



SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION

# Introduction to special issue: practising activist socio-legal scholarship: navigating tensions and crafting approaches

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The question of how to pursue politically relevant and engaged scholarship has been an ongoing theme within socio-legal scholarship. In the United States of America, Presidential Addresses of the Law and Society Association have consistently urged greater political engagement (Lempert 2001; Seron 2016; Scheppele 2023). In the United Kingdom, journals such as *Social & Legal Studies* have placed critical and engaged scholarship at the core of their mission (Editorial 1992; Editorial 1998). In the Majority World<sup>1</sup> – where the socio-legal field is less institutionalised – scholars have often been more directly involved in political action, re-imagining colonial law and using it as a tool for social change (Shivji 2018; Sieder, Ansolabehere and Alfonso Sierra 2019). These scholars have not only inspired calls for activist scholarship in the Minority World (Munger 2001) but have also unsettled the very dichotomy between scholarship and activism (D'Souza 2009).

Yet though there is broad agreement across geographies on the need to confront power and injustice, questions remain over how best to do so – whether through critique, reform or activism. For some time, the preferred mode of political engagement among socio-legal scholars seemed to be as a public intellectual (Calavita 2002). Invested in influencing and shaping public opinion, policy and decision-making in a certain direction, public intellectuals often draw on their academic position, prestige and knowledge to support social movements and other forms of collective action with which they share political commitments (Cushman 1996). This engagement, however, does not always entail direct collaboration with movements, much less accountability to them (Lennox and Yildiz 2020). By contrast, in the past decade, a different form of political engagement has emerged: scholar activism. This modality, which goes beyond critique or policy prescription, has become more prevalent and visible across the social sciences, including in the

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this introduction, we use the term 'Majority World' to refer to what has in the past been called the 'global South' or 'developing world'. This term rejects the developmentalist and hierarchical tone of earlier categories such as 'developing' and 'developed' countries or 'Third' and 'First' World. Instead, it emphasises where most of the global population actually lives and foregrounds the cultural and biological diversity, political agency and economic power of these countries (Alam 2008). Unlike 'global South' and 'global North' – which, though developed as correctives to earlier terms, remain geographically inconsistent and risk reproducing binary oppositions – 'Majority World' highlights the numerical centrality of these populations and reframes global inequality. It shows that the wealthy and powerful, who make up only a small fraction of the world's population – the Minority World – continue to exercise disproportionate influence over the majority. While in this introduction we adopt these latter terms, some contributors to this Special Issue have preferred to retain 'global South' to stress shared experiences of colonialism, dependency and marginalisation in global governance.

socio-legal field (Hale 2008; Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2015; Borrás and Franco 2023; Stephens and Bagelman 2023; Mattsson, Vico and Satō 2024; García *et al.* 2025; Kelsey 2025). As socio-legal scholars increasingly embrace scholar activism, what tensions does it generate as scholars move across different academic and political fields? And what new practices are emerging that both deepen socio-legal knowledge and advance struggles for social change?

This Special Issue explores these questions by examining the evolving practise of activist socio-legal scholarship. Over the past decade, socio-legal scholars, including the contributors to this Special Issue, have increasingly experimented with different methods and conceptual approaches in hopes of doing research that is more relevant and connected to grass-roots political struggles. In doing so, socio-legal scholars adopt new methodologies and practices of knowledge co-production with movements. Yet they face a series of challenges regarding dominant epistemologies and ontologies of socio-legal research. These include the persistent separation of subject and object embedded in external legal perspectives, the divide between theory and praxis and entrenched expectations surrounding the form and style of scholarly work, including conventions of authorship and modes of dissemination. The contributions to this Special Issue trace how scholars are navigating these challenges and charting new approaches to socio-legal research.

Of course, many of the challenges that activist socio-legal scholars confront are not unique to their field. These include the cultural and epistemic hegemony of positivist analysis in the social sciences, and the accompanying racial and class composition of academia that separates it from popular knowledge and social movement struggles. Challenges also result from the neo-liberalisation and corporatisation of higher education, which have led to the decline of research funding, expansion of managerial structures, increase in job precarity and widespread adoption of audit-driven, performance-based evaluation systems – where student evaluations, now often treated as customer feedback – have driven academic scholarship and teaching toward activities that confer scholarly prestige rather than engage in community-based research and political activism (Torres and Schugurensky 2002; Busch 2017; Wright and Shore 2017). Furthermore, the dominance of European and American academia, and English as the lingua franca of prestigious academic publishing, continues to privilege certain epistemologies and geographies while rendering others invisible or marginal (Naqvi *et al.* 2019).

