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## Pawning and Challenging in Concert: Engagement as a Field of Study

**Abstract** An introduction of sorts, this text opens the thematic collection of articles on engagement. It takes up the idea that a particular group of people engage the idea of engagement in order to establish a field of study. In so doing, the text proposes to tackle the specific creation of the field and of the 'we' that engages with its creation. The first portion of the text deals with the multiple meanings of engagement; the second with the idea of the group (of who the 'we' is and what it does); while the last segment engages the idea of the political in engagement. Its main aim is to show how the *we* and the field, at least for a time, cannot be easily disentangled.

**Keywords:** engagement, field of study, group, 'we', the engaged, the political

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### Becoming a field of study

Suppose we are ambitious and want to establish a field of study. Suppose it gains ground, and becomes unfixed from where it began and disaffiliated from its initiators. This field is now a free-floating entity in an academic space, provided of course it is produced in a non-minority language. The field has been produced and is now acting as a material or a toolbox, to quote Foucault, for others to use (Foucault 1996a: 149). The way it has been conceived, debated, negotiated, repudiated, disassembled and then reassembled, usually can and does remain hidden. The field which has scored the name *studies* (such as gender studies, Victorian, discourse-analysis, disability studies, postcolonial studies and the like) can be certainly dis-assembled again, and its inventors and developers can be retrieved, at least in part. However, if we are not interested in discovering bio-bibliographical data, we could be perfectly content with using, keeping in mind readjustments, the mere ideas the field offers. In other words, when we wish to do research within certain studies, we do not necessarily have to think of who did it first and why. Even if we engage with names or specific ideas promulgated by certain people, we do not necessarily have to think of who they really were and how their historical – material and symbolic – conditioning brought them to their contribution. The studies outgrow their founding fathers and mothers.

As is the case with a great deal of work created in contemporary academia, our presumed field has been developed in some sort of community. This

vague designation can refer to any type of community: from figurative ‘community of scholars’ who borrow, build and exchange each other’s work, regardless of actual acquaintance with those who they borrow from, build with or against; to the more concrete community of idea-makers and idea-administrators who apply them through policies or politics; to a group of people who, by sharing the same institution, gather their enthusiasm and knowledge and through personal communication develop a common base – with aspirations of turning into a field of study. Legendary figures aside, a great deal of academic work arises today from direct and mutual exchange, whose principles, goals and even expected outcomes are set in advance. Against the infamous image of reclusiveness of academic work, more often than not, we work *with* each other. The era of Cartesian insularity and contemplation of the self and divine existence by a fireplace – especially when reflection involves inventing the field of studies – is now bygone.

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### **The logic behind the name: what is engagement?**

Let us, for a brief moment, recall two relatively recent struggles around the name. The term ‘post-colonial’, particularly when attached to ‘studies’, remains a site of disciplinary and interpretative contestation, where both notions and the hyphen between them have stirred a significant debate over time. Post(-)colonial refers to a remarkably heterogeneous set of subject positions, critical enterprises, re-tooling of old notions, cultural markers and disciplinary activities (Slemon 1994). The very term “‘post-colonial’ is resonant with all the ambiguity and complexity of the many different cultural experiences it implicates” (Ashcroft et al. 2003: 2) – its

field of reference is almost indeterminate. Something similar, although the contestation trajectories differ, may be said for gender in gender studies. Should we set aside quandaries about its disciplinary status, probably never to be fully resolved for plethora of reasons, academic and otherwise, the trouble with the name persists. If gender studies really ever outgrew its predecessor in name and in form – women’s studies – it is still debatable whether it succeeded in ‘circumscribing the uncircumscribable’, that is, whether the mere change in name enabled it to resist ghettoization: constructing its coherence while preserving its cherished criticality and subversiveness (Brown 2005). Names almost always produce space for dispute and conceptual unease, simultaneously occluding some meanings and opening others. Can engagement prove to be different in that respect?

What does engagement stand for? Commitment and publicity come to mind first. Engagement seeks a certain kind of publicity, a certain kind of frame which involves others – in the guise of other persons or others personas, corporeal or corporate – who witness the pledge or vow. Contracts, enterprises or betrothals are recognized forms of engagement, synonymous with engagement itself. All of them require mutuality and a formal promise, the formality of which is ensured by institutionally protected public domain. Commitment is also inscribed into the very fibre of the word. Engagement assumes bodily existence of the engaged, either in the form of a subject who offers her life as a guarantee of good faith, who *gages* herself, or in the form of an object, a token of will deposited as a pledge. Originating from ‘gage’, engagement assumes both pawning and challenging, giving security and threatening to take it away. It refers to dedication, determination for a cause, a strong obligation to bind and be bound, or else to a hostile encounter, combat or conflict.

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Internal struggle is enshrined in the concept itself, being patently discernible in its etymology, in uses and misuses of its truth (*etumon*). To be engaged means to be attracted to (a claim, a cause in order to become committed); to be hired (contractually bound, indentured, made liable); to be wed (a binding agreement to hold and protect, and hold and obey, unto death); and to bring troops into conflict (to engage the enemy). If we move away from the sediments of the word, the struggle does not disappear. The history of uses of the word is embedded into how it becomes enmeshed in the area of its prospective studies.

Moving from engagement to the engaged, to the bodily presence and the will to engage with, we ought to ask: what do the engaged stand for? What are we committed to and whom do we encounter as the enemy? Apparently, engagement includes choosing sides, being simultaneously for and against, pawning and challenging in concert. Adhering to a cause – and dismissing other concurrent causes – assumes the existence or invention

of rivalling sides, poles in antagonism. This substantial antagonism seems to be the core politicality of engagement.

We may say that, on a surface level, if one is engaged, one cannot not will to be political. Let us recall Sartre's famous equation of speaking and acting in *Litterature engagée*: "by speaking, I reveal the situation by my very intention of changing it; I reveal it to myself and to others *in order* to change it... The 'engaged' writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change" (Sartre 1950: 22–23). The words become political; they act like 'loaded pistols'. One chooses engagement in the sense that one is not at liberty not to choose – abstinence is also a choice. The substantial antagonism here concerns the politicality of choice, of values we speak of in order to change the situation in which we find ourselves and to which we are bound. Public engagement is a total activity; it indebts the world by abolishing ignorance about it, and with it the innocence of choicelessness.

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Therefore, there can be no studies of engagement which would somehow by-pass the political. However, the scope and the meaning of the political are always less than straightforward: pledging to a cause may take on many different guises. One may aim one's loaded pistols to fight for a better world as a totality, but also for a chunk of a better world. One may engage in common struggles and struggle for the commons, or with single-issue struggles only – how do we judge who is more in-common and more politically engaged? One may engage with the streets, and on them – by marching and chanting – or by unpicking mortar and crushing ground, provided of course there are streets to be treaded on at all (Butler 2015). Or one may, quite to the contrary, choose to engage with the institutions, from within the system, with the aim of bettering or battering it. Words may act as pistols in any of these politically quite different situations. Sometimes too it is not with words that we fight: assembled bodies have political meanings which are not enacted by discourse, although they still 'speak' "in ways that index another sense of the organic and the political" (Butler 2015: 181).

Do all conceivable politicalities matter? What kind of politicality deserves prioritizing and for what reasons? Also, the historical uses of certain words wear off or dramatically change the very core of their referent. If Sartre's post-war *public engagement* referred to carrying and using different kinds of arms in order to change the world, today this term has a rather ambiguous meaning, referring to agency mediated by policy agendas, included in the criteria for government schemes of competitive research funding (Bačević 2016). The word is one and the same, but the politicality it harbours is not. The former wanted to abolish inequality and injustice; the latter, even though it assumes investing in creating positive social change, fundamentally promotes "the practices which maintain those social and economic

circumstances at the root of the causes of inequality and injustice” (Fasensfest 2010: 486). Had engagement studies been initiated in Sartre’s time, would they have had the same subject as they might have today? How does context conditions the pawning and challenging in concert? How *the engaged* changes with the change in contexts? Can the subject remain one and the same through times of heightened war-induced responsibility for unforeseeable and unintended consequences (Baert 2015); in times such as ’68, when the field of the political burst open to enable “plurality of questions posed to politics rather than the reinscription of the act of questioning in the framework of a political doctrine” (Foucault 1999b: 115); and in times after 1989 when the political doctrine camouflaged itself in a profusion of culturally based identifications, closing off the domain of plurality and democracy by racialising politics (Fassin 2012)?

