. Dylan Rodriguez in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* outlines a negative consequence of this association between professional activists and their funders: the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC). They explain that the NPIC is "a set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist social movements" (INCITE! 8)<sup>6</sup>. The non-profit – and the professionalization of activism at-large – create a simultaneously powerful and powerless resistance. Powerful, in the resources afforded to the non-profit and the potential breadth of its work; but powerless in *actually* reaching their goals. This close association between potential oppressors (as in, businesses and government organizations that benefit from *no* change to the status quo) and potential resisters to this oppression (with

---

<sup>6</sup> A clarification is needed for this definition. When Rodriguez is referring to "public political ideology", they are referring to public opposition to established political practices, as well as potentially subversive elements of activist movements. In general, ideology is used in this paper to refer to Herbert Marcuse's conception of the term.

professional activists included in the umbrella of non-profit activist organizations) creates an environment that is not favorable to change.

By virtue of receiving external funding from government and business organizations, an unfortunate conflict of interest may manifest. This material connection between their funders, who benefit from the status quo, and their organizational aims of fighting for a new future, creates a dependency that favors these funders. What results is professional activism potentially creating a “policing” or “monitoring” resistance, warping any effective negations of the status quo into pacified forms. Non-profits become an arm of the problem itself, rather than the tools that will be used to challenge it. Moreover, even if individual activists were to climb these same systems of oppression to move them in the correct direction, they would not be able to create lasting change. Just as I am outlining the many risks that can hinder professional activism’s ability to call for change, so to is there a possibility for a select few to “climb the ladder” of success. However, their very existence as going from perceived outsiders to helming colossal institutions serves a pacifying function. It is incredibly likely that a single individual will not be able to make a radical difference to the status quo – even in this powerful position – but other peoples’ perceptions of him/her as one who *is* making radical difference legitimizes the whole body (whether it be a business, political party, or country). Therefore, professional activists may not find much success by going the other direction – to join the ranks of the oppressors in order to change the future for the better.

The non-profit industrial complex and the conflation between personal and professional fates are both material manifestations of deeper issues: ideology and one-dimensionality. Both concepts will be taken Marcuse’s *A Note on Dialectic* ([1960] 2007) and *One-Dimensional Man* ([1964] 1991). We may understand ideology as what molds our needs, beliefs, and actions that

we take to be both necessary and eternally justified. He explains that “[t]he most effective and enduring form of warfare against liberation is the implanting of material and intellectual needs that perpetuate obsolete forms of the struggle for existence” (Marcuse 1991, 7)<sup>7</sup>. Such needs for the professional activist as a wish for a comfortable retirement or stable job due to precarious living conditions all obfuscate any true form of liberation, and instead perpetuate hollow desires. True needs (such as the need for safety, stability, food, shelter, etc.) are all but forgotten in this model, or made secondary.

Moreover, these false needs and beliefs that materially work against our own best interests create a sense of false consciousness – that is – a mirage of a true understanding of our own conditions and the world at-large. This account of ideology is pertinent to understanding the strength of the project-oriented regime, that being its ability to effectively absorb capitalist critique. Initial immediate needs, such as a desire for food, shelter, and other absolute necessities that were the basis for these initial capitalist criticisms, were turned on their head. Instead of what we really need for survival, false needs supplant them. Marcuse explains that false consciousness creates an environment with “neither criticism nor change; on the contrary, insistence on the dynamic character of the status quo, on its constant ‘revolutions,’ is one of the strongest props for this attitude” (2007, 445). What occurred after the 20<sup>th</sup> century critiques that Pasqualoni and Scott brought up, then, is one of these *revolutions*. By redirecting the cries for safe and livable conditions<sup>8</sup> into acceptable avenues of resistance, these initial threats are

---

<sup>7</sup> While Marcuse refers to the socio-political context of the 1960s during the time of his writing, his theory still holds relevance to today. The subsuming of capitalist critiques into institutional power structures, so as to strengthen them, is still an observable phenomenon, according to Pasqualoni and Scott.

<sup>8</sup> This is a vast reduction of what the protest movements looked like in the 1960s. Issues of racism, segregation, homophobia, transphobia, war mongering and classism were all brought to the forefront of discussion during this period.

pacified. Our immediate needs are turned into mediated needs, with a new sense of entrepreneurial mobility offered as a means to obtaining forms of survival.

Not only this, but the act of resistance *itself* is not immune to this treatment. Acceptable resistance is constructed as a favorable one, where one's livelihood may be derived from fighting for change. Ironically, however, by fighting to ameliorate the shortage of immediate needs afforded to others, professional activists are constantly at risk of losing their own immediate needs. Therefore, as the activist's immediate needs are distorted by a false need to professionalize their existence (in order to seemingly access these same immediate needs), their ability to fight for the survival of others is severely limited by the threat of losing their main source of income. Thus, the creation of the project-oriented regime was an ideological one. Activists sought to revolutionize the world while being able to securely sustain themselves from this same work. The result, however, was the precarious conflation between their personal and professional fate. If they advocate for a future that is far outside the norms of the status quo, their position of safety could be eliminated due to the activist's reliance on state funding. The same state, coincidentally, that proliferates (and gains profit from) the current state of things. Therefore, the professionalization of activism leads to a mediated and eternally non-threatening call for change.

Instead of the need for force to change our outlook on the world, the antidote to liberation is this form of a sinister but seemingly passive social control. These callings for change from professional activists tend to advocate for a slightly different form of the status quo. This loss of a substantive revolution constitute the ontology of *one-dimensionality*. When the power of negative thinking, that is, being able to conceive of what may exist outside of a distortion of reality, is not available, people are reducible down to their false needs and wants.



Professional activists, like everyone else, stand at great risk of becoming the mirrors of ideology that subjugates them, with other modes of potentially effective resistance relegated to the backwaters of imagination. As Marcuse explains in *A Note on Dialectic*, “Here the principle of dialectic drives thought beyond the limits of philosophy. For to comprehend reality means to comprehend what things really are, and this in turn means rejecting their mere factuality” (Marcuse 2007, 446). The superficial nature of reality and the associated constructed needs, desires, and perceived power of cultural forces lead to the almost unreachable status of *true* critique. As the fates of professional activists collapse from their professional and personal lives into one whole, they are reduced to one dimension.

To thoroughly comprehend reality for what it really is allows for a rejection of ideological norms, to be able to negate this one-dimensional existence offers hope according to Marcuse. He explains that “the language of negation as the Great Refusal to accept the rules of a game in which the dice are loaded” (2007, 448). But what exactly is the ‘Great Refusal’, and how does it remedy the issues presented by the professionalization of activism? Broadly speaking, The Great Refusal is taken as a *refusal to go along*. It is a rejection of prevailing ideological notions, leading to a distancing of oneself from one-dimensionality. Marcuse explains that “The liberating function of negation in philosophical thought depends upon the recognition that the negation is a positive act: that-which-is *repels* this-which-is-not and, in doing so, repels its own real possibilities” (2007, 447). Negation is positive insofar as it creates *new* possibilities. The status quo’s eternal justifications never offer any hope for change (i.e. repels un-actualized futures), meaning that constructing a position that is in any way positively associated with the status quo will only serve to reproduce it.

This includes professional activists. Even if they have the urgency and feeling of a ‘life under attack’, their status as a *professional*, or more specifically, one who derives income from foundation and government grants, is a positive one. They become entrepreneurs of change, holding onto the same mechanics of their profession as anyone else in a project-oriented regime. Instead of wholly negating the status quo, they become a part of it. Therefore, the concept of this refusal, and the associated creation of an authentic language that directly challenges and negates ideological norms, holds wide-reaching implications for professional activism. With this newfound conception, we may be able to shift our understanding of professional fate and decouple it from our wishes for radical change. Moreover, refusing to go along allows for resistance to internalizing, and working in accordance with, established practices in the wider reaches of capitalism that are reflected down to the organization and interpersonal level for the activist. Marcuse’s conception of resistance may ultimately allow us to work away from the conflation between personal and professional fate and leave the concept of the professional activist in the dustbin of history. Instead of a meaningless positive outlook, we construct a truly radical alternative to the world. Our false needs are left behind as we walk away from the entirety of the system itself. From this commitment to refusal, we are closer to our *actual* needs, of the need for shelter, food, and survival, than the professional activist ever was in their eternally insecure position.

Despite the apparent promises of the Great Refusal, there is one glaring issue to the theory. Namely, how is solidarity constructed in a seemingly individualistic act of a refusal to go along? How can the language of the Great Refusal be communicated with others, without itself being twisted into a mode of ideological oppression? Unfortunately, there does not seem to be much room in Marcuse’s theory at-large for us to be able to communicate the intricacies of this

refusal with one another, and there is not an effective way of doing so. Even if one person were to live in this state of negation, what effect could it have, and how could it be relayed from person to person without its central focus being lost? We may say that in the process of exchanging this information, or even through one seeing another living in a state of negation, a one-dimensional perspective may extract superficial notions of resistance that inevitably reinforce activism's convenient professionalization, while discarding the rest. This failure in communication inevitably strengthens the status quo.

An initial *absolute* may be translated into a mediated 'absolute'. A total refusal for one to accept the limits of activism as enforced by the professional may be translated into refusing to accept the limits of activism that does not *quantitatively benefit society*. That is, the great refusal to engage in a professional activism that emphasizes 'results' and constructs a façade of freedom, would inevitably be communicated as a refusal to engage in activism that gives *poor results* and one that does not afford us *superficial freedom*. And while, on an individual level, activists may become resisters to the status quo in multiples, this commitment largely runs counter to the pressures that are brought on by ideology itself. Therefore, in whatever manner a refusal is seemingly communicated, this message has a tendency towards reinforcing the status quo, just as the mid-century critique (outlined by Pasqualoni and Scott) prolonged capitalism's eternal status. The core practices of the great refusal may be lost in translation due to the overbearing effects of ideology and false consciousness, leading to deepening contradictions and the fomenting of further suffering. A positive 'negation' only leads to a silent protest.