Perhaps the greatest current challenge, however, comes from the political threats to academic freedom that are sweeping the world (Darian-Smith 2025). Today academic institutions – essential centres of democratic thought and critical inquiry – are increasingly under attack. While the Trump administration's antagonism toward higher education made headlines globally, similar assaults are unfolding across Europe, Latin America and beyond.<sup>2</sup> In Brazil, the Bolsonaro government (2018–22) actively championed an ideological campaign known as *Escola sem Partido* ('Non-partisan School'), which continues today under a broader conservative movement that intertwines opposition to progressive education with assaults on gender and sexual rights. In Argentina, the current president, Milei – who self-identifies as an 'anarcho-capitalist' – has waged a public campaign against public universities, enacting funding freezes, threatening academic autonomy and de-legitimising critical inquiry. But the most profound example comes from Gaza, where the Israeli government has systematically destroyed all institutions of higher education and killed hundreds of academics, including three university presidents, in an attempt to eradicate the archives, memory and identity of the Palestinian people. Palestinian legal scholars have named this 'scholasticide' – defined as 'the deliberate destruction of an educational system and its institutions' (Shlaim 2025), a war crime closely connected to the charge of genocide.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>2</sup>In Europe, much of the focus has been on Hungary and Turkey – which are important case studies of the systematic dismantling of institutional autonomy and academic freedom (Pap 2024; Doğan 2023). However, a recent report by the European Parliament Research Service found that 'the state of de facto academic freedom across the EU continues to erode' (Maassen *et al.* 2025, p. ii).

<sup>3</sup>For a visual testament of this see: <http://www.picturingscholasticide.org>.

ensorship, repression and violence against students, faculty and staff who decry Israeli military violence against Palestinians are a further testament to the vulnerability of academic freedom amid the global rise of authoritarianism. Given this context, academics today confront a paradox: the risks of identifying with activist scholarship are clearer than ever, even as its necessity has never been greater.

In a climate where academia is already under threat, identifying as an activist scholar can undermine the legitimacy of academic knowledge production, lead to marginalisation and, in the worst cases, invite attacks on academic spaces (Picq 2025). Crucially, these risks are unevenly distributed. Scholars from marginalised and minority communities are most often those engaged in activist work: their personal connections to experiences of oppression and emancipatory struggles make politically engaged scholarship the most meaningful way to practise their profession (Hale 2008). At the same time, however, these academics are also the most exposed to precarity, unemployment, harassment and intellectual extractivism. Similarly, the social movements, activists and local communities with whom scholar activists collaborate often lack institutional protections and resources, and are often less mobile than scholars. Scholar activists risk exposing their collaborators to the threat of violence by public and private actors, while at the same time appropriating their knowledge.

In the face of these risks, but also of scepticism about the scientific validity of politically engaged knowledge production, some socio-legal scholars have advocated for a liberal/positivist retrenchment, suggesting a return to academic neutrality and a narrow vision of what constitutes proper social science and theory (Rubin 2025). Yet beyond decades of scholarship that have exposed the problematic assumptions behind value-laden claims to ‘neutrality’ (Haraway 1988; Harding 1991) and the social practices through which scientific knowledge is produced (Latour 1987), it is now clear that broader public understandings of expertise, neutrality and objectivity have begun to internalise these once-academic critiques (Pamuk 2021).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as law becomes increasingly politicised, it is clear that *all* legal and socio-legal scholarship is inherently political and shaped by underlying commitments and aspirations for social change. To maintain the difference between ‘the activist as the engaged scholar, and the dispassionate, ivory tower academic’ is a problem, as Radha D’Souza emphasises, because this ‘dichotomous categorization conceals the fact that the ivory tower scholar is also as socially engaged as the activist one’ (D’Souza 2009, p. 33).

As this Special Issue demonstrates, activist scholarship is diverse. Contributors range from early-career scholars in the Majority World to more established scholars in the Minority World. Each is working in different contexts – with migration-rights activists in Sweden, non-governmental organisations fighting for greater transparency in Puerto Rico, sex worker collectives in Brazil, academic administrations in United States law schools and Indigenous communities across Nepal, Colombia and Guatemala. These contributions show that activist scholarship takes no singular form but rather is shaped by varied contexts, commitments, theoretical traditions, embodiments and modes of inquiry. Yet despite their differences, they reveal that activist socio-legal research generates specific tensions that require unique reflection. At the same time, they illustrate how activist involvement makes scholarship better – by challenging naturalised dominant categories, resisting academic drift toward insularity, expanding the canon and integrating knowledge produced outside universities (Hale 2008; Calhoun 2008; Choudry, 2020). The aim of this Special Issue is therefore not to glorify activist academic socio-legal scholarship, but rather to identify sites where it is being practised, catalogue some of its approaches and methods, elaborate on some of its conceptual and theoretical anchors and highlight its epistemic, methodological and normative contributions to the socio-legal field.

In this introduction, we map the terrain of activist socio-legal scholarship, highlighting the tensions that emerge from this positionality and synthesising the strategies and approaches to

<sup>4</sup>Similar debates over the possibility of neutrality have played out in legal scholarship (Kahan 2011; Sherry 2011).

scholar activism developed by the contributors to this Special Issue. We conclude by emphasising the importance of naming and supporting this figure – despite the risks – in order to foster a scholarly community capable of navigating the complex demands of moving across fields of power and struggle, particularly in these challenging times.

### 1. What is activist socio-legal scholarship?

Socio-legal scholarship has often endeavoured to be engaged with addressing issues of social justice. While there are different traditions of socio-legal scholarship across the world, they primarily share a common historical root: challenging positivist forms of law and jurisprudence that were divorced from social realities. In the Minority World, socio-legal scholarship grew from developments within the social sciences and in law. Social scientists turned to the study of law as a key site for understanding the intersections of legal, social and economic development, while legal scholars adopted social scientific methods to reform law and deploy it instrumentally to address social and economic inequality. Socio-legal studies emerged in the early to mid-twentieth century in the United States of America and Europe, combining law and social-scientific approaches, though the balance between them varied across countries and periods. By the mid-twentieth century, studies examining the ‘gap’ between legal norms and social needs and realities became the orienting framework for socio-legal studies in both the United States of America and Europe (Nelken 1981).

During this early period, perspectives from the Majority World rarely entered the socio-legal field directly; rather, they were mediated through European and North American interlocutors. Anthropologists and, later, law and development scholars, often pursued projects framed by the goals of understanding alternative worldviews and alleviating inequality. Yet studies of the effects of colonial legal orders on local populations had ambivalent consequences. While investigations of Indigenous orderings were often undertaken with the stated goal of supporting greater communal autonomy and self-determination, they in practice furnished knowledge that facilitated colonial administration and control. Meanwhile, law and development scholars drew heavily on modernisation theory, which has since been critiqued for its paternalistic and flawed assumptions about progress and development – assumptions that, rather than disrupting colonial hierarchies, served to reproduce them (Fitzpatrick 1980; Rodríguez-Garavito 2015).

During the 1980s and 1990s, socio-legal studies’ orientation to social justice issues shifted in response to both global transformations and internal changes within the field. On the one hand, socio-legal scholars in the Minority World were responding to a shifting context marked by welfare state retrenchment and the advance of neoliberalism, developments that steered them away from the earlier, more idealistic commitment to reform-oriented agendas that had long dominated the socio-legal field. For example, in the United States of America, scholars in the Amherst Seminar drew on such ideas to challenge the positivist paradigm that characterised the gap approach, adopting a more critical stance toward legal reform and the very structures of liberal legalism (Benavides-Vanegas 2003). Sarat and Silbey (1988) famously argued against the ‘pull of the policy audience’ and for a more politicised form of socio-legal research that, focused on power, domination and resistance, was thereby more closely aligned with the social sciences than with progressive legal reform. In Britain, scholars critiqued mainstream socio-legal scholarship for its acceptance of the hegemony of law (Campbell and Wiles 1976), while in the Netherlands there was dissatisfaction that scholars’ idealistic hopes had not been achieved (Hertogh 2012).

In the Majority World, the growth of socio-legal research occurred at different paces and in relation to varied sociopolitical conditions. In Africa, for example, the rise of socio-legal approaches was critical in the Africanisation of colonial law. However, by the 1980s and due to the imposition of structural adjustment programmes by international finance institutions, the decline in funding for universities and libraries limited the capacity of academics to engage in independent

research. Having to rely on consultancies from development and foreign aid organisations not only hampered the growth of critical independent scholarship, but also reinforced the dominance of knowledge production in the Minority World (Ghai 1987; Ndulo 2001). In Latin America, the socio-legal field began to take shape in the 1960s amid the region's authoritarian turn, which coincided with the rise of the law and development movement. Projects funded by the Ford Foundation and the USAID promoted the idea that legal reform could foster economic modernisation and institutional consolidation, a framework that continues to shape scholarship today despite its analytical and empirical limitations (Rodríguez-Garavito 2015). This agenda, however, did not go unchallenged: Marxist scholars in Mexico, Brazil and Argentina advanced *crítica jurídica* (critical legal studies), questioning law's capacity to transform society, emphasising its function as a mechanism of domination and exploring counter-hegemonic legal practices emerging from below (Sieder *et al.* 2019). The democratic transitions of the late 1980s and the institutional consolidation of the 1990s further expanded and professionalised the socio-legal field, with a particular focus on transitional justice, human rights violations and democratic reforms (Sieder *et al.* 2019).

On the other hand, transformations within the field of socio-legal studies also led it to adopt more critical theories and methods. First, the field was influenced by feminist and post-structural scholarship, which challenged the positivist epistemes of social science research, recognising the role of knowledge production in structuring relations of power between subjects and objects of research, as well as the significance of gender and class positions in social science research and the limits of universalism. As a result, socio-legal research became increasingly open to interpretive methods and increasingly engaged with the study of legal pluralism in all social contexts – not only in the Majority World (Merry 1988; Harrington and Yngvesson 1990). This turn to more critical and interpretive approaches led researchers to focus increasingly on social movements and activists (McCann 1994). Second, socio-legal studies expanded into a more diverse and global field, incorporating new voices and approaches. This shift was marked by the growing contributions of women and racialised minorities in the United States of America and Europe, as well as scholars from the Majority World. Frank Munger's (2001) Presidential Address to the Law and Society Association, titled 'Inquiry and Activism in Law and Society', made this dynamic evident: he linked the emerging conversation on the relationship between activism and socio-legal research to the global expansion of the field, highlighting the work of Joyce Ladner, a Black feminist scholar from the United States of America; Neelan Tiruchelvam, a Sri Lankan human rights advocate and constitutional scholar; and Upendra Baxi, an Indian legal theorist (Munger 2001). Inspired by these scholars' legacies, Munger emphasised how activism could strengthen socio-legal inquiry, offering not only critical insights into the operations and effects of law but also exposing the contingency of seemingly coherent reformist visions.

Since Munger's speech, the meaning, forms and practices of 'activist socio-legal scholarship' have been debated. While the history of the social sciences, including law and socio-legal studies, is replete with thinkers who have placed struggles for justice at the centre of their work – from Karl Marx to Kwame Nkrumah, from Simone de Beauvoir to Angela Davis – it is only since the 2000s that the term has gained currency in Anglophone academia. For this reason, some contend that scholar activism is not a new phenomenon but rather a continuation of this long-standing tradition, with its recent naming as the only truly innovative feature (Calhoun 2008). We argue, however, that scholar activism constitutes a novel epistemic-political positioning in the socio-legal field, uniquely situated at the intersection of both academic and activist spaces. As such, the scholar activist is marked by features that distinguish her from other practices of engagement.

Scholar activists operate in a way so that they simultaneously inhabit the domain of institutionalised knowledge production and the sphere of socio-political action, with equal commitment to both. They strive to produce rigorous social scientific knowledge while also interrogating the epistemological assumptions that underlie such knowledge, as well as the contexts and processes of its production. At the same time, they collaborate with grass-roots

movements and transnational activists in diverse and sometimes informal ways, offering analytical tools, solidarity and strategic support. Such dual engagement is closely connected to activist scholarship's commitment to dislodging the dichotomy between theory and practice that remains at the heart of mainstream understandings of what academic work entails (Rasch *et al.* 2022). If all scholarship is activist and vice versa, in the sense that 'all theories ramify practices of one kind or another, implicitly or explicitly and conversely all practices are informed by some theory, either explicit or implicit' (D'Souza 2009, p. 28), scholar activism not only makes this connection explicit but places it at the very centre of its endeavour.

Scholar activism is thus not simply a matter of engaged scholars 'wearing many hats' at different moments in their work. Rather, scholar activists continuously navigate and negotiate across multiple and often conflicting, social fields, including universities, civil society organisations, social movements, media spaces and state institutions. This movement between diverse contexts and power structures demands the management of different forms of capital – academic, political, cultural, relational – and exposes scholar activists to distinct regimes of recognition, legitimacy and risk. These dynamics are further shaped by racial, gender, class and geographical hierarchies, as well as by conditions of precarity. In some contexts, scholar activism can be a privilege available to only a few, while for others it is not a matter of choice but an existential requirement (Picq 2025).

Although this Special Issue features socio-legal scholar activists based in academic institutions, we emphasise that activist scholarship also takes place in other institutional and political settings, from social movements and civil society organisations to political parties and grass-roots collectives. As Choudry (2020) has argued, those of us who identify as scholar activists need to go beyond 'the self-referential loop' to acknowledge, appreciate and learn from those who think, analyse and generate knowledge in the course of social struggles outside the university. By conceptualising scholar activism as positioned at the intersection of academic structures and movement politics, we highlight its transversality: what defines scholar activism is not where knowledge is produced but the struggles over 'knowledge for what, for whom, and under what institutional constraints' (D'Souza 2009, p. 28).

This understanding of scholar activism as an entangled positionality differs from most of the definitions we encountered in the field. Many of these definitions imply a left/progressive political normativity, where at the core of scholar activism lies a commitment to further 'justice and equality of various forms' (Lennox and Yıldız 2020, p. 4), to use 'knowledge to improve society' (Causadias *et al.* 2024, p. 370) and to 'affirm human emancipation' (D'Souza 2014, p. 1). While the scholars contributing to this Special Issue agree with these aims, we contend that scholar activism is not inherently left leaning. If we take seriously the argument that all knowledge is political and politicisable, scholars on the right of the political spectrum can (and do) also practise activist scholarship. The difference, then, lies in the types of struggles one engages in. For progressive scholar activists, these struggles often involve double forms of contention: against the social structures of inequality and the injustices they seek to transform, and within the neoliberal, metrics-driven and often Eurocentric academic spaces in which they must operate (Rasch *et al.* 2022).

