

**“You can change the world. We’re just here to help”:** Activist consultancy firms as forms of neoliberal governmentality.

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## 'You can change the world. We're just here to help': activist consultancy firms as forms of neoliberal governmentality

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### ABSTRACT

Using Foucault's theory of governmentality, we trace the development of activist consultancy firms (ACFs), providing an in-depth description of two ACFs: Boutique Activist Consultancy and the Solutions Institute. We explore how these ACFs enact neoliberal governmentality. The ACFs' ambivalent engagement with professionalization is the most notable finding of our research.

### KEYWORDS

Neoliberalization of activism; governmentality; activist consultancy firms; professionalization of activism; critical discourse analysis; social activism

## Introduction

We teach graphic and web design, how to build a coalition and how to start a movement, dealing with all levels of government, how to start a protest, how to pass and repeal legislation, and more. We have over 50 advising areas. We teach people how to become activists, and established organizations the tips and tricks of returning power to the people. We believe that good ideas don't require force, and by reducing political force, taking power away from politicians, you can change the world. We're just here to help. ('About Us', n.d.)

This article examines two activist consultancy firms (ACFs): the Boutique Activist Consultancy (BAC), a two-partner team, and the Solutions Institute (SI), an organization with dozens of staff and voluntary members. Both were founded in 2013, and both describe themselves as consultancies committed to providing professional services as social activists. BAC's slogan is 'The use of innovative protest to bring about political or social change'. SI's motto is 'You can change the world. We're just here to help'. Both define themselves as professionals in the field of social activism. Drawing on the works of Michel Foucault (Death, 2010; Foucault, 1991), we examine professionalization of social activism as a case of neoliberal governmentality, and ACFs as an assemblage of rationalities, strategies, and techniques that enable rule-facilitating governance (cf. Rose, 1999, p. 49). Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), we examine how BAC and SI turn activism into a field of expertise, a discipline, and a career, as neoliberalism and social activism intertwine. As ACFs seek to influence and coordinate social actions, we consider whether they operate as an apparatus of neoliberal governance. Examining ACFs as neoliberal governmentalities enables us to more clearly discern identities, subject positions, and agency as they are 'constructed' by neoliberal rationