



# Responsibility and commitment in urban scholar-activism: Perspectives from an anthropologist and a geographer

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## **Abstract**

In this piece Michael Herzfeld and Loretta Lees reflect on their roles as urban studies scholars based in the academy and on what their positionality means regarding the communities with which they have engaged and continue to engage.

## **Keywords**

Scholar activism, ethnography, anthropology, geography, urban

In this short piece we join forces as, respectively, an anthropologist and a geographer, both engaged with the problems of contemporary urban life, to advance debate on our roles as long-time scholar-activists fighting against dispossession in cities around the globe. Each with one foot in academia and one foot in local communities (in a form of situated solidarity), we jointly consider the obligation of the academic world to place its insights at the disposal of communities its members have studied (see Fuller and Kitchen, 2004, on working beyond the academy). This, at base, is a simple question of reciprocity. Given the chasm that often seems to yawn between the elite space of academia and the often intensely besieged conditions of marginalised, low-income communities, however, implementation itself is neither a simple nor a straightforward act.

Both of us are in a privileged position to act as public intellectuals funded by academia. This comes with a particular responsibility: not to extract knowledge related to the lived experience of the communities we work in for the sole purpose of advancing our own



academic careers. It may be that engagement grows out of interests that initially are purely academic, as one of us has suggested (Herzfeld, 2010). Indeed, that commitment is arguably preferable to pursuing a path of applied anthropology or applied geography that is often beholden to government, banking, or private interests. But the approach from academia and its special concerns prompts ethical questions no less urgent than those posed by research that is driven by other institutional forces. We must therefore thoughtfully examine what we do and how we react when those whose travails feed our academic reputations demand reciprocation in the form of political engagement or other kinds of help. What do we do when they disagree with the form and content of the help we are prepared to offer? What do we do when they want neither our presence nor, in the end, our help? In thinking through these questions, while broadly in agreement about basic principles, we also recognise differences in emphasis and style between our respective approaches. These differences are matters of temperament, circumstance, and discipline.

Herzfeld, educated in a decidedly hands-off tradition, nevertheless found himself ethically unable, when working on the impact of gentrification on historical memory in Rome, to avoid involvement in evictees' struggles. Appalled by the indifference of much of the traditional Left to the sufferings of petit bourgeois shopkeepers and others, but even more concerned about the far Right's exploitation of that abandoned responsibility for demonstrably cynical and self-serving ends, he became actively engaged in both local anti-eviction networks and in the defence of particular families unable to resist the power of corporate property owners and developer-gentrifiers. As (at the time) a European Union citizen (he is British), he felt that this was not only a right but a moral obligation.

Subsequently, in Thailand, Herzfeld's Rome experience equipped him, even as a non-citizen, to participate in a community's mobilisation against collective expulsion (Herzfeld, 2016). His involvement there helped to place academic, activist and journalistic resources at the inhabitants' disposal; he co-organised conferences, gave interviews and wrote op-ed essays in both Thai and English. These efforts, some of which were reported outside Thailand, significantly broadened the audience for the community's plight.

Both experiences were marked more by failure than by success in the long term. The Bangkok community has been demolished and its last residents expelled, with the authorities finally conceding that the arid park they erected in place of a vibrant if poor living entity was a failure inasmuch as it has been largely ignored by Bangkokians and tourists alike. Few of the lower-income residents Herzfeld knew during his Rome fieldwork still live in their old homes. What he learned from these two long-term engagements, however, has fed a stream of publications and public lectures intended to raise consciousness about the role of states, municipalities, and corporations in breaking community resilience. His Bangkok work, in particular, led him to participate in larger movements, and he has at various times collaborated with the International Alliance of Inhabitants, the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, and the Centre for Architecture and Human Rights (on whose international advisory board he sits). He remains committed to the idea that, since it is his academic identity that gives him such leverage as he has been able to acquire, that identity must not be sacrificed to the demands of activism. His work on housing issues is part of a larger concern

with the politics of heritage (see also De Cesari and Herzfeld, 2015; De Cesari and Dimova, 2019), and he strongly believes that in heritage reconstruction, especially where housing is subordinated to grandiose monumental visions, the failure to provide some form of inclusive recognition of those who have already lost out inflates resentment, potentially generating far more destructive conflicts in the future (for an encouraging counter-example, see Ginzarly, Farah and Teller, 2019).