### § *The Mythos of Activism*

After looking at the relationship between professional politics and activism, as well as the professionalization of activism, I will now explore the status of myth in this context. To articulate my argument, I will turn back to Weber's *second* conception of the profession as outlined in *Science as a Vocation*. First, I must make a crucial distinction. Weber does not theorize a science-oriented professional as someone who *solely* deals with the natural sciences. In this lecture series, he originally uses the German term *Wissenschaft*, which, according to the translator of the text Rodney Livingstone "means 'science' but in actuality can refer to any academic discipline or body of knowledge" (Livingstone in Weber, 2004, 1). Weber is less concerned with specific domains and more so uses the term to refer broadly to the acquisition of information through any and all disciplines. Here, within the ever-expanding bodies of knowledge that attempt to rationalize all aspects of reality, lies the concept of *disenchantment*. Weber asserts that "we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*. That in turn means the disenchantment of the world" (Weber 2004, 13). As we continue to expand our collective knowledge through extensive data collection, calculations, and observations, we learn how to control those same elements of our reality. We gain a sense of dominion *over* aspects of reality, instead of perceiving endless distant mysteries in past ages. Disenchantment, then, is the de-mystifying of all that is unknown to human beings. This de-mystification touches on all points of life, leading to a rationalized and intellectualized totality (reality). The prophetic or mythical that has characterized past ages only continues to exist in the most minute of interpersonal connections (if at all).

Professional activism largely operates within similarly disenchanted parameters, as not only does the activist live *from* their work on an individual level, but their status as a professional

incentivizes them to have a rational outlook on the world. For example, in relation to the law a professional activist may not “explain *whether* such a thing as law should exist and *whether* these particular rules should be adopted” (Weber 2004, 19)<sup>9</sup>. Instead, rational and adherence to the law is encouraged. This can include a push towards changing government policies or a call for reinforcement of others, and all the professional activist’s actions are confined to a strictly legal perspective. Disobedience is dissuaded both through the risk of them losing their livelihood and an aversion to seemingly irrational means of struggle. Proposals for alternative understandings of ‘legality’ are either discouraged through the mechanics of the contemporary legal framework or not taken seriously. Therefore, it is in the professional activist’s best interest to follow dominant legal tendencies.

However, this rationale of the professional activist and their disenchanting outlook on the world propagates *myth*. To explain how this is possible for a ‘mythos of activism’ (as I call it) to be constructed out of a seemingly rational position, I will borrow from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1947] 2002) connections between myth and enlightenment. The current attitudes of rationalization and intellectualization as described by Weber originated with the birth of ‘The Enlightenment’ at approximately the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>10</sup>, and related ‘revolutions’ of science and reason sprang up from this tendency. A central tenet of the movement was to inoculate oneself from the lure of myth, including all variants of

---

<sup>9</sup> Weber also uses the example of a doctor tending to his patient. Rather than the doctor asking, “whether this life is valuable and when” they ask, “what should we do *if we wish to make use of technology* to control life?” (Weber 2004, 18). The doctor, therefore, controls the life of another as a purely technical expression. As a clockface naturally turns due to the powered motion of internal gears, so too does the professional (as a mechanical node among many) naturally treat the patient to sustain their life, irrespective of any impersonal element that is denied in this interaction.

<sup>10</sup> While this criticism may be placed towards a historical phenomenon from centuries prior to what is being discussed here, the relevance of enlightenment reveals itself to us when we consider its infinitely reproduced status. Ideas from the enlightenment have been carried into (and indeed, justified) aspects of modernity, especially the contemporary modes of activism

‘mysticism’ and religious authority, and commit the self to disenchantment, so that the world becomes – from the eyes of humanity – a strictly objective domain.

However, as enlightenment developed, it became myth in its own right. Adorno and Horkheimer explain this further, stating that “[m]yth becomes enlightenment and nature mere objectivity. Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted... The man of science knows things to the extent that he can make them” (2002, 6). The objective world is a mythical creation of enlightened thinking, in that we map out all the phenomena we witness in *relation to ourselves*. Nature becomes mere objectivity in the sense of what nature can do for us, how we may exploit it or control it. A tree, for example, is understood as based around the softness of its wood, its growing time until harvest, and its response to load-bearing stresses, all important when we wish to control it for its use in construction. We gain a sense of autonomy, self, and morality out of this seemingly rational perception of reality, instead of supernatural or mythical forces seemingly controlling all of these on our behalf. In this way, then, we may map out all the phenomena we witness. What animated the world with magic is now quantified with a steadfast, reasoned approach.

It is precisely this perception of the world that is a *myth*. Myth, in that we are imposing a narrative of the world centered on the Anthropocene. Even as enlightenment purported to rid us of baselessness, its narrative of reality is no more valid than the mythical sagas of ages past. The focus on rationality is placed within a fundamentally irrational world, one that is not centered on humanity, nor our perceptions of it. The professional activist’s outlook, then, is merely a narrative that constructs the world in our favor. Just as a religion may not be able to accommodate entities outside its grand narrative, what *materially exists* outside of our rational perception is inaccessible. The tree holds some form of existence outside of what it does for us,

however, this conception is impossible to reach, due to the selfish mechanics of enlightenment. Therefore, a distance is constructed between enlightened ‘reality’ from what reality *really* is.

The rational world is reducible to concepts, and by extension, our understanding of other people as well. Anything *outside* of this perspective of reality is to be feared and potentially eliminated. If a given object (or person) falls outside this narrative, if we cannot transition this *thing* from an unknown to a known, and if it cannot be instrumentalized, then we fear its very existence. Our attempts to impose our understanding of materiality fundamentally fail, and as a result, this gap in the grand narrative of enlightenment must be closed outright. Professional activism pressures activists to quantify their callings, by focusing on the results of their processes and leaving nothing to the unknown. However, if a person’s lived experience, beliefs, or personal history falls outside what can be measured, or what can be generalized into a progress report, then this gap can be an immense threat to the activist’s work.

In order to mitigate these risks to the grand narrative of enlightenment, rationality is made a powerful judge against what cannot be understood. After all, if we cannot come to a reasonable understanding of this person’s social existence, that must mean (according to the professional activist) that they escape the technologically advanced and morally sophisticated grounds of modernity. If they truly fall outside the bounds of rationality, of an objective approach to morality, then their account *clearly* has an inherent fault. This newfound role as judge allows for the enlightenment to distance itself from its status as myth. As Adorno and Horkheimer explain, “Mythology itself set in motion the endless process of enlightenment by which... every definite theoretical view is subjected to the annihilating criticism that it is only a belief, until even... enlightenment itself [has] been reduced to animistic magic” (Adorno, Horkheimer 2002, 7). This unending process of criticizing alternate perceptions of the world in

favor of a *true* reality, only for this position to be annihilated by its own criticism, has intensified under enlightenment and arguably reached its highest form. This intensification, through scientific convention and modes of operation, leads to criticism, subsequently to fear, evolving into horror, becoming myth and a criticism of its own totality. Thus, we can see the effects of disenchantment and enlightenment lapsing into their predecessors, that of enchantment and myth. What seems to be a radical break from previous forms of animism is, rather, an altogether new “mythic terror” (2002, 22), distinct in its ferocity and barbarism.

This scientific rationale is integral to professional activism. Under this professional framework, activists ought to create a calculation between wage and action. That is, what amount of action is permissible (or possible), given the parameters that they are working within. They are incentivized to calculate how much of the grant money they receive can be allocated towards an issue they want to address, versus how much they can use for their income. Furthermore, they must consider how much of this possible action can be quantifiable and reproducible, so that the grant money can continue to flow to their non-profit. Professional activists may measure certain trends (or create new ones) surrounding a social issue that, despite the statistics’ practical use, reflects little about that issue in the real world. If activists fall into the many pitfalls of professionalization, this leads to them being judges of what constitutes suffering worth fighting for. If the fight cannot be understood nor explained in rational terms by the person harmed, then *they must be at fault*. This self-management of activist callings is troubling, as the agitation and resistance offered by professional activists are severely limited. This incentive to judge others exists for the activist *even if* they are altruistic in their drive for helping others. Every individual in this framework is at risk of falling into this type of rationality.



To be specific, the rationality I am speaking of here in relation to professional activism is *instrumental rationality*. While one may read Adorno as condemning rationality broadly speaking, he is speaking of human-centered rationality that is borne out of enlightened thinking. Similarly, instrumental rationality is precisely the problem, and one that reinforces the paradox of activism. Instrumental rationality, like the selfish characteristics of its enlightened predecessor, focuses on the motives of the activist. In effect, they instrumentalize their fight for change, and most importantly, the people whom they wish to help. Social issues that are framed within established rational means (such as fighting for the wellbeing of the working class through passing favorable welfare policies) becomes a personal endeavor. How much can I get paid for working towards this goal? How close would I be to sustaining myself if I align myself to fighting for this issue? And how much do I have to lose if I fight for an irrational position? The person harmed is a concept that exists *for* the professional activist's goals. They are merely a node within a wider calculation. As such, this scientific approach to calling for change both instrumentalizes their fellow humans while dehumanizing them. Professional activists have much to lose in fighting for the lived experience of someone who falls outside these rational bounds of 'reality'. The calculation between wage and action is not favorable to this 'someone' within the equation, they are a concept for the activist to avoid. Therefore, as the activist chooses favorable narratives to fight for, they are constructing a mythology of their own. This rational calculus, an action of self-policing, is alien to the true nature of the social injustices proliferating in modernity. What is seen and acted upon, instead, is an unjust mirage, and the lives of a countless many are silenced<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup>This brings into question the idea of *epistemic erasure*. That is, if someone is not able to articulate their grievances through the discourse of professional activism (so that it receives recognition through established

