

Doing Scholar-Activism: Tension and Possibilities

The most exciting breakout session at the 2021 Pathways to Sustainability Conference? It starts off well when moderator and media scientist Dan Hassler-Forest bluntly admits he doesn't know why he's here, "but a little chaos might be in order. And if we're finished later and don't feel like leaving, we'll just occupy the room."

With that, the tone is set. The topic of the session is, as chairman Giuseppe Feola (Copernicus Institute) points out, the tension between research and activism, or rather: the legitimisation of science by social mobilisation and vice versa. And the difficulty that people sometimes have when they fulfil the double role of scientist-activist, not least when they are threatened.

Pitches

In anticipation of the attendees splitting up into smaller discussion groups, five researchers from various disciplines gave a pitch. The story of political scientist Ammar Maleki (Tilburg University) about an Iranian scientist who was thwarted by the regime because of his ideas is particularly moving. It turned out to be his father, who died eight months ago without Maleki ever being able to see him again. "Political science is also a contribution to a more sustainable world. And an academic must also be an activist, otherwise he will remain blind to the needs of the world. Conversely, an activist must also be a scientist, otherwise he will lose sight of objectivity." Organisational scientist Patricia Zanoni (Utrecht University and Hasselt University) is even more adamant: "Don't you dare take a risk? Then stay in your ivory tower." Both she and chemist Bruno Bottega Pergher (University of Amsterdam) descend from the stage for their pitch as they have a "problem with authority", to the hilarity of those present.

Discussions

The group discussions that follow range from very practical topics ("How do you deal with arrests if you're not from here?" "It doesn't matter as long as you don't destroy anything and don't aspire to certain jobs or sectors") to the observation that it is "typically Dutch" to find activism a dirty word: "Just look at the last Maagdenhuis occupation, that involved mostly foreign students and staff members."

To what extent scientists-activists are privileged and can, in contrast to some people from other sectors, much more easily afford an activist stance is one of the most fascinating themes that was discussed during the closing plenary discussion. Cultural anthropologist Elisabeth Dueholm Rasch (Wageningen University and Research) hits the nail on the head for this writer when she says that there is indeed a privilege, "but I simply cannot undo that. What I can do, however, is to make it useful."