Lees had what can best be described as an ‘anointing of fire’ into anti-gentrification activism when as an undergraduate undertaking her dissertation on gentrification in the Lower East Side in New York City she met the geographer Neil Smith during the Tompkins Square Park anti-gentrification riots. Moving to Vancouver, Canada, post-PhD, she began working with local communities fighting gentrification in the Downtown Eastside, and also got her first sense of how ‘shows of activism’ were becoming central to what was then the ‘new’ critical geography movement (Lees, 1999). Departing Canada, Lees took up a permanent position at King’s College London, where she continued her work on gentrification. As third-wave gentrification took off massively in the city, she began to realise that the demolition of council estates was one aspect of it. Like Herzfeld in Rome, Lees in London was confronted not only by the indifference of the Left, but by the active promotion by New Labour boroughs of what amounted (and indeed still amounts) to state-led gentrification. Wandering around some of the council estates in Southwark under threat of demolition, she met a teacher, the last resident refusing to move out of the Heygate Estate. The teacher, and his supporters, had heard about Lees’s work on gentrification in London, and he invited her into his home. It was winter, and he had installed a generator to get heat as the Council had turned off his gas and electricity (which amounted to, in her mind, a form of state-Rachmannism). Off the back of this random encounter, Lees was asked if she would act as an expert witness at a public inquiry the teacher and others had brought against the demolition of the estate. Unfortunately, the plaintiffs did not win, but they did ‘out’ what was going on (Lees and Ferreri, 2016).

Increasingly appalled by how low-income communities were being treated, Lees began meeting and working with groups fighting the gentrification of council estates. She won an Antipode Activist-Scholar Award with the London Tenants Federation, Just Space and Southwark Notes Archive Group—working with (not on) local council estate communities being socially cleansed—and co-produced *Staying Put: An Anti-Gentrification Handbook for Council Estates in London* (London Tenants Federation et al, 2014). To cut a very long set of events short, Lees then acted as an expert witness on the injustices of gentrification at two public inquiries on the Aylesbury Estate (the first had a precedent-setting win; see Hubbard and Lees, 2018), gave evidence against the gentrification juggernaut of the Haringey Development Vehicle, and collated evidence in a three-year ESRC funded research project on estate demolitions and displacement (see <https://estatewatch.london/>; and also London Tenants Federation, Just Space and Lees 2020). This all fed into working with the late Sandra Annunziata and social movements in Southern European cities (see Katsinas, 2017) to develop anti-gentrification toolkits specifically for each context (see Annunziata and Lees, 2020). Off the back of this public work on housing issues, people urged Lees to apply to be

Chair of the London Housing Panel (which brings together voluntary and community organisations with a particular interest in housing in London), and she now acts as a ‘critical friend’ via the panel to GLA policy-making on housing. The panel’s key priorities are: to bring about a massive increase in the building of social housing, especially council housing; to support the voices of all Londoners wanting to be heard on housing; and to take action on the scandal of temporary accommodation.

As our urban scholar-activisms developed and grew, as we became more and more involved in the fates of low-income and often marginalised urban dwellers, our academic environments, in the US and the UK, were changing around us. The result of neoliberal domination over the global economy and its ruthless use of what some scholars (notably Shore and Wright, 1999, 2015; Strathern, 2000) have dubbed ‘audit culture’—the reduction of quality assessment in the academic world to a numerological game—began in earnest. This process generates two particularly insidious developments: the breathless pursuit of impressive numbers at the expense of both real academic quality and a genuinely ethical commitment to people studies; and a caricature of expertise that proliferates in the form of largely unwanted, self-important acts and agencies that lack direct experience of community suffering and even, on occasion, essential local skills such as language (see Cabot, 2019). In our view, expertise should take the form of intimate knowledge of, and collaboration *with*, urban inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> We are indebted to them for our knowledge of their societies, and the one reciprocation we can offer, if they so wish, is a collegial engagement that may at least, even when failure supervenes, do something to restore their sense of dignity.

Dignity may sound like an abstract and meaningless term to some readers. We contend, however, that the right to housing is not an abstract commitment to spatial fairness; it is also a commitment to the right to privacy and sociability in a culturally appropriate balance, and especially to spaces locally considered appropriate to family life. Many national constitutions mention some concept of residence. The Mexican constitution even specifies that housing should be ‘decent’.<sup>2</sup> Such specificity, however, is rare; vagueness and escape clauses are much more common. The Italian constitution, for example, declares, ‘The home is inviolable. Personal domicile shall be inviolable’ but says nothing of protections for the homeless.<sup>3</sup> The Thai constitution accords each citizen ‘the liberty of making the choice of his or her residence’, but then goes on to qualify this seemingly open-ended freedom: ‘The restriction of such liberties... shall not be imposed except by virtue of a provision of law enacted for the purpose of *security of the State, public order, public welfare or town and country planning...*’<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ‘The university has learning and resources to share, but must recognise the expertise of community organisations and respect community decision making and ownership’ (London Tenants Federation, Just Space and Lees 2020).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Any family has the right to enjoy a decent and respectable house. The law will set the instruments and supports necessary to achieve such objective’ (art. 123, Political Constitution of the United Mexican States, [http://comparativeconstitutionsproject.org/wp-content/uploads/UNAM-Mexican-Constitution\\_vf.pdf?6c8912](http://comparativeconstitutionsproject.org/wp-content/uploads/UNAM-Mexican-Constitution_vf.pdf?6c8912) (accessed 9 December 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Art. 14, [https://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/istituzione/costituzione\\_inglese.pdf](https://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/istituzione/costituzione_inglese.pdf) (accessed 10 December 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Art. 38, [https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2017-05/CONSTITUTION+OF+THE+KINGDOM+OF+THAILAND+\(B.E.+2560+\(2017\)\).pdf](https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2017-05/CONSTITUTION+OF+THE+KINGDOM+OF+THAILAND+(B.E.+2560+(2017)).pdf); emphases added (accessed 10 December 2020).

Some countries have laws making it difficult to demolish any house that already sports a roof, which in this sense symbolises the protection of private life, but such laws delay rather than deflect the arrival of the bulldozers and demolition squads. Thus, none of these legal arrangements guarantee every citizen or legal resident a home. The right to a space that shelters basic human needs is widely accepted; special pleading and arbitrary pre-conditions render that right perpetually fragile, reducing entire communities to petitioning for what they should have been unquestionably entitled to retain.

Decency and dignity are meaningful only as the expressions of a shared social ethic; there is nothing decent about hostile attitudes to in-migrating minorities, for example, but equally there is nothing decent about legalistic excuses for evicting long-standing communities. Such an ethic, moreover, has a temporal dimension; it represents the evolution of communities over time. Any consideration of the right to housing should therefore include the right to maintain or develop the social arrangements—some of them vital to economic survival as well as psychological and social resilience—that existing residential structures have already demonstrably supported. Slum development, urban renewal, and neighbourhood improvement too often serve only as euphemisms for real-estate speculation and exploitation. Herzfeld's Bangkok informants, for example, presciently distrusted the language of 'development', the usual rhetorical justification for the frequency of forced evictions in Thailand (see Elinoff, 2017), but were eager to achieve the 'self-development' that success in their fight against eviction would very probably have given them.

Opportunities for independent community self-development are rare. In a few cases where housing is already owned by the poor and protected from demolition by a strict conservation regime, as in the Greek town Herzfeld studied some years earlier (Herzfeld, 1991), a process that he calls 'self-gentrification' suggests an option made viable by idiosyncratic local circumstances. Most communities are not so fortunate.

Even those who are the legal owners of their homes often find themselves fighting a hegemonic version of the 'common good' (Cellamare, 2008). Too often, municipal authorities offer compensatory housing that has the effect of fatally dislocating those arrangements (see Lees, Shin and Lopez-Morales, 2016) and thereby depriving any conceivable notion of dignity of the specifically social context that gives the term more than a rhetorical meaning. Some municipal governments recognise that sometimes a retrospective acceptance of illegal construction is preferable to forced eviction that leads to precisely the kind of social death to which we allude. Rome, until the abolition of the *equo canone* (rent control), has been one city to do this, albeit erratically, but the removal of rent control opened the city up to the most ruthless speculation by neoliberal developers claiming to improve the neighborhood (see Herzfeld 2009: 26) and exposed most of the poorer residents of the old historic city to the threat and ultimate reality of forced removal.

As part of the new 'audit culture' in the various academic systems of the English-speaking world, and especially in response to the call to demonstrate 'impact', the performance of an ill-defined but comforting activity called community work has new prestige in showing the value of social science and the humanities (see Allen and Imrie, 2010, on housing and urban research). But we must be extremely cautious, even suspicious, in our

engagement with these developments (see Ferreri and Glucksberg, 2016). A rhetoric of counting points to demonstrate the extent of community participation in decisions actually serves as a device to *exclude* effective local participation, reducing it to an unconvincing placebo and thereby further undermining local faith in promises of effective participation. This rhetoric simply reproduces and exacerbates the problem that Arnstein (1969) underscored half a century ago in an article only recently reprinted in an unusual acknowledgment of enduring topicality. Top-down gestures of participation, Arnstein argued, often subvert the reality they ostensibly promote, substituting ‘manipulation’ and ‘placation’ for genuine mutual engagement and empowerment. Even ‘empowerment’ has sometimes been coopted by forces whose goal is instead to ensure that local actors get no access to power at all (for a consideration of both terms in tandem, see Atkinson, 1999). Both concepts also play dangerously into local class hierarchies, some of which, as in present-day Thailand with its entrenched establishment espousal of karmic predestination as realised in the visual evidence of social status, are further reinforced by local cosmological hierarchies and dominant political ideologies. Already contested at their points of origin, concepts like participation and empowerment too easily become, not lost, but insidiously redirected in translation.

Such terms—apparently benign, but deployed in support of special interests—can also serve as a Trojan horse for self-interested and self-proclaimed forms of expertise, scholarly or otherwise. The claim to be a scholar-activist is not a guarantee of commitment. Too many academics are already building their careers on the backs of deprived communities without full reciprocation, in a few cases even pushing their own colleagues aside in the process (Lees, 1999). Two years ago, Lees experienced a particularly vicious, ‘sharp-elbowed’ attack that could have seen her fired; fortunately, her university defended her. These attacks have continued, as young scholar-activists jostle for academic space, making this, ironically, a risky academic space. We strongly urge that these academics—especially when they are members of ethnic, class, or racial elites—should not set out to undermine fellow academics, and that they should avoid exploiting often questionable claims to expertise as the basis for their unhelpful attacks. We also suggest that they should avoid pontificating, often in abstrusely theoretical terms, about the good they claim to do. While we strongly support the right to academic freedom, we should be as careful in academic debate as in our everyday social life not to confuse freedom with self-interested irresponsibility. We therefore oppose what amounts to the gentrification of scholar-activism itself, as counter-cultural politics become trendy and mainstream in academic circles. Genuinely ethical scholar-activists reject the more violent and imperialist histories of the academy (see, e.g., Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010); if they are to make a credible claim to an ethical standard, scholar-activists must also apply it to their own current practices inside academia and beyond it.