A distinction must be made between different forms of professional activism before we tread further. First, it is entirely feasible for activism to be professionalized without any influence of state or business funding. Communities seeking protection, recognition, or expansion of their rights may pool their resources in order to create a separate class of professional activists. This group, separate from the preceding models of funding as they derive their income directly from the people they represent, may largely avoid the pressures, and risks that professional activists who derive their livelihood from businesses and the state experience. Therefore, professional activists who skirt past the material influences of the status quo are largely not affected by the paradox of activism. Professional activism, therefore, is not *intrinsically* the wrong approach to fomenting change. However, how professional activism is commonly constructed: as being absolutely tied to the non-profit<sup>12</sup>, of creating and simultaneously being a symptom a mythological activism, is where many risks manifest. Community-driven professionals may construct a form of professionalism that runs in complete independence from their paradoxical counterparts, as the material basis for their existence largely precludes any reliance on the status quo's sense of progress. What occurs, instead, is a relationship that is immediately dictated by the needs of the oppressed.

As a countertrend to this troubling phenomenon, we may look to Rosa Luxemburg's idea of revolutionary spontaneity to combat this perfectly rational irrationality. Her position may provide hope in ameliorating the calculating and instrumentalizing nature of professional activists. To examine this viewpoint, we will look to Paulina Tambakaki's analysis of Luxemburg's arguments in *Why Spontaneity Matters: Rosa Luxemburg and Democracies of*

---

funding and support mechanisms), then it is not seen as rational, and their lived experience is silenced. After all, the professional activist is supposedly acting on rational grounds.

<sup>12</sup> Here I am solely referring to non-profits that are funded by the state, businesses, or wealthy donors.

*Grief*. Tambakaki begins with defining spontaneity in a general context, explaining that it “designates an impulsive and short-lived reaction to an event or situation. Spontaneous reactions are often assumed to be unplanned... and unpredictable” (2021, 85). Political theorists generally take spontaneous actions to be inconsequential in virtue of their unplanned and chaotic nature. These events, some may claim, do not have the potential to bring any real change.

However, this preceding viewpoint is in stark contrast to Luxemburg’s conception of spontaneity within a wider revolutionary tradition. For her, spontaneous action is the groundwork for the revolutionary strike, as they are “the expression, if not culmination, of a period of class struggle aiming at the socialist transformation of society” (Tambakaki, 2021, 87). Luxemburg believes that this basis for class struggle is a manifestation of people’s frustrations and outrage when the contradictions inherent to capitalism become so severe that a breaking point is reached. More specifically, Tambakaki explains that for Luxemburg, spontaneity illuminates three important realities for the working class.

First, it is the most appropriate and immediate reaction that one has when grappling with the “totality of their condition” (2021, 88). That is, when viewing one’s life and the life of others in a holistic manner and understanding the threads of injustice woven within and in between their lives, spontaneity and radical action capture this realization through its immediate rejection of capitalism. Second, spontaneous action is fundamentally a self-expression, meaning that the grievances expressed by people are not directed to them by any other party, but it is rather a ground-up initiative. And finally, these actions give credence to “the potential for new forms of organization, including that of a council democracy” (2021, 88-89), leading to a long-lasting imaginative expansion of what methods of organization are deemed possible. Tambakaki explains that, as a result, spontaneous actions are “both important catalysts for change– helping

to raise the critical consciousness that will initiate such change— and manifestations of preparation and awakening” (2021, 89). It is this foundation of action that leads to such forms of ‘awakening’, where the prospects of a truly democratic reality may be on the horizon, and something that is tangible to everyone.

Instead of a seemingly ‘measured’ response, that is, a planned protest that adequately uses the resources of established organizations, or strategic pressures applied to governing bodies using participatory measures (such as lobbying, think tanks, or writing and/or calling government officials), spontaneous action is a seemingly irrational, sudden, and meteoric shock to the contemporary state of activism (and the world at-large). This holds the potential to tear apart the prevailing mythos of activism at its seams, directly challenging the catastrophic instrumentalization that professional activists take part in. Non-profits are left scrambling to catch up to the demands of the protestors and facilitate their continued efforts. The channels of power are flipped in this scenario, where the callings of these organizations are now molded by the wishes of protestors, instead of the other way around.

This is explained by Luxemburg herself in *Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy* (1904), stating that “in general, the tactical policy of the Social Democracy is not something that may be “invented.” It is the product of a series of great creative acts of the often spontaneous class struggle seeking its way forward” (Luxemburg, 2021). While she is speaking in the context of the (then, recent) Russian Revolution of 1917, parallels in agenda setting during times of rupture during her time can be drawn to the present-day, due to the immense influence professional activists have in the political sphere. Within Luxemburg’s time as well as the potential for spontaneous action today, the agenda was not ‘invented’ by leading professional activists or party leaders, but rather through the collective outrage of the populace.

Therefore, to meet the needs of those they purport to represent, radical propositions must be adopted by governing bodies and organizations, to the chagrin of their leaders.

This immediacy directly challenges pre-existing narratives, and has the potential to ameliorate any sense of alienation due to its historically grounded position. By directly combating the constructed mythos of activism and the terror of myth itself, people are able to address their own material conditions and historical grievances that have led to this breaking point. It is a challenge to the oppressive rationale, a diversion away from a nonsensical perspective of the 'world'. Therefore, the seemingly irrational position of these spontaneous actors is legitimized by the proximity they hold to their own condition, and they create a groundwork for universal solidarity. There are, however, some issues with spontaneity as articulated by Luxemburg in this context, particularly in two forms. Chiefly, if one is not careful spontaneity may fall into myth in its own right. The possibility of liberation through spontaneous class struggle may be reified as it progresses, by virtue of its own unplanned nature. If the central tenet of such a movement is merely a sense of frustration, this feeling can (as had been done with the critiques of the 1960s) be hijacked with false consciousness trumping the true needs of the masses. Eventually, this initially devastating blow to the system becomes part and parcel of its functioning, thereby repeating the project-oriented regime's origin in systemic critique. Ultimately, spontaneous action runs the risk of being co-opted by professional activist methodologies and falling into similar issues of the one-dimensional struggle that were outlined in the previous section.

Moreover, spontaneity may conceivably be used by activists with a reactionary tendency, similar to individuals I mentioned near the beginning of the paper. Harmful spontaneity, as I deem it, functions as a meteoric reaction to whatever potential change may take place. While

revolutionary spontaneity is spurred by the material destitution of the working class, spontaneous outrage can be fomented by ideology. For example, the false consciousness of the working class may demand that they spontaneously rise up in response to expansion of trans peoples' rights. While this has little to no negative effect on their material conditions (and if this same reaction succeeds, they *will* actually feel the negative effects of it), they may hold a false need to protect the sanctity of their community, in which trans people are perceived as a threat. This, and other political issues that can define the false consciousness of a society, are ultimately ideals. And while they have little to no reflection in the actual struggles that they are materially facing, the potency of this spontaneous action may be an *antidote* to the revolutionary spontaneity touted by Luxemburg.

#### § *The Paradox of Professional Activism*

Now that we have covered the nature of the 'professional' in detail, as well as the myriad of issues that arise from activism's professionalization, I will turn to the paradox of activism. Some clues to how it functions on a material basis may be found In *Reflections on activism, the academy and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex in Colombia: What a revolutionary ethos might look like* (2022), as Correa-Salazar et al. explain that activists in Colombia "face the dilemma of either 'belonging' to the system for a stable wage or renouncing to personal ethos." (2492) This dependence or destitution dichotomy leads to a question: how is it possible for a professional activist to negate the system by being a part of it? We are generalizing the problems faced by

activists in Colombia<sup>13</sup> to professional activism at large, as similar forms of mythologizing and calculated actions are performed by professional activists in both contexts. In every case, the professional activist is fully integrated into the wider realm of professionalism, sitting among bankers, engineers, or CEOs. In the multitude of cases that Weber explains in *The Vocation Lectures*, some of these positions constitute remaining in science as a vocation (such as the engineer) while others have differing relations to politics as a vocation (the CEO could also be living for politics by being an elected official, for example). While we have covered that, in this context, the activist may have footing in all spheres of the profession that Weber mentions, as well as the conflation between personal and professional fate, we have yet to understand how the activist engages in (and conceives of) interactions between themselves and people they represent. We must ask if it is possible for this type of activist, given the restrictions imposed by their mythos and ideological pressures, to wholly separate their work and call for another future from systemic pressures?

The professional activist largely commits to a surgical process. They ought to diligently research, relay information to and from separated worlds, and agitate as much as is feasible. However, as these actions of resistance committed by the activist are prolonged over time, they run the risk of being profoundly depersonalized. Adorno and Horkheimer explain the following in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “Individuals shrink to the nodal points of conventional reactions and the modes of operation objectively expected of them. Animism has endowed things

---

<sup>13</sup> When discussing movements in Colombia and other countries in the Global South, we would be remiss not to bring up the effects colonialism has on social justice work. Communities existing in previously colonized countries must constantly grapple with the mythologizing foreign professional activist, and the native activist’s own concerns being shifted into the margins. They are only able to find voice by translating their lived experience into a foreign one, a thing alien to themselves that is palatable to the professional activism’s ‘rational’ parameters. While this concern is serious and its implications vast, it is outside the scope of this paper.

with souls; industrialism makes souls into things” (2002, 21). Through the activist taking the role of a ‘surgeon’, they are dissecting disparate elements of a given social struggle in order to be properly understood in a professional context, and by doing so, they objectify the social issue itself. This may constitute the framing of the issue as a nebulous and autonomous entity, that is withdrawn from the context of individuals and communities. For example, the push towards addressing the houseless and homelessness crisis by professional activists becomes a mechanical one, as their push is centered around idealized victims and scenarios conjured by rigorous research and a narrative that fits the requirements of potential sponsors. This mechanical pressure is exacerbated by the use of technology, such as more efficient data collection and management, and more efficient allocation of funds within state organizations and sponsorships. Moreover, even if the activist seeks out alternative sponsors that align more with their drive to address the houseless crisis, sponsors are largely disincentivized to create meaningful change that will undercut their bottom line.

This deepening efficiency and the potency of the ‘idealized victim’ necessitates the professional activist to consider a *quantity of suffering*. As in, how much suffering is taking place to the point where our organization must step in? In this scenario, professional activists are effectively instrumentalizing those who are actively being harmed by widespread social and political factors. Connected to this animistic practice is the idealized victim themselves. They become, among many factors, a potential product to be utilized within wider ‘market’ forces. Correa-Salazar et al. state that “Activism and NGOs in Colombia are usually framed by different market dynamics, which necessarily turn the beneficiaries of social projects into products” (2491). Their story and identity are useful insofar as they are marketable both to previously mentioned funding opportunities, and as a method of signifying progress. This one-



dimensionality of the ‘idealized victim’ where their entire humanity collapses into a single node among other forces in the professional sphere (and wider productive forces), depersonalizes and alienates both the victim from themselves, and the professional activist from the victim. This quantifying of suffering ties back to the instrumental rationality we discussed in the previous section. When professional activists fall into the trap of the paradox, this rationality is exacerbated significantly.

With all of this in mind, I will return to one of the initial questions of this paper: why are any activist victories always at risk of melting back into the status quo, whether it be through reaction or pacification? This is due to two factors: the untenable position of professional activism when caught in the paradox, and the proliferation of professional activism in the contemporary political landscape. As has been discussed previously, the project-oriented regime and non-profit model have largely become the norm within activist circles in recent decades. While there are some positives that may be drawn out of this phenomenon, the risks associated with professional activism are far too high to warrant such a shift. Most importantly, this paradox, of attempting to negate the system while working within the very same structures one seeks to dismantle, acts as a stop gap to many attempts towards radical change. Instrumental rationality, the mythos of activism, and one-dimensional thought are all exacerbated in this position, leading to a trap that activism cannot work itself out of once it is caught within it. This is largely the cause for the stagnation, as the paradox acts as a black hole that professional activists are in great risk of being pulled into its influence.

With that being said, is this paradox of professional activism something we must eternally account for, or is it temporary (and contingent upon wider socio-productive forces)? One of the primary strengths of this paradox is the perception that “activism” (as defined by a

mythology) and “practicality” (as defined by ideological factors) must be eternally considered. Professional activists are pressured into perceiving the practical considerations behind their activist methods as ahistorical. In reality, however, this paradox is not an eternal, nor does it doom us to indefinite adherence to the status quo. Ultimately professional activists are restricted by the social and cultural relationships that largely constitute our status quo, but if there was a significant break from this norm, how we understand the “professional” and what may constitute activism will fundamentally change. But what are the steps towards achieving this goal?

*§ What can be done? A possibility for radical change.*

Now that we have covered the major risks inherent to professional activism, and the associated paradox that is instrumental to its dysfunction, I will consider if there is any feasible way out of this conundrum. While both spontaneous action and The Great Refusal purport to be carriers of radical change, they both fall into the same folly of myth that professional activism finds itself in. The messianic spontaneity, its function and clean break with the status quo, elevates itself to a near-idealistic form of resistance, and one that does not provide any tangible applications to contemporary activism. On the other hand, the Great Refusal may be more promising in its absolute negation of ideology and false needs. While it purports to access the true nature of reality through its negation, communicating this idea between individuals is strained, and may fall victim the same elements of ideology that it is trying to circumvent. In sum, both approaches are unviable in adequately dismantling the paradox of activism.

What we may be left with, then, is a sense of self-awareness for the activist world. The dangers of this paradox are worsened by virtue of its dynamic character, in that it can wholly swallow any attempt towards radical change if professional activism at-large is not careful. By giving a critique of activism's professionalization, my hope is to illuminate the risks that are so pervasive within the field, which are themselves a reflection of the wider socio-political landscape. Put simply, the best way to combat one-dimensional thought, instrumental rationality, and mythologizing activism is to be aware of these risks themselves. A lack of awareness in the paradox will mean its continued reproduction. Professionalism in the activist sphere is not *inherently* at fault. On the contrary, we may uncover new modes of professional activism that place distance between activist organizations and domineering entities that seek to fund them for ulterior motives. What this looks like can only be uncovered through simultaneously closing the gap between action and reality. That is, how the methods by which one calls for change closely relate to the fraught conditions of marginalized people.

Therefore, this primary awareness of the paradox of activism may enable professional activists to distance themselves from these risks, and seek to change their material conditions that inhibit their action. Out of this, professional activism may be successfully retrieved from the brink and be able to radically shift the status quo. A mythos of activism is challenged by challenging the myth, and likewise, the false needs that have inhibited lasting change being carried out by the activist may finally be done. To an extent, this mindfulness may be deemed irrational by the current narrative of enlightenment, as this framework may require an allegiance to peoples' histories, lived experiences, and beliefs that run counter to the presumptions of objectivity. However, the extent to which "rationality" (in the aforementioned sense, which I may call "material") cannot be the only form of fomenting radical change. After all, this would

look eerily similar to the Great Refusal as articulated by Marcuse, which has numerous issues of its own. Therefore, this line between material rationality, mindfulness, and empowerment of oppressed individuals, and a return to the paradox of activism is one that can only be clarified through the actions of activists themselves.

### § *Conclusion*

As we have covered, the contemporary landscape of activism is complex and inseparable from notions of disenchantment, myth, rationality, ideology, false consciousness, and one-dimensionality. The central focus this paper has been examining the conflicting interests of the professional activist, who holds a unique position in both holding a sense of discomfort with the current state of reality (and who calls for change, according to the normative definition given by Svirsky), while simultaneously living *from* politics by making activism their livelihood and commits to disenchanted methodologies as explained by Weber. This status, as well as their professional fate as activists lead to troubling developments in the form of a paradox of activism, in that one impossibly negates the system while working according to the restrictions and established practices of this same system. Adorno and Horkheimer's conceptions of enlightenment and myth, Marcuse's articulation of ideology, false consciousness, and one dimensionality, and Weber's conception of disenchantment all have played a significant role in this analysis. Finally, while I covered two unviable options for change, I offered a potential "way out" of this paradox through professional activists' self-awareness, of the risks they may constantly face and the paradox that can shut down their ability to call for change.

Throughout this analysis, one may hold some reservations regarding the arguments presented in this paper. For instance, some may claim that this analysis is too reductive, as there may be contextual influences on the professional activist that are wide-reaching and cannot be encapsulated within a single paper. More specifically, one may argue that the methods of some professional activists in contemporary times *have* led to lasting and radical change. For this, however, I take radical change to mean systematic and wide-reaching change that serves as an affront to the current state of affairs. Professional activism clearly does not accomplish radical change defined as such. Others may criticize the distinction made between the non-profit and the professional activist, or that the connection between the two is not clear. While this statement may hold some truth, as there are still gaps in research that need to be filled, I argue that the nature of professional fate in this context is what largely bridges this gap, as personal and professional fate are inexorably tied to one another. As a result of this, the fate of the non-profit organization at-large becomes the fate of the individual, as their livelihood and profession are centered around its functioning. Still, further research needs to be done on this topic of activism. Research on the nature of grassroots organizations should be expanded, as they constitute a realm separate, though not wholly disconnected from, professional activism. There is an interesting relationship between the two, and no clear demarcation exists. Moreover, a more comprehensive ‘philosophy of activism’ ought to be a reality, especially since activism as a practice has the potential to radically change every facet of our lives. Still, the hope of this paper is to illuminate the central questions of activism in our time from a philosophical perspective and provide an alternative approach by which lasting change can be achieved.

## References

- Catalina Correa-Salazar, Laura Martínez, Daniela Maldonado Salamanca, Yoko Ruiz, Rocío Guarín, Luna Alejandra Hernández Guarín & Amy E. Ritterbusch (2022) Reflections on activism, the academy and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex in Colombia: What a revolutionary ethos might look like, *Global Public Health*, 17:10, 2484-2499, DOI: 10.1080/17441692.2022.2042354
- Gebhardt, Eike, Andrew Arato, and Herbert Marcuse. "A Note on Dialectic." Essay. In *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 444–51. New York: Continuum, 2007.
- Horkheimer, Max, Theodor W Adorno, Theodor W Adorno, and Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Translated by E. F. N Jephcott. *Cultural Memory in the Present*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*. Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2007.
- Luxemburg, Rosa. *Leninism or Marxism?* Martino Fine Books, 2021.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. 2nd ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.
- Pasqualoni, Pier-Paolo, and Alan Scott. "Capitalism and the Spirit of Critique: Activism and Professional Fate in a Contemporary Social Movement/NGO." *Max Weber Studies* 5.2/6.1 (2005): 147–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24581978>.
- Svirsky, Marcelo. "Defining Activism." *Deleuze Studies* 4 (2010): 163–82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45331440>.

Tambakaki, Paulina. "Why Spontaneity Matters: Rosa Luxemburg and Democracies of Grief." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 47, no. 1 (2021): 83–101.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453719876978>.

Weber, Max. 2013. *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Routledge Classics. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.  
[https://openurl.ac.uk/ukfed:bat?u.ignore\\_date\\_coverage=true&rft.mms\\_id=991003626297402761](https://openurl.ac.uk/ukfed:bat?u.ignore_date_coverage=true&rft.mms_id=991003626297402761).

Weber, Max, David S Owen, Tracy B Strong, and Rodney Livingstone. *The Vocation Lectures*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 2004.