

## Review

Emejulu, A., Kustatscher, M. and McGregor, C. (eds) (2025) *Ambivalent Activism: Working with Contradiction, Hesitation and Doubt for Social Change*. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, paperback, 214 pages. Available at: <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/ambivalent-activism>

Who hasn't felt unsure or confused or conflicted about their involvement in work to change the world? Too often we bury these feelings, believing they are signs of our own weakness or that they will lead to division. And too often, when they surface, they can indeed result in hurtful division or burnout or nihilism.

But what if instead of burying them or blaming ourselves for feeling them, we find different ways of dealing with them? This is what this collection of articles from a range of social movements in different parts of the world argues.

### What is ambivalence?

The editors say "to be ambivalent is to experience a contradictory set of emotions simultaneously" (p.1) and they then use a definition that expands this to include the "feelings of tension and conflict that result" (Rothman et al, 2017: 33). They argue that the "contemporary political land is replete with the morbid symptoms of an inability to hold ambivalence and work through it as political praxis" (p.2).

### The book

The book is based on a series of seminars that the editors organized in 2022 and all the chapters, bar one, are based on presentations from those seminars.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is more theoretical, the second part contains chapters about activism and the final part is about academia. I initially was more interested in the middle part but found the other parts had a lot to offer. For each section, I will look at one chapter in particular that resonated with me, to give an indication of the range of the contents.

### Part 1: Theorising ambivalence

The one article that isn't based on a presentation is an article by Dorothy Gould called "On (Not) Knowing What Is to Be Done (in 17 Affective Registers)" which was originally written in 2019. One of the issues I have struggled with in my activism is uncertainty and I know my fellow activists felt the same. Not knowing what is going on or what you should do when you

feel under pressure to know these things is destabilising. When you are already positioned as irrational or ignorant as many activists are, this can be even more so. Gould offers a way of understanding what might be going on and an assurance that embracing uncertainty can be a positive move. When we are frightened and under pressure, we are tempted to reach for answers too quickly, to demand a ten point programme for success, or to look to those who seem to know what they are doing. Instead Gould argues that embracing uncertainty can lead us to know what is really going on. However, no matter how much I agree with the need for this openness, I continue to struggle with being open to not knowing when I see the rise of authoritarianism across the globe. I feel we can't afford the luxury of not knowing. And at the same time, I recognise that it is this need for answers that has led us to this turn to the right.

### **Part 2: Activism as Ambivalent Praxis**

This was the richest part of the book for me – each chapter, from a range of activisms, offered me new perspectives as well as the affirmation of recognizing similarities with my own experiences in different contexts. I have decided to focus on Adebayo Quadry-Adekanbi's chapter, "Resisting with People I Don't Like: Exploring the Internal Tensions Among Queer Activists in Lagos, Nigeria". The title immediately spoke to me. Who hasn't struggled with working with people you don't get on with?

Too often, there is an assumption that if we are fighting a common cause, we should all get on. We don't of course and we realise it very quickly when we first get involved. And too often, not getting on with everyone and not addressing it can lead to differences in opinion on strategy, say, getting personal.

Quadry-Adekanbi, in writing of his experience of queer activism in Lagos, explores this, using Lauren Berlant's concept of inconvenience. Just because people share a common enemy doesn't mean people get on – this *inconvenience* – requires a lot of us. We need to adapt to each other and to the environment in which we operate. Quadry-Adekanbi points to the different economic situations activists comes from and how these differences can cause friction. He argues for heterotopias – places where ambivalence can be accepted and where activists can work together without having to like one another.

I recognize this from the activism I have been involved with, where I now recognise but didn't then, how class background, amongst other factors, affected differences in goals and often resulted in personal conflict.

**Part 3: Activism and the Ambivalent Academy**

As an activist turned academic, I had hoped this part would offer me more than it did. I found all four chapters to be well worth reading but it was only Aylwyn Walsh and Paul Routledge's chapter, "The Role of 'Stuckness': Ambivalence in Scholar-Activism" that resonated with me.

The chapter opens with an all-too-familiar of running a workshop where hardly anyone turns up which leads the organisers to wonder why – they feel stuck. This 'stuckness' is the focus of the chapter. Stuck between frustration and hope, how can they as scholar-activists, understand and work with this state? They are funded researchers in the Global North, working with activists in the Global South, working around the constraints and conflicts that are inherent in this kind of work. The key message for me is that they have found that "not eschewing ambivalence but dwelling or waiting" (p.188) offers a way forward.

**Conclusion**

On a personal note, it was my ambivalence about my activism that drove me to do a PhD. I had been dealing – consciously and unconsciously - with an uncomfortable mix of thoughts and emotions for over 25 years. I hadn't thought of them in terms of ambivalence. I had hoped taking time to do research would help me make sense of the complicated emotional and intellectual difficulties and in time would lead me back to activism. However, it hasn't been straightforward. For a time, I felt my research was reinforcing those painful feelings and leading me to doubt we had achieved any good.

However this book offers a different perspective. It acknowledges that that ambivalence is a common, if not universal, experience in activism and not one to suppress or ignore. It argues that, though there is no easy way to do this, and no certainty, that accepting and working with ambivalence may give us new insights and renewed energy.

It also reminds me that along with the painful emotions, I had experienced joy and belonging and certainty in the cause. It seemed that I could not tolerate feeling such a range of feelings and the negative ones dominated for a long time. So the questions I am now asking myself are: Can we accept the despair, frustration, betrayal and cynicism, and work with them, rather than give into them or deny them. Can we welcome the joy and love that are also been part of activism? And how do we do this in a time of genocide and climate collapse?

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