This is especially important because universities themselves, often championed as bastions of free thought and ethical independence, are nevertheless hardly innocent of exploiting their ownership of real estate at the expense of disadvantaged populations, including some who work for those same institutions. Much as church institutions in Rome claimed that their goal was to re-use existing housing for the ‘beneficent’ (that is, charitable)

purpose of housing priests or increasing ecclesiastical wealth, so, too, universities sometimes exploit the noble ideals of higher education as an excuse for dispossessing inconvenient tenants and employees. We offer two examples here.

In the first illustration, a private university located in Philadelphia had been engaging for many years in land acquisition followed by university-led gentrification.<sup>5</sup> Anthropologist Susan Brin Hyatt and her students investigated the process whereby local residents were brought under increasing pressure to depart, and soon they ‘were all beginning to see the outline of an alternative story in contradistinction to the dominant narrative of how, through its development projects, the university was “saving” the community from an “inevitable” spiral of decline’ they discovered ‘a vital neighbourhood that had long been beset upon and that had a history of fighting back’ (Hyatt, 2010: 18). Based in the university itself, they were able to change the dynamic on the ground and, at the same time, to create a pedagogical model that constituted a form of activism in its own right. Indeed, that model was arguably more successful than the goal of preventing further encroachment seemed likely to be. As Hyatt (2010: 28) remarks, ‘Part of our charge as activist-scholars is to make our students aware of the multiple landscapes that have characterised both our university environments and surrounding neighbourhoods during various historical periods and to show them how current neoliberal redevelopment projects heighten and exacerbate long-standing inequalities along axes of race and class’. This, arguably, improves the more general chances of protecting neighbourhoods in the future.

Pedagogy, moreover, is a two-way street. In our other example, it was through student activism—in which his then advisee Maple Razsa was a ringleader—that Herzfeld became aware that similar dynamics were affecting the janitorial and other non-academic staff at Harvard University. While a university spokesperson unctuously claimed that these workers were being treated generously because they were not being charged for courses they could take (his remarks are reproduced in the documentary that Razsa co-produced [Razsa and Velez, 2002]), few had the time to take advantage of such luxurious handouts, even had they needed or wanted to do so. Most already lived far from the university, and rising costs and inadequate salaries were pushing their living quarters ever further out. In this respect, their situation was not far removed from that of the workers on whom modernist cities like Brasília depend; housed in—at best—modest quarters located far from the sleek modern city, these workers are dependent on skimpy public transportation to be able to work at all. It would have been truly ironic to have worked against such injustices in Rome and Bangkok while ignoring the remarkably similar situation faced by workers at one’s own institution.

Scholar-activists, we contend, should be judged by what they do rather than solely by what they say. But ethical prescription is a minefield. In particular, the audit culture, using the same logic that neoliberalism employs to hold workers responsible for their disadvantages (see Gershon 2011: 540), can shield scholars from directly accepting responsibility from the actual, experienced impact of their interventions through the various

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<sup>5</sup> In London, the Carpenters Estate in East London which Lees was working on as part of her Antipode Activist Scholar Project saw similar action (see <https://ucl4carpenters.tumblr.com/post/36828652777/press-release-ucl-students-occupy-in-opposition>).

bureaucratic devices that come under the heading of ethics committees. In some cases, it may shield the academic institutions for which they work from hypothetical legal claims that could result in significant financial outlay. We argue that scholar-activists who do *not* play the audit game and are at least as interested in the well-being of the communities they study as in the advancement of their own careers are, when thereby assuming a measure of risk, more truly ethical than any auditing of ethics could achieve. Indeed, their opposition to the excessive and perverse uses of auditing is itself an ethical position. This does not mean that they are not answerable for their actions, only that this accountability should be in relation to community members rather than boards of bureaucrats and professors.

