„That is when theory comes into play"

Sally Haslanger on the relationship between philosophy and activism

You often emphasize that you are a believer in social movements and keep a clear backpack ready for demonstrations. How did this come about? Which social movements have been most important and formative for your political socialization?

When I was in college, I really did not understand feminism. I did not have a sense of myself as anything other than free and autonomous and powerful. But my brother kept telling me '*Oh, just you wait!*' And then a series of events occurred. I was assaulted. And suddenly the reality hit. It was just an incredible lightning bolt to my spine. I suddenly understood why he kept saying that.

I was transformed quite quickly and became involved in feminist activism of a variety of kinds. One of my glory moments was when I was working at the University of California, Berkeley to promote sexual harassment protections. This was in the late seventies, and sexual harassment was quite a new idea. We were just a bunch of random grad students, demonstrating and working on this issue for some time. The university lawyers asked to meet a core group of us. We did not know that much about the law. And a friend said '*I think Catharine MacKinnon is visiting at Stanford this year. Maybe we should call her and see if she'll join us.*' We were all going '*Really? Do you think she would?*' We called her, and she met with us with the university lawyers to talk about sexual harassment and the requirements of

sexual harassment law. So, it was like, '*Yes, it's a win!*' Also, I was involved in the early days of the anti-pornography movement. The slogan was: Pornography teaches lies about women. I had a couple of close friends who were also activists, and we would organize demonstrations and such.

At the same time in graduate school, I was primarily involved in doing analytic metaphysics. I was not doing any social political philosophy. And I really held these two parts of my life separate because there were no courses in feminist philosophy or feminist theory or any of that at the time. So what we did was to organize reading groups and demonstrations.

In my first job at Irvine I was hired in part to teach in the Women's Studies Program, which started being created at that time. But I had never taken a course in women's studies. All I had was my own self education and the education of my activist friends. When I arrived on campus the director of Women's Studies met me and said: 'You know, we are so glad to have you. Your syllabus looks wonderful. But I have one question: Why are you in the philosophy department?' And I said, 'Well, I have a PhD in philosophy. This is what I do.' But she couldn't really understand why, given the history of analytic philosophy, which was pretty bad for women and there was no feminism in any substantial sense.

So, I continued to work on feminism, mainly at my activist side and not in my research. But at some point I was asked to write something for a book that was edited by Louise Anthony and Charlotte Witte on feminist philosophy. And I said, '*Well, I do not do feminist philosophy.*' And they said, '*Oh, yes, you do.*' And I said, '*Well, I do not know what I would write.*' And they said, '*Well, you know a lot about feminist theory, and you know how to do philosophy, so just get work-*

ing on it.' And so, I wrote a paper on Catharine MacKinnon's work, which was called '*On being objective and being objectified'*. That was my first paper in feminist philosophy, and I never looked back.

Another thing that has been important to me has been anti-racist work. And there were important decisions in my life about how to engage with and support the black community even though I am not a member of that community. How do you do that? What is that involvement and when are you welcome and when are you not welcome? So, there has been a long history over the last decades of really trying to be a good ally and working together with the black community while also staying on the margins of those efforts. And I think that has been a very deep learning experience for me. How to build coalitions both in philosophy and theory and in activism. I have tried to build coalitions between groups working on women's rights and LGBTQ rights and racial liberation. And it has been tricky, but it is something that I very deeply believe in and raised my children to believe in. So that has been very meaningful to me.

Can you speak a bit more about the relation between your academic life and the activism of communities outside of the university? What are the tensions that go along with it?

Well, I had thought at certain points after I got my PhD that I was going to quit my job as an academic philosopher and become an activist. But one of the challenges I had was that I was much more reluctant than other people in the organizations to act without having an analysis of the situation. People would say, '*Here is what we are going to do'*. And I would say, '*I think we need to have a reading group about this first'*, and they would laugh at me. Even in

contexts where they did not know what my academic background was, I developed this reputation of being cautious and uncertain about what steps to take as an activist. And that was something that led me to realize that I am not really the best activist leader.

In organizing, it takes a sort of activist creative imagination. And it is exactly that, which I felt I personally did not have. I did not have that sense of, '*Oh, we could do this, and that would work.*' And so, my involvement in movements and also my involvement with the black community, I feel has been more a sense of commitment and willingness to do the grunt work. Willingness to sweep the floor, to do the dishes, make the posters and those sorts of things. And learning from those who have this creative sensitivity to the kind of the moment how to go forward.

I am good at showing up. I am good at being committed. I am good at building networks and connections, but I am not that good at deciding what needs to be done and planning how to do it.

And this cautiousness and urge for an analysis has pushed you towards philosophy again?

Yeah, that is exactly right. I always have questions and concerns and I want an analysis. And this is what I do now: I spend a lot of time doing this diagnostic work of trying to figure out what exactly the issue is and where the leverage points are, because that was always something that I found very difficult in the activist context that I was in.

How do you think theory can still make a difference with respect to political practice? Because as I understand it, the work you are doing now is something that is meant to inform political practice as much as it is informed by it.

Well, I feel as though my work is not quite informed by the work on the ground but is more in conversation with it. Take the case of sexual harassment. There were times when the strategy emphasized legal reform. But experience showed that you need more than that. Think of the #MeToo movement. This is decades after sexual harassment laws were passed. So what we needed were efforts to change culture and raise consciousness. But how to do it? I became worried over time that many of the usual tactics do not have the kind of broad impact that is needed to end sexual objectification. And so part of my work has been to think about how to bring together the significance of law and the significance of the economy and the significance of culture and the significance of all of these various components of society to think about social change more holistically.