The issue of the ‘when’ of engagement leads to the question of its ‘where’. If the unification of proletarians of all countries made the ruling classes in 19<sup>th</sup> century tremble with fear of their engagement of deeply rooted antagonisms, the engagement which revolves around governmental funding schemes has negligible capacity to intimidate. The question ‘what do the engaged stand for’ thus needs to be supplemented: where do the engaged stand, spatially and temporarily? Do they stand in the streets, in the Parliament, at the pulpit, in the factory; do they appear as talking-heads, as keynote speakers, as experts, or as modern day troubadours? In what part of the world do they have the chance and the right to appear, and how do limits (linguistic, national, racial, gender etc.) to their appearance condition their relevance for engagement? The issue of ‘where’ also relates to the issue of inside/outside, and to the issue of capacities to be and remain outside, where ‘outside’ remains an almost entirely positive designation (referring to non-corruptedness, un-orthodoxy, powerful powerlessness).

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### The engaged ‘We’

Who can study engagement? Posed as such, the question seems banal. Anyone can engage in studying engagement: one may disavow participation in representative democracy or active citizenship and still study civic engagement; one can fully exclude oneself from community building, and yet have an interest in how social engagement works; one can be devoted to public engagement studies, and remain forever hidden in the proverbial ivory tower of academia. However, if we move from its platitudinous surface, this question gives rise to a host of other questions, relevant for understanding contemporary conjunctions of thought and action. The issue at hand is the ‘who’, but this time the subject is not *the engaged*, but the ‘we’ who wish to transform the engaged into an object of our study. Who is this ‘we’? What is its habitat, with what type of bodies is it populated, with what kind of norms must they comply?

When there is a ‘we’, a group of people assembled to study engagement *together*, the initial banality of the question dwindles (see also Cvejić in this volume). The apparent differences in approach, disciplinary or experiential (in research or in direct engagement), do not necessarily lead to a prolific interdisciplinarity or tensionless exchange. Who we are, what we read, where we have learnt to read that way, how we learnt to disseminate what we know, and the audiences we choose or would wish to choose if that choice had not already been made for us, matters. Our colours matter. Our age and (class, ethnic, small town/big city) background matter. Our distance and proximity matter. Our private arrangements – the place where we go when we finish discussing engagement, the place where we cater to other people’s needs and desires, the place which can act as the quiet and safe haven, or as a beehive – matter. Our sex matters, even when we wish to transcend it, confront it – we are all feminists, regardless of the body we were born into! – or relegate it to a domain of insignificance. ‘We’ is a group in which our corporealities matter differently and where this very corporeality, through the norms that permeate it, seeks engagement. The free-floating entity ‘social engagement studies’ has its rhizomes in a ‘we’ that is at the same time a collection of selves who produce thinking, and an assembly of embodied singularities who struggle with their own temporal and spatial confines.

The ideally conceived surrounding in which this ‘we’ engages with engagement would be in line with what Athena Athanasiou has termed agonistic democratic performativity: we is “to disseminate its own fixity and certainty, to embrace its situated contingency and provisionality, to suspend definitional closures of political subjectivity and action, and to remain ultimately open to its incalculable potentialities and misfires” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 155). However, when things need to be done, when thinking has to be replaced with structured action of minor or major importance (such as obtaining funds for a light lunch and refreshments at a seminar on utopia, or writing a group protest note on political machinations that hinder alternative forms of engagement), agonism needs to be suspended, at least for a moment. The ‘tyranny of structurelessness’, to quote the title of the old but still so useful pamphlet written by Jo Freeman (1970), lurks behind groupings that, in the name and spirit of engagement, wish to defy hierarchy, to disobey disciplinary matrices, to avoid baits of rewards and punishment, and to follow the patterns they wish to see institutionalised outside of the group itself. Needless to say, visions of this ‘outside’ need not overlap, even where there is tacit consensus about it.

This issue is especially acute today – in the academic setting, in which almost any type of studies, including those of engagement, is being produced – as well as in society at large alike. Being *for* agonistic democratic performativity needs urgent elaboration in times when democracy stands opposed not only to dictatorship and other forms of coercive and limitless rule, but also

to the relentless transmutation of rule into governance and management (Brown 1995: 20). In times when but a shadow (not a spectre) of homo politicus remains to counter our embodiments as human capital, struggle for engagement, both in terms of action and thought, becomes vital, but is also always already thwarted. How can we engage against *ourselves* who act as entrepreneurs of and investors in our own selves, a role we either eagerly or reluctantly accept, in the absence of welfare or socialist states and the social subjectivities of the past (Feher 2009: 34)? How can we engage against self-appreciation, enhancement of competitiveness and value, and maximization of ratings and rankings, not only in our work in academia as thinking beings who produce thought on engagement, but also as subjectivities produced in times of severe responsabilisation and utter dispensability? How can we think of fighting inequality, when it becomes so ingrained and normalized in the relationality of human capital that we ourselves simultaneously think about combative engagement and cede to the conditions which effectively preclude it?