Far from being niche or marginal, socio-legal scholar activism is a dynamic practice in which key debates over research ethics, methodological approaches, critical reflexivity and the very foundations of scientific authority and legitimacy are contested and materialised. By naming the figure of the activist scholar who moves across epistemic, political and linguistic borders – and conceptualising scholar activism as an entangled positionality – we take seriously the tensions and labours involved in this mode of politically engaged knowledge production. We acknowledge its diversity and highlight both the burdens and the joys it entails for those who identify with it. As the contributions to this Special Issue demonstrate, socio-legal scholar activism offers crucial insights into how we might re-imagine the role of the university, the purposes of research and the

meanings of academic accountability and responsibility in a global context of rising social inequality, ecological and social reproduction crises and democratic discontent.

## 2. Tensions of activist socio-legal scholarship

In addition to the challenges that generally permeate scholar activism, activist socio-legal scholars also confront enduring dilemmas rooted in the field's historical formation in relation to the juridical field – an entanglement that entails both ideological and epistemological choices as well as commitments. Several pieces included in this Special Issue tackle some of these tensions, making a timely contribution to the field of socio-legal studies, as we discuss below.

### 2.1. Centring the law versus addressing broader social forces

There remains a persistent tension in socio-legal scholarship concerning the extent to which analyses should centre on state law versus the broader structural conditions – such as capitalism, patriarchy or colonialism – that produce and sustain inequality. For example, in the past years, socio-legal scholars have (re)turned to the scholarship of the Soviet legal theorist Evgeny Pashukanis, and the broader field of law and Marxism, exploring the assumptions, narratives and dynamics of 'legal form' as a growing area of inquiry (Miéville 2005; Golder 2011; Knox 2013; Nesiah 2022). In spite of these recent critical approaches, however, law remains the dominant 'unit of analysis' within socio-legal studies, even if it is broadly understood. This focus risks obscuring law's constitutive violence, as Nergis Canefe (2023) argues. Drawing on Walter Benjamin (2021), she shows that law, often imagined as the opposite of violence, is in fact produced and reproduced through it. Canefe calls on socio-legal scholars to examine how legal consciousness, ideology and hegemony normalise injustice and secure compliance with law and the state.

By contrast, some scholars concerned with the rise of right-wing authoritarianism have stressed the importance of remaining firmly engaged with law (Scheppelle 2023). For example, Pola Cebulak (2023) examines the growing activist engagement of European scholars against illiberalism in the region, especially through legal mobilisation, and calls for an interrogation of their methods and ethics. In particular, she highlights the need to critically reflect on the positional ties of scholars to the communities they advocate for, the rise of authoritarian resistance to what is framed as judicial activism, and the discursive consequences of interpreting political and social challenges through legal categories.

For activist socio-legal scholars, the pull between engaging law directly and addressing broader social forces often mirrors a deeper political tension between reformist and radical approaches – a challenge with which activist-oriented socio-legal scholars have long grappled (Akbar 2022; McCann 1987). In this Special Issue, Matthew Canfield reflects on this dilemma through a participatory action research (PAR) project in Kenya. Collaborating with civil society organisations, he helped design a project to examine the impact of new state-promoted digital technologies on smallholder and peasant farmers. While PAR practitioners have long criticised research that caters to elite audiences, identifying the translation of PAR into policy as a key challenge (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Lenette 2022), Canfield recounts how civil society actors nonetheless encouraged him to leverage his legal expertise to frame the findings as policy recommendations. Yet, because existing legal frameworks often promote technological adoption, this posed a significant dilemma. He nevertheless shows how grappling with these tensions alongside co-researchers in the field offers a promising approach to activist socio-legal research.

### 2.2. Legal knowledge, power asymmetries and depoliticisation

A second tension of activist socio-legal research lies in the positionality of researchers in relation to legal knowledge. Socio-legal scholars have written extensively about how law operates as a

specialised discourse and form of knowledge – access to which is regulated not only by the legal profession, but also by the state and educational institutions (Conley and O’Barr 2005). Activist socio-legal scholars are frequently privileged in their access to and knowledge of the law, even if they are not trained as lawyers. When engaging with grass-roots communities, this specialised knowledge often creates informational and power asymmetries, and can even become a site of extractive practices. However, attention to this dynamic can generate productive tensions for activist socio-legal scholars who are cautious about the co-optive role that lawyers and legal frameworks often play in narrowing the horizons of justice within social struggles.

In this Special Issue, Carolina Rezende Moraes describes how members of Tulipas do Cerrado, a sex work collective in Brazil, demanded not only control over the research process but also access to her legal knowledge as a condition for research. In repositioning themselves as co-creators, they not only sought to unsettle social hierarchies but also to use the instruments of law and knowledge production, challenging social and economic inequalities that hinder their well-being and protection. Moraes explores the concept of ‘whoring the law’ as an expression of the way the Tulipas worked with her as a peer-educator to co-construct knowledge of the law that not only saw formal law as an instrumental site of protection, but as a means of navigating the law in ways that supported their dignity and agency. This tension underscores a core dilemma of activist socio-legal research, which Moraes’s paper illustrates: while legal knowledge can reinforce existing hierarchies and inequalities, it can also be appropriated, re-signified and re-politicised by social movements. The challenge thus, for scholar activists, is not to withdraw from sharing their expertise, but to engage in forms of co-production that can potentially unsettle asymmetries, foreground alternative epistemologies and expand the horizons of justice rather than narrowing them.

### 2.3. Enduring Western legal dichotomies

A third enduring tension that activist socio-legal scholars face lies in the persistence of the subject-object dichotomy within dominant modes of knowledge production. Western epistemology, particularly as institutionalised in the social sciences, has long upheld an ideal of valid knowledge as the product of detached observation: a knowing subject who meticulously observes and accurately describes an external object of inquiry. This positivist conception of objectivity became a cornerstone of scientific rigour and authority throughout the twentieth century, sustaining a deep-seated ‘commitment to ideas separating theory and practice, observation and action, the universal and the particular’ (Calhoun 2008, p. xv). As Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez (2005) theorises through his notion of *la hybris del punto cero* (‘the hubris of the zero point’), this epistemology promotes the idea that there is a single, superior way of knowing the world – namely, the scientific-technical rationality of the Occident – which claims privileged access to ‘real knowledge about nature, the economy, society, morality, and people’s happiness’ (Castro-Gómez 2007). Other forms of knowing are relegated to the realm of *doxa* – opinion, belief or cultural residue; treated as part of modern science’s past.

In the study of law, this epistemic vision is perhaps most evident in the legacy of legal formalism, which treats law as a self-contained system of rules and principles existing independently of the messy realities of social life – for instance, by privileging doctrinal analysis over the lived experiences of those subject to legal regulation (Williams 1991). Even the field of socio-legal studies, despite being founded on a critique of purely doctrinal approaches to law, is not alien to its own forms of dualism. While critical socio-legal traditions draw on feminist, queer, post-colonial and decolonial thought to reject the illusion of detached observation, emphasising that the researcher is always already implicated in, and a participant of, the social world she studies, they often retain the separation between theory and practice – or academic inquiry and political engagement.

In their contribution to this Special Issue, Mariana Prandini Assis and Luis Eslava revisit this question by offering a genealogy of *investigación militante*, a tradition of engaged scholarship developed in Latin America and the Caribbean since the 1960s, which places the critique of the theory-praxis binary at its core. Weaving together the lives, political engagements and concepts of three *investigadores militantes* – Orlando Fals Borda, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Lélia Gonzalez – Assis and Eslava show ‘how *investigación militante* embeds research within collective struggles, treats law as a lived and contested terrain, and co-produces alternative normative visions with communities’. They call on socio-legal scholars to engage with three central commitments that this tradition brings forward – methodological, political and ethical – as reference points for an activist law and society praxis attentive to the interconnectedness of knowledge, action and subjectivity. Their intervention echoes previous critiques of neutrality that call for deeper attention to the politics of knowledge production and the recognition that all knowledge is embedded within distinct political and epistemic horizons (Haraway 1988).

### 3. Emerging approaches to activist socio-legal scholarship

In addition to interrogating the tensions of activist socio-legal inquiry, the papers in this Special Issue also describe various approaches to activist socio-legal research. What is clear is that activist scholarship takes many forms and may take place both outside and within the academy. The contributions to this Special Issue include at least four different modalities of activist socio-legal research, illuminating different pathways, strategies and targets of social change.

#### 3.1. Activism as a mode of knowledge production

As the contributions to this Special Issue demonstrate, one form of activist scholarship involves leveraging knowledge, expertise, resources and positions of relative privilege and power to actively advocate for change. Several articles in this Special Issue describe different ways in which engaging directly in activism can serve as a form of knowledge production and epistemic justice.

For example, José Atilés examines an alternative mode through which activist socio-legal scholars may contribute to struggles for epistemic justice. He traces the long-standing efforts of socio-legal and legal scholars in Puerto Rico, to challenge colonial legalities, particularly through the use of freedom of information requests and legislative advocacy aimed at promoting transparency. Initially focused on studying how activist scholars mobilised these legal tools, Atilés’s perspective shifted when he was invited by civil society actors to help draft legislation to replace the country’s anticorruption code. This experience forced him to confront his own critical scepticism toward substantive policy reform and led to a deeper appreciation of the contradictions and challenges involved in pursuing incremental change. He further reflects on how scholar activist efforts to promote transparency can serve broader aims of ‘reclaiming knowledge, sovereignty, and autonomy as acts of resistance against imperial dominance’.

Also rooted in the Latin America and Caribbean context, and rejecting the binary between activism and scholarship, Mariana Prandini Assis and Luis Eslava argue that *investigación militante* offers a powerful framework for thinking, doing and living socio-legal research as a form of political engagement. By tracing the political formation of concepts such as *senti-pensar*, *amefricanidade* and *ch’ixi*, they show how engaging in struggles beyond Western epistemic splits enables socio-legal scholars to approach research as an entangled practice of knowing and transforming reality. Similarly, drawing on the concept of *border work* (Newman 2016), Anna Lundberg and Emma Söderman reflect on their involvement in the Swedish Asylum Commission to illustrate how scholars can move beyond academic detachment and engage in forms of knowledge co-production rooted in lived experiences. In their case, foregrounding collaboration with those directly affected by migration law was central to producing knowledge capable of both understanding and transforming these exclusionary regimes. At the same time, Lundberg and

Söderman's active participation in the process challenged dominant epistemic hierarchies in migration studies and opened space to theorise how activism itself becomes a site of knowledge production through embodied, situated and collective engagement.

### 3.2. Leveraging research to support local struggles

Socio-legal scholars have long sought to analyse and support struggles for civil rights and social justice. However, much of the research conducted by law and society scholars has focused on analysing social struggles from the outside to advance socio-legal theory within. For example, most research on law and social movements, as well as legal mobilisation scholarship, has sought to analyse the strategic ways that movements engage in law to understand more abstract dynamics of social change. In these modes of analysis, the researcher is not directly implicated but rather stands as an outsider observer, and analyst, even when adopting a critical lens. Increasingly, scholars are looking for ways not just to study social movements, but also to support them (Akbar *et al.* 2021).

Atiles, Moraes and Canfield each describe a shift in the traditional approach of interviewing and engaging activists sympathetically to working *with* activists. For Canfield, this meant experimenting with PAR – an approach well-developed in other transdisciplinary fields such as rural studies, public health and education – but one that has only recently been adopted by socio-legal scholars (Carmalt 2023; Houh and Kalsem 2013). In contrast to traditional approaches of social science research, PAR seeks to produce knowledge that empowers grass-roots actors by co-creating knowledge that is directly useful to their struggles. Moraes, too, sought to support movements through her research but in her case more traditional methods of social science inquiry were more suitable to produce the evidence that the Tulipas do Cerrado wanted and needed for their advocacy. She describes carrying out a survey alongside the Tulipas as a peer-educator, and emphasises how they reappropriated the means of knowledge production in order to support their own empowerment.

In contrast, Atiles describes adopting methods more akin to those of cause lawyers that were once his research subjects. He describes how he was drawn into activism, to use insights gleaned from his study of colonial legality to draft legislation. These papers illustrate the diverse ways socio-legal scholars have supported local struggles for social justice through their research and insights. While their approaches vary, they share a common departure from producing theory primarily for elite academic audiences. As a result, their contributions often remain invisible within the field, except when retrospectively framed as methodological reflections. This Special Issue, therefore, also aims to make visible what is frequently overlooked or undervalued in socio-legal scholarship.

### 3.3. Destabilising conventional forms of scientific documentation

An important consequence of the professionalisation and specialisation of the social sciences in general, socio-legal studies included, is the development of specific forms of documentation and presentation of research outcomes. These forms become institutionalised as the only recognisable and legitimate modes of research communication, which in turn have the academic community as their primary audience. This configuration produces a closed and self-referential loop of navel-gazing knowledge production – one where academics create and disseminate in forms that can be easily identified and evaluated by their peers. While this dynamic is an important feature of the social differentiation process that makes science distinct from the arts or politics, for example, it simultaneously contributes to what Nancy Fraser (1990) termed *subaltern counterpublics* being excluded from dominant modes of epistemic validation.

Within this logic, research that emerges from activist collaboration or community-based methods is often deemed 'unscientific' or anecdotal – not because of a lack of rigor, but because it

fails to conform to the codes of academic writing, citation and publication. These conventions thus risk operating as gatekeepers, by reproducing epistemic hierarchies and disqualifying politically engaged knowledge as methodologically inferior or excessively partial. Challenging them involves rethinking not only *what* is considered valid knowledge, but also *how* it should be communicated and to *whom* it is accountable. Ultimately, form is never neutral: it shapes who gets to speak, who gets to be heard and published and what is recognised as social science research.

In this Special Issue, authors have addressed this question in different ways, which equally contribute to destabilising conventional forms of scientific documentation and communication. Moraes describes drawing on her expertise in empirical data collection to design and implement surveys at the request of the sex worker collective she collaborates with, providing them with data they could use in their advocacy efforts. Echoing Charles Hale (2008), who cautioned against a ‘full-throttle’ approach to antipositivism, Moraes used the power and legitimacy entrusted to traditional forms of research documentation to support the political goals of the sex workers’ movement. As Hale (2008), and many other scholar activists, she is aware that often communities actively seek collaboration with social scientists to document social problems and generate data in the language of science, strategically adopting conventional formats to serve community aims.

At the same time, however, the constraints of academic conventions around language and format can hinder understanding and even the production of knowledge itself, particularly for social scientists working closely with people for whom the more-than-human world and lived experiences escape the written form. This is the case of Lieselotte Viaene, who combines autoethnography, spiritual reflection and methodological critique to document her journey from conventional academic research to collaborative, research-based documentary filmmaking. In her piece for this Special Issue, Viaene explores how audiovisual production in partnership with Indigenous filmmakers serves not only as a means of disseminating research but, most importantly, as a method of knowledge co-creation that foregrounds relational ethics and the agency of more-than-human entities. Viaene argues for alternative forms of documentation rooted in embodied praxis, spirituality and working-class consciousness, challenging the epistemic authority of traditional scholarly formats and advocating for a more inclusive, non-humanist and accountable politics of knowledge. Similarly, Lundberg and Söderman describe their role in producing videos and alternative forms of reports that are accessible to the migrant communities they work with.<sup>5</sup>

#### **3.4. Transforming disciplinary practices of knowledge and university governance**

A final mode of activist socio-legal engagement is in shifting not just the conceptual frameworks, epistemologies and documentation formats of socio-legal research, but also the institutional structures in which many activist socio-legal researchers are based. Teaching, administration and governance are central aspects of scholarship that rarely receive attention in the context of activist scholarship. Recent years have witnessed calls for decolonising the university – a difficult task given that the University itself is a colonial construct. A key dimension of the colonial university is the role of disciplines, which not only operate as a field of struggle for reward and sanction, but also entrench certain ideologies and epistemologies. Law and legal education is, of course, central to coloniality and thus the subject of increasing discussions about the possibilities of decolonisation (Adébisi 2023).

None of the contributions in this Special Issue discuss activist socio-legal pedagogy, but in her contribution, Mikaela Luttrell-Rowland describes the challenges and possibilities of adapting her activism to administration. No doubt this may be the toughest task in the context of the neoliberal university. As she explains, even the idea of the activist scholar administrator seems like an oxymoron. Yet building on her experience as a researcher developing skills of ‘relational listening’

<sup>5</sup><https://asylkommissionen.se/conference-videos/>.

with working children and other social movements, she explores pathways for enlarged understanding and imagination of bureaucratic engagement, anchored in the need for administrators located within universities to grapple with the ways in which they are often implicated in some form of violence.

#### 4. Conclusion

Today is a dangerous time for scholar activists. The global expansion of authoritarianism, combined with surveillance capitalism and rising nationalism, is undermining the (neo)liberal settlement. In this moment of political, economic and ecological turmoil, scientific knowledge production has come under intense political scrutiny, including by scholars themselves (Rubin 2025). Openly identifying as a scholar activist risks further marginalisation or even personal endangerment in increasingly hostile political climates. At the same time, this is also a critical time for activist scholarship. While autocratic political movements may demonise scholar activism in their attacks on universities – even as they cultivate their own scholar activists – the practice of scholar activism is increasingly recognised within the academic field of socio-legal scholarship. This is creating spaces not only for scholars to advance political action and solidarity, but also to continue pushing to transform the universities and institutions of higher education and the very modes of knowledge production. Visibility, therefore, remains essential for fostering a scholarly community, continuing to establish the credibility of activist research and revealing the inherently political nature of all academic work.

Importantly, activist scholarship is not only about supporting social transformation. It also strengthens academic scholarship. As Craig Calhoun writes,

‘it is easy for social science to become too complacent, too affirmative of the existing order, and turned in on itself as though it were entirely self-justifying. Activist scholarship puts new issues on the research agenda as well as the public agenda. It encourages creativity and forces confrontation between different perspectives, explanations, and statements of fact. Such creativity and confrontation advance social science’ (Calhoun 2008, p. xxv).

This Special Issue foregrounds such confrontations. The contributors probe the tensions and complex entanglements as well as the generative insights and convivial relations of solidarity produced through activist scholarship. Moreover, they contribute, with analytical rigour and novel data, to advancing knowledge about key and timely questions in socio-legal studies.

In this Introduction, rather than defining scholar activism as a singular approach, we have described it as an entangled position in both academic and political spaces. Understanding the meaning and practice of politically engaged scholarship as such is particularly important in the context of socio-legal studies since it is an interdisciplinary field marked by overlapping fields of power that scholars must navigate. The pieces in this Special Issue offer a small but complex snapshot of how scholar activists navigate such struggles and tensions across fields – producing new methods, frameworks and approaches to socio-legal research and analysis. In doing so, the authors aim not to glorify scholar activism, but rather illustrate the rigour, creativity and the diversity of its practices.

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