For the last years I have been working with a program at MIT that tries to address global poverty with methods of co-design. I am especially interested these days in what's called period poverty, where young women cannot afford menstrual products. This has a huge impact on them. Because menstrual shame is pretty much globally prevalent. Almost nowhere are people comfortable talking about their menstrual periods. There are some programs here in the Boston area that are trying to address this, as well as a group in Kenya. What we are doing is building a kind of network of people and the young women are creating apps and we are giving them resources for thinking about how to prevent teenage pregnancy for example by simple things like having a bracelet where you keep track of your cycle with beads. So that you know the days when you may be most fertile, but it is a bracelet. Nobody can tell what it is for, and only you know how to use it.

For me this idea is essential that if you begin to change the practices that changes relationships. When you sit down together in a group of men and women and you are trying to have them design solutions to a problem, the women have really good ideas and they've got skills. And so, the men are going, '*Whoa, that is amazing. You could do that*'. And they go, '*Yes, of course I could do that*'. Then the relationship between them changes. It is about changing practices and in changing practices, you change relationships between the individuals. This is something I am really deeply invested in at the moment as a kind of on the ground effort. Of course, this does not break down global capitalism.

I was just going to ask you about this. How is it then that in your view this approach of changing on the ground practices relates to changing social structures?

I think this is connected to the issues about changing the laws and how changing the laws does not fix things most of the time. It can sometimes, but it does not unless there is a kind of more holistic ability to change the practices in ways that are emancipatory. Because you can institute a law and there is no change in the practices or the change in the practices backfires or whatever. So, when you are thinking about structures at this very broad and more abstract level, I think trying to do that and hoping that it will trickle down and change people's form of life is overly optimistic. You have to start with opening up space in the form of life and having creative imagination and having different relationships with each other. And then there can be a broader and wider change in the society. Once people begin to see that they are not

stuck in a particular form of life, their critical capacities are enhanced, and they can begin to see connections between the situation that they were in and their improved lives and situations of other people. And then there is compassion and there is identification and there is commitment to seeing these kinds of changes happen more broadly. And you get broader movements for social change, for democratic control of various things, because once you see it happening in your immediate context and you see your own life being transformed, then that opens up this possibility of imagining greater futures, better futures.

It is not immediately radical, but I think it has a much more sustainable radical potential.

And it suggests that theory does play quite an important role because whether you organize people to enable them to solve certain problems in this or that way actually depends on your analysis.

Exactly. There is a lot of work around period poverty where people just get large donations from American corporations and basically dump the products, and say, '*Here, now you have this product*', and they last for six months and then it is done. And there is no real change in this. You get girls to go to school for six months, they are regular participants in school, but then they run out of the products and cannot go to school anymore; there is no change in the relationships. Part of what I think having the theory does is it says – in my view – practices are the basis for the social relations, which are the basis for the structure. And then the structure has dynamics that give us the system. So, when you want change in the structure and in the system, the really important place to start is with the practices, because if they change, then the relations

change and then the structure has to change because these new relationships are cut against the way the system has been working in the past. If you try to change it from the top but the practices are continuing the same way as before, the change is not sustainable. It is not lasting because people revert back to the practices that they were engaged in before.

In organizing of this sort, we encourage a process where each of us can notice: I not only had that moment where suddenly everything was looking different, but that I was given an opportunity to act in the world differently, act in relationships to others differently. Because the heart and soul of movement work is finding new ways of relating to each other and building that into something very broad and collective and then you can press forward together. So that is where I am coming from.

In your Benjamin Lectures, you are going to start from the idea that society is made by us but at the same time seems to have a life of its own. How then can change still be effective, if the structures and systemic dynamics are not so easily responsive to our attempts to change them? How does it help for the work on the ground to draw the connection to the structural dynamics?

That is a hard question and, obviously, a deeply important one. I think one very simple way to think about structures is to think of a variety of different constraints on our agency: geography, my own body, biology – all of these constrain my agency. But there are other constraints on my agency that are part of the built environment which is not just buildings but institutions and those sorts of things. Social structures I think of as the kind of constraints on agency that are socially constituted. So the first step is to see which ones the social ones

and which ones the natural ones are or which ones we can potentially overcome by changing how we interact and which ones we cannot change. The next thing, which is, I think, extremely hard and something that I am just barely grasping is to think about when you start tweaking these things in the system, how it does ramify through the system. Something that in a local context may look like a good tweak can ramify in ways that there is backlash and it interacts with other things in ways that you do not really want to happen. The next thing is the extent to which the economic dynamics are the dominant dynamics that are responsible for the way the system works or whether there are other dynamics involved, the other vectors, so to speak, in the system that make a difference. And of course, the economic dynamics are extremely important, but I think there are additional ones. Some of them are material like climate and climate change. But then there are also cultural dynamics, there are political dynamics, there are historical dynamics.

Trying to get a feel for these multiple dynamics, I think is extremely important when you are thinking about social change, because in my view oftentimes movements have been sort of single-issue movements like the feminist movement or the anti-racist movement or the anti-capitalist movement or the post-colonial movements. But you have to see that you cannot really do one thing at a time, because as you try to change one thing, it cascades in ways that are unpredictable, unless you are trying to attend to the multiple factors that are relevant. And that is where theory comes into play.

This interview was conducted by Rahel Jaeggi and Robin Celikates.