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### Engagement and the political

This short piece is organised as a small proposal to think through different aspects of establishing an academic ambition to form a field. The prospective field and those who structure it, who tend to think as a group, to establish the field group-wise, become interlinked in many ways. The will to take into account the physicality of our own groupings, and its symbolic and material transposition in what we encircle as the field – willing it to become unfixed from *us*, to be taken away further – has its specific place in the formation of the establishing thought itself. The antagonism is enhanced, not stifled by the willed agonistic democratic performativity. It reveals itself on multiple levels: in what we wish to achieve by studying engagement (more of the political, more politics, more policy); in how we understand ourselves as engaged actors – and not mere students (those who would *take pains* only in learning, and not from taking punches); in how we differently understand the divide between theory and practice and how we work to mollify it; in how we conceive ourselves in engaging the antagonism – from the outside (as the constitutive or as the ‘excised’ outside) or from the inside (as a reformable or as a revolutionisable inside)?

The idea that one needs to be engaged in order to study engagement has been formerly rejected as trivial. However, if we wish to establish the field of studies that deals with engagement, the issue regains its significance. The specific position of a student, the one who does not need to be the subject of engagement in order to have engagement as one’s object, sets forth the possibility of disengaged study of the engagement. What are we when we study engagement? Are we intellectuals (see Pudar Draško in this volume), those who have and use the intellect to pronounce and announce

desirable ways of acting to some others, those all too immersed in mundane activities bereft of thinking? Are we inadvertently re-introducing ancient divisions between the theorists (those who look from afar, who have the privilege of distance), and the doers, who fight battles on the ground, giving us food for thought with which to engage (see Prodanović in this volume)? If we consider engagement always implicated in the political, does that mean that the 'students' may wish to engage with 'real politics', in order to actually mould the world they envision according to their best vision? Can we abstain from engaging and be content with a kind of Lyotardian post-modern 'philosophical politics', a passive individual act of resistance to dominant political theories, doctrines, ideologies and myths, and to the legitimate forms of intellectual political engagement that strives to actualize them (Savić 2004: 15)?

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A certain disengagement is always already present in the hiatus produced by thinking, with – however temporary or situational – suspension of acting. This pausing of action and its translation into thinking may be read as disengagement, as the displacement of action from its *thereness* to a nowhere, a specific non-place of thinking (Arendt 1981). Thinking without professing, without being somewhere specific in the future – without putting on the mantle of a sage, prophet or legislator – secures us from action. Yet maybe, by being so immersed in what is *now*, we are actually in the midst of acting, and only then really able to tie the knot binding action and thinking. By studying engagement we may be dreaming, as Foucault does, of an intellectual “destroyer of evidence and universalities, the one who in the inertias and constraints of the present, locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of power, who incessantly displaces himself, doesn't know exactly where he is heading nor what he'll think tomorrow because he is so attentive to the present” (Foucault 1996: 225). Maybe we are not impeding action when we are pausing to think, by being now if not there. This pausing may not be a solitary work which leads to a nowhere of thought, but a common act of reflection on the conditions and directions for acting, which has more than a mere instrumental value (Butler 2015: 123–124), and which must be done with others, among others, in exchange and in mutuality.

Unlike so many other fields of studies, the one surrounding engagement needs to revolve around the core politicality involved in engagement itself. This does not imply that a 'we' behind the field needs to act as a collection of strategists, experts or prospective politicians. But it does mean that it cannot turn its back on the 'now' of the material world and its multiple and profoundly political junctures. Being engaged with thinking engagement may not necessarily result in arranging the world according to a certain vision of order, but it would compel us to remain close, committed to the antagonisms which saturate the world we pause with thinking.



Studying engagement forces us to constantly review orders that arrange “tangible reality in which bodies are distributed in community” (Rancière 1990: 28). These are orders that allocate those who have their part (but also those that have no part), that assign them to a particular place or task by which they become visible and audible. Those orders govern what counts as intelligible appearance, they govern the distribution of spatial arrangement where one proves one’s being and having a part. Logic antagonistic to this, according to Rancière, is the political logic which cancels this configured harmony by shifting bodies from their assigned places, places they were ordered to occupy. Studying engagement forces us to remain attentive to the possibilities of achieving the contingency of equality, of opening up of the spaces where those who have no part burst onto the scene and, if only temporarily, redefine the meaning of community, politics and democracy.