Both of us have done scholar-activist work through engaged ethnography (see Lees, 2003; Herzfeld 2010; Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, on the possibilities and limits), and both of us are painfully aware that one size does not fit all. Not all scholars working with marginalised communities are able to do much in the way of activism. As foreigners, for example, we face severe limits to our options. We also have the luxury of being able to leave when departure seems prudent. When working in our own countries of citizenship and residence, we encounter different but equally dangerous difficulties. Lees, for example, experienced an attempted physical attack (luckily a colleague stepped in to separate the two parties) from a developer who did not agree with what she was saying about what his company had done to a council estate. Just a few weeks ago she received an e-mail from someone in the UK saying that a talk she was due to give at a Geography Colloquium in Berkeley was being labelled as 'extractive research', despite the fact that the woman from the council estate with whom she had co-produced the work was herself attending the colloquium alongside her and answering questions. This relates again to the 'risky academic space' and 'sharp elbows' of scholar activism discussed earlier.

Given the ethical stance we have adumbrated here, we would certainly not presume to dictate to colleagues what they should be doing. We do, however, call for a recalibration of professional academic ethics, one that will recognize *both* the commitment to offer help when it is wanted (and not when it is not wanted!) *and* the respect for local values as well as internal differences that should take precedence over any concern for self-advancement. To this we add the respect we should accord other scholar-activists while expecting reciprocation from them. We have both been fortunate in having enjoyed rewarding careers that have certainly benefited from our work with local communities; that is not in dispute, and we both willingly defend the value of academic research as such. But ultimately, as became apparent in the discussion that generated this article, we have converged in agreeing that there is no *necessary* contradiction between being a good scholar and being a good activist. And we agreed, and agree, that a good scholar is also an ethical scholar, so that ignoring ethical imperatives on the excuse of scientific detachment is actually bad science.

Scholars are human beings (indeed, one part of the problem we face is their occasional inability to accept that they *share* that humanity with the people they study and with other scholars), and they, like their informants, live in a world that rewards achievement. But the pernicious idea that academic achievement is somehow superior to ethical commitment, or the equally pernicious view (which used to be treated as a given) that political involvement

in the lives of those we study is somehow unscientific, are, we contend, excuses for ignoring precisely the ethical imperatives to which we should instead be pleased to subordinate those personal goals when the need is clear. Not only should we reject the assumption that theory is the ultimate goal; we must also not forget that all human beings theorise – and that communities’ collective experience may generate rich theoretical insights that can be useful to them in practical ways and also illuminate the more abstract issues that concern academics. Respect means recognising our informants as colleagues – not necessarily always as co-authors (but note Lees has just co-authored a journal article with a displacee), since much of our writing is done in solitary contemplation, and not solely as comrades on the barricades, but always as co-thinkers and co-participants in intellectual production.

### **About the authors**

**Michael Herzfeld**, author of twelve books and producer of two ethnographic films has conducted extensive field research in Greece, Italy, and Thailand. His current interests include nationalism, bureaucracy, craft production and apprenticeship, knowledge politics, and heritage conservation and its social impact. A former editor of *American Ethnologist* and currently editor-at-large for *Anthropological Quarterly* and series co-editor of the book series “New Anthropologies of Europe” (Berghahn) and “Asian Heritages” (Amsterdam University Press), he holds honorary degrees from the Université Libre de Bruxelles, the University of Macedonia, and the University of Crete, and is a past winner of the J.I. Staley Prize and the Rivers Memorial Medal.

**Loretta Lees** is an urban geographer who is internationally known for her research on gentrification/urban regeneration, global urbanism, and urban policy. She co-organises *The Urban Salon: A London forum for architecture, cities and international urbanism* and has written/edited 12 books including *Planetary Gentrification* and *Gentrification*. Loretta won the first Antipode Activist Scholar Award 2012, and has been an expert witness in three public inquiries fighting displacement due to gentrification; one of these inquiries resulted in a precedent-setting win.

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