

**Glenn Wallis**

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**AGENCY IN PRACTICE**  
**TRASH THEORY 4**

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**SNB Magazin 17**

# Agency in Practice: Trash Theory 4

By Glenn Wallis

**SNB Magazin 17**



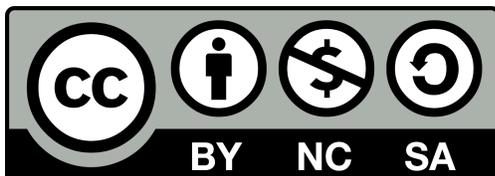
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Agency in Practice	4
I. I was reading a Facebook discussion	4
II. My pondering about that episode converged	7
III. This line of thought led me back to Antonio Gramsci's	9
IV. As I was drafting this post, I came across a link	12
Links	16
Author	16
<a href="#"><u>Online Discussion</u></a>	

# Agency in Practice: Trash Theory 4

*This offering for our trash heap of practice theory elaborates on the following non-postulates:*

**Non-Postulate 1** *Practice is a struggle against mastery, rather than a reaching toward it.* The most crucial element for any non-buddhist practice should be a perpetual resistance to taking *any* part of subjectivity as a refuge, or as some sort of “default” state removed from the inconveniences of social subjectivity. Practice necessarily implies struggle; practice leads to mastery, at which point practice is no longer needed as such. To practice, then, is *to resist mastery in perpetuity.*

**Non-Postulate 3** *Practice/struggle is in itself generative of a form of life.*

**Non-Postulate 7** *Any future practice must be collective, educational, and dialogical.*

{from various contributors to "[Trash Theory: Preliminary Materials for an Image of Practice #3](#)"}

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As so often happens on this blog, a confluence of events prompts this post.

## I. I was reading a Facebook discussion

where academics and practitioners were responding to a colleague's call to take action in the world beyond the classroom. The article, by Pierce Salguero, is titled "The World Outside the Lecture Hall is on

Fire." (Links at bottom.) Here's the gist. Listening to a scholar give a rather routine scholarly paper at an academic conference, Salguero had a realization.

It was a realization that we have important choices to make about how we spend our time and energies as scholars.

The world outside our lecture hall is on fire, literally and figuratively, and I realized I can no longer keep up the professional facade behind the lectern while it burns.

This insight is, of course, fortuitous. And, given the caution endemic to academia, it is laudable that Salguero writes about his realization. My overriding response to the piece, though, was that it stopped where it should have started. Here's the final paragraph:

Now, more than ever, how we approach our scholarship is inherently and inescapably a political matter. What we choose to talk about and what we choose to ignore in the course of our ordinary day is our politics. Shall we choose to bury our heads in the sand, or to use whatever platform we have to try to address the conflagration outside the window?

Everything before that final question struck me as material that *should be* too obvious to an educated reader. Is it really necessary to *make the case* for action? Why not use the entire essay to explore the decisive question at the end of the piece? Does Salguero's intended readership really have to be *convinced* of his basic thesis? The answer, on full display in the Facebook comments, genuinely baffled me. Or, is there an English word that contains a mixture of bafflement, confusion, disbelief disappointment, and sadness? That's what I felt while wading through the comments, discussion, and reposts. Why? There are several reasons. Some are more or less personal quirks, like my distaste for the Academic Mutual Admiration Society. Others are more consequential, like the realization that the people responding, many if not most of whom are rising or established scholars and practitioners, are hearing for the first time Salguero's uncontroversial (?)

observation that education is a political act. But what I find most disturbing about the entire episode is *the yawning gap* between the modest spirit of the original article and the jubilation of responses:

Bravo. Your words echo so true.

Will read and re-read for a while maybe two weeks or two years because it's such an important call to reconciliation between one's thoughts and actions.

Word from Pierce Salguero.

Great essay by my friend Pierce Salguero.

I may just use a couple of lines from this in my keynote next month.

All the claps in the world for Pierce Salguero!

Important thoughts from my friend and colleague Pierce Salguero.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart! So very important and so true. As scholars and trained writers, thinkers, and researchers, we have much needed skills that we can each share in different ways. I agree that it is essential for each of us to make conscious choices on how we use these skills.  
**THANK YOU FOR SPELLING THIS OUT!**

Some of this can, of course, be chalked up to the all-too-commonplace practice of sycophantic fawning among academics. And Facebook is clearly not a forum primed for nuanced discussions. Still, the general trend expressed there, even in so small a sample, is, I believe, nonetheless noteworthy. So, what exactly was sticking in my craw about this entire episode?

## II. My pondering about that episode converged

with another incident. Peter Limberg, of the *Intellectual Explorers Podcast*, sent me an unpublished article that he co-wrote with professor of psychology Davood Gozli. The article concerns a subject type the authors term *the marginal figure*. Such figures play a "potential role...as sources of insight and connection across domains and communities."