It has been claimed that substantial antagonism is the core politicality of engagement. Some aspects of its antagonistic nature have been touched upon already. Let us, in conclusion, turn to the issue of antagonisms and coalitions. When we claim that antagonism is at the root of the politicality of engagement, does this imply that there is some Schmittian foe within thought or in the field of action that we need to engage in order to study engagement? Or does that mean that being engaged must be reduced solely to being *contra*, engaging the enemy<sup>1</sup>? Can we not also sleep with the enemy, as the old separatist slogan goes, thus keeping him closer than our friend?

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Can there be coalitional thinking, if not coalitional action, which would go beyond hegemonic uses of antagonism – beyond crushing the enemy, toppling the sovereign, bearing arms for the sake of establishing a weaponless utopia, a utopia free from antagonism? Could it be possible to think of coalitions – and solidarity – based on a different kind of relationality, different type of groupings, which would gather together “in opposition to existing and expanding inequalities, to ever-increasing conditions of precarity for many populations both locally and globally, and to forms of authoritarian and securitarian control that seek to suppress democratic processes and movements” (Butler 2015: 135)? Could we employ the histories and trajectories of engagement, its changes, uses and misuses, in order to understand how the force of antagonisms, processes of their formation and effects of production (of vulnerability, in Butler’s terms, or those who have no part, in Rancière’s) may shape the new modes of coalitional action and thinking?

In effect, studying engagement might act as way of preventing us from moving away from antagonism. If engagement is to be found in the production of contracts, enterprises, betrothals and wars, if engagement is this very

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1 Enemy being not only opponent on the battlefield, but also wife in British slang.

production, it also assumes, by the logic of this production, taking sides, and having those on either side bound and gaged. Thus, studying engagement impels us to take antagonism earnestly; to not remove politicality all too easily from the fields, spheres and niches which seem less than political, or are historically categorised thus; and to engage in imagining or reinventing “new relational modes’ across the incommensurate scenes of work-nature-intimate stranger, and not just among lovers” (Berlant 2010).

## Post-scriptum

During the final preparations for this thought-piece, I encountered a passage which would probably best sum up my own intuitions about what it means to be engaged. It says that

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revolutionary change [is] something immediate, something we must do now, where we are, where we live, where we work. It means starting this moment to do away with authoritarian, cruel relationships – between men and women, between parents and children, between one kind of worker and another kind. Such revolutionary action cannot be crushed like an armed uprising. It takes place in everyday life, in the tiny crannies where the powerful but clumsy hands of state power cannot easily reach. It is not centralized and isolated, so that it can be wiped out by the rich, the police, the military. It takes place in a hundred thousand places at once, in families, on streets, in neighborhoods, in places of work. It is a revolution of the whole culture. Squelched in one place, it springs up in another, until it is everywhere. (Zinn 2009, 653)

However, when I communicated it to a close fellow group member, her response was ruthlessly simple: “not enough”. This is the reason why a ‘we’ runs throughout this text. It is also the reason why this text does not pretend to be a polished set of solutions, a manual or a manifesto. The chosen form of this essay is also prompted by the firm belief, in line with the passage quoted above, that a ‘we’ that wants to study engagement – and more than that, to establish its field of study – cannot and shall not be a one-headed giant, but a many-headed hydra.

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### Zalog i izazov: angažman kao polje studija

#### Rezime

Tekst predstavlja svojevrstan uvod u tematski skup članaka koji različito pristupaju pojmu i problemu angažmana. Polazi se od pretpostavke da je za pokušaj zasnivanja polja studija koje se bave angažmanom i angažovanošću, neophodno uzeti u obzir kako mnoštvo značenja samog pojma, tako i sastav i aspiracije onih koji tvrde da polažu pravo na utemeljenje takvog polja. U tom smislu, u prvom segmentu tekst razmatra različita značenja angažmana (etimologiju, razlike u načinu upotrebe, aktivnosti onih koji su angažovani); u drugom se usredsređuje na ideju grupe koja nastoji da ustanovi polje studija (na pitanja veze teorije i prakse, neophodnosti angažovanja onih koji promišljaju angažman itd.); dok se treći deo teksta bavi odnosom političkog i angažovanosti. Osnovni cilj je da se pokaže kako se u pokušaju ustanovljenja polja studija angažmana, polje i oni koji žele da ga ustanove kao polje, ne mogu s lakoćom razdvojiti.

**Ključne reči:** angažman, polje studija, grupa, „mi“, angažovani, političko