When members of conflicting groups think about each other, what comes to mind tends to be the prototypical group members—someone who embodies all the relevant features of the outgroup, while possessing none of the features of the ingroup. But groups of people are rarely homogenous and could not be fully represented by their prototypical member. If communication within and between groups is only controlled by the prototypical members, there is little chance for intra-group change and inter-group reconciliation. To deflect attention away from prototypical members, it is useful to focus on a concept that stands in sharp contrast to it—the *marginal figure*.

I would add that an important function served by the marginal figure is that of interjecting crucial yet anathema information into the established thought-system, in-group, or status quo. It is this very function that prevents the marginal figure from being heard, accepted, invited into the center, much less openly applauded for his or her efforts. This treatment of the marginal figure is understandable for obvious reasons. However, it is also paradoxical since it is arguably *from the margins* that any genuinely substantive innovation is ever going to unfold.

The margins can interrupt, threaten, or de-stabilize what is in focus. In prototypical cases, what is marginal is left out of our awareness, quietly, though it persists as a potential target of inspection. The margins could be the product of ignorance, thinking habits, repression, or our inflexibility. Their very

existence, however, is unavoidable, because our perspectives, our categories, and our theories do not exhaustively cover our reality.

As rich as Limberg and Gozli's paper is for our purposes, I will wait until it is published to comment further. I mention the article because it made me reflect back to Salguero's piece and the ensuing Facebook response; and from there, to a specific question about the possibility of *agency* in any given social formation or practice. That is, we talk a lot about the *subject* of practice, the implicit person encoded in the text and given shape by the community. But, here's the question: what is required to transition from a position of being passively formed to one of active self-forming, from *subject* to *agent*? (Any answer to this question must take caution not to subsume "agency" into yet another idealist framework of atomized selfhood. See Postulate 7, above.) Here's what occurred to me. The intended *empirical* readers of Salguero's text are today's intellectual and cultural "thought leaders," to use a current buzzword. That term derives from the management world, but has, alas, slithered its way into academia. In the old days, we might have said "experts." But, as is fitting for our era of defeat and desperation, thought leaders are required to be something more than go-to people for specialized knowledge: "They are trusted sources who move and inspire people with innovative ideas; they turn ideas into reality...They are changing the world in meaningful ways and engage others to join their efforts. They create evolutionary and even revolutionary advancements in their fields," and so on. By contrast to this energetic and bold figure, I reflected, the *implicit* or *implied* reader of Salguero's text (I mean the whole shebang here—OP, FB), the reader who is *rhetorically* embedded therein, is the classic diminished figure of neoliberal institutionalization: *vulnerable* in the face of the status quo; *adaptive* in devising coping mechanisms for daily functioning; and *resilient* in adjusting perpetually to things as they are. I say much more about this issue in a text I am writing on education. My point here is that what is sticking in my craw is the fact that everywhere I look in the worlds of both academia and

x-buddhism, all I see are passively formed subjects where *active agents*, I will never cease to argue, *should be*.

### III. This line of thought led me back to Antonio Gramsci's

*Prison Notebooks*. In Gramsci's terms, what is ailing me is that all I see are *traditional* intellectuals occupying the rightful site of *organic* intellectuals. Gramsci's interrelated concepts of cultural hegemony, ideology, and the organic intellectual should be useful to anyone thinking through the issue of agency in practice. For, against his fellow Marxists, Gramsci denied the dogma of an economic determinism that would inevitably result in the severing of the workers' chains. He considered this a passive attitude, labeling it "vulgar historical materialism." The emphasis, he felt, was being placed on "materialism," resulting in an attitude of resigned patience, like Christians waiting for the Second Coming. By placing the emphasis instead on "historical," Gramsci introduces a robust element of agency into his theory of political change. Very roughly, his argument goes like this: It has always been the case that one group of people holds power over other groups (hegemony). Power follows from having prevailed in the "war of position," in, that is, the struggle for cultural dominance wherein one's own class interests are represented to the detriment of others' interests. For, it is from the position of cultural dominance that ideology is generated and controlled. Ideology can easily be wielded as a powerful and pernicious tool of domination and made to *render natural* the very terms and conditions of that domination. We see that happening today in the United States, where the typical Trump voter has absolutely no rational basis for supporting the policies of a man who represents at every turn the interests of the billionaire class. So, why do they do so? This was precisely the question that animated Gramsci's notion of hegemony in the 1920s. (He sought to understand why, for instance, the proletariat supported the imperialists' war in 1917; why workers were content with minimal material concessions in negotiations with their wealthy factory bosses; why the poor desired expensive yet superfluous products hawked in

the capitalist marketplace, and so on.) His answer is that the 1% is able to do so because they have won the war of position. From there, the entire apparatus of control—encompassing the social, political, economic, cultural, educational, religious, etc.—is at their disposal. They use it to convince everyone of the *inevitability* and *naturalness* of, say, a \$7.25 minimum wage for workers and a \$15,600,000 average pay for CEOs; or of the need for a \$23,890 tuition price tag on a public four-year college (out-of-state students); or of a paycheck for a woman that is only 78-82% that of her male colleague; or of\_\_\_\_\_. . . Fill in the blank. This phenomenon of *ideologically rendering natural* is as infinite as it is insidious. The status quo is thus run through with a self-replicating mechanism that makes it virtually impossible to alter. Enter the organic intellectual.

The only way to counter the prevailing status quo is to stage a war of position. Realistically, it is only from a dominant position that any genuine change to the seemingly inevitable status quo will emerge. This is the case whether we are struggling to change an x-buddhist sangha, a college administration, or the world order. (Reformism, or tweaking the system "from within," is rigged in advance in favor of those who currently occupy the dominant position.) It is the *organic intellectual* who enables this war. So, who is this figure? We can perhaps best understand the organic intellectual by considering what he or she is *not*: a "traditional intellectual." Traditional intellectuals are those who represent and protect the boundaries of their respective disciplines. In this regard, they are the well-interpellated subjects of an academic *tradition*, and proudly view themselves as such. A certain air of the Ivory Tower professor hangs over this image. Traditional intellectuals see themselves as apolitical and classless, or, really, as *above* or *beyond* politics and class, so much the better for studying and analyzing their disciplinary corner of the world.

Since these...traditional intellectuals experience through an "*esprit de corps*" their uninterrupted historical continuity and their special qualification, they thus put themselves

forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group.

Yet, in doing so, they err. Or, more to the point, they delude themselves. On closer examination, the "uninterrupted historical continuity" and "special qualification" that the traditional academics grant themselves as functionaries within a bounded field, are rooted in the ideological hegemony of *precisely* "the dominant social group." The position of the traditional intellectual within today's neoliberal corporate university thus "*conceals* an attachment to various historical class formations" (emphasis added). Namely, far from being "autonomous and independent of the dominant social group," they are the very protectors, enablers, and replicators of that group's values, interests, and aims. The traditional intellectual can not help but perpetuate the norms of the hegemons from within the educational system.

Diametrically opposed to this figure is that of the "organic intellectual." The social role of this figure "is primarily that of organizing, administering, directing, educating, or leading others," initially toward revolutionary *imagination* and, eventually, toward *action*. The organic intellectual is thus instrumental in the fight for substantive change to the reigning norms and values that the traditional intellectual, knowingly or not, perpetuates.

One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer "ideologically" the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own *organic intellectuals*.

The issue here is, of course, much more complex than I am making it. Gramsci, for instance, understood the traditional intellectual to be a representative of the bourgeoisie and the organic intellectual, of the workers. He also famously said that "All people are intellectuals...but not all people have in society the function of intellectuals." That is,

anyone, whether a college professor or a factory worker, has the *capacity* to educate others toward social change benefitting the masses; but only someone who takes up the mantle to do so is "an organic intellectual." Indeed, the chapter "The Intellectuals" in *Prison Notebooks* opens with this question:

Are intellectuals an autonomous and independent social group, or does every social group have its own particular specialised category of intellectuals? The problem is a complex one, because of the variety of forms assumed to date by the real historical process of formation of the different categories of intellectuals.

It would be too much to work out here, but Gramsci's theory can be made to better fit our current circumstances. For example, bourgeoisie/workers can be replaced with status-quoist/precariat. More importantly for my purposes, it can be refitted to apply to the issue of agency in the social practices of education and x-buddhism. Bringing it back to the issue framed in the Salguero episode, we could say that the choice he articulates is between operating as a traditional or an organic intellectual—in the classroom, in scholarship and writing, in conversation with one another, and yes, even on Facebook posts. This can be seen as a direct response to his closing question: "Shall we choose to bury our heads in the sand, or to use whatever platform we have to try to address the conflagration outside the window?" This strikes me as a way out of hegemonic collusion and passive subjugation, and toward robust agency and collective creativity. That's not to say that it will succeed. But imagine harnessing the energy of the jubilant response to the article to advance in the war of position. It's possible, right? Or am I deluding myself?

#### **IV. As I was drafting this post, I came across a link**

on Facebook to an article in the British leftist daily *Morning Star*. The title of the article was "Promote Parenti, not Slavoj Zizek," by Zoltan Zigedy. The author's explicit criticism of Zizek as a clownish figure who "has mastered the tricks of a public intellectual—entertaining,

pompous, outrageous, calculatedly obscure and mannered" does not interest me here. Zigedy's larger point however, directly relates to that thing sticking in my craw. And that is that the acceptance of someone like Zizek—in academia, in leftist circles, in the publishing world, even to a degree in mainstream media—is predicated on a defanged version of some radical idea. Zigedy's intention is to consider the reception of Marxism in current academia. He observes that:

The curious thing about this intellectual Marxism [of Zizek and others], this parlour dilettante Marxism, is that it is never all-in—it is Marxism with grave reservations.

Marxism is fine if it's the "early" Marx, the "humanist" Marx, the "Hegelian" Marx, the Marx of the Grundrisse, the Marx without Engels, the Marx without the working class, the Marx before Bolshevism, or before communism.

Zigedy is describing the traditional intellectual here. That is, teaching Marx with such qualifications is effectively to render him a thinker of the status quo, if one with (harmless) intellectual quirks and (impractical) theoretical idiosyncrasies. He even quotes a tandem of academic authors who distill Marxism down to the answer to two burning questions: "what work should I do?" and "how should I spend my finite time?" For, according to these authors, these are "the ultimate questions anyone must ask." What is the answer, they offer? "Accumulating capital contrasts, they submit, with 'maximising...each individual's free time to spend as she pleases:"

Thus, the struggle for emancipation, in this rethinking of Marxism, is not the emancipation of the working class, but the wresting of freely disposable time from the grip of work.

Zigedy's conclusion for this section is that the intention of authors from within the university system "seems to be to defang Marxism more than promote it." This conclusion prepares us for the really damning aspect of "Promote Parenti, not Slavoj Zizek." And it is this aspect that interests me here: "University employment is rarely

available to purveyors of dangerous ideas." Marx's barring from university employment was, however, the least of his problems. He was exiled first from Germany, then France, then Belgium. Precariously settled in England, he was relentlessly hounded, censored, and surveilled by the authorities; he and his family were spied on, harassed, threatened, and intimidated. In all of this, he was "a harbinger of the fate of nearly all authentic Marxist intellectuals." And by "authentic" Zigedy means "dangerous." (The Parenti" of the title is Michael Parenti, "the most dangerous Marxist intellectual in the US.") Nicely tying together two of the main strands of this trashy post, Zigedy contends that "Real Marxists are necessarily outliers," and "It is a telling fact that, though history has produced many "organic" Marxists, Marxists with roots in the working class and in movements challenging capitalism, their contributions seldom populate the bibliographies of university professors, unless to deride."

"Promote Parenti, not Slavoj Zizek" could be titled "Be an Organic Intellectual, not a Traditional One," or "Think, Act, and Teach from the Margins, not from the Core." To do so, it should go without saying, "is not a career move, but a thankless commitment." To paraphrase Zigedy in light of Salguero's article:

Capitalist institutions do not endow those who advocate the undoing of \_\_\_\_\_ [fill in the blank as you see fit: neoliberalism; corporate capitalism, American imperialism, wealth inequality, conformity, the quenching of the fire, etc.] with academic honor or celebrity. And those people who do rise to academic acclaim, who get lucrative book deals, who enjoy media exposure, seldom present much of a threat to the system.

I have many more questions about all of this. And there are many conclusions to be drawn for teaching, community, x-buddhism, and practice in general. As I was letting this post simmer, I even came across another thought-provoking source related to the question of agency. But I have gone on for too long. So, rather than present it as the fourth moment in my witch's flight here, I will just encourage you

to see for yourself. I am referring to Tom Pepper's working outline for his proposed book at [\*The Faithful Buddhist\*](#):

My assumption, argued throughout the book, is that real human agency is necessarily dependent on a fairly sophisticated use of language, including written language. I have come to believe that it is just not possible for those unwilling to think rigorously in concepts to ever become the kind of subject capable of real agency. So no truly popular account, dependent on entertaining presentation and rhetorical manipulation, can ever be of use in this project.

Something is afoot. The world is on fire. The university is on fire. Buddhism is slouching ever more deeply into the New Age desert. Foundations are shaking. Yes. Even traditional institutional players are telling other traditional institutional players as much. Jubilation is raised. Courageous people like Pierce Salguero are sounding the clarion call. But where are we headed? And what will *you* do? Whatever else you do, please keep an eye on the margins, on the darkness beyond your current horizon of vision. Better yet, consider joining those of us who have lain our camp there. The time has come to be *all-in*.

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## Links

Pierce Salguero, "[The World Outside the Lecture Hall is on Fire](#)"

Peter Limberg's [Intellectual Explorer's Podcast](#)

[Davood Gozli](#) personal website

Antonio Gramsci, [Prison Notebooks](#)

Zoltan Zigedy, "[Promote Parenti, not Slavoj Zizek](#)"

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**Glenn Wallis** holds a Ph.D. in Buddhist studies from Harvard University. He is the author of *A Critique of Western Buddhism: Ruins of the Buddhist Real* and several other books and articles on Buddhism. For more information, visit: [www.glennwallis.com](http://www.glennwallis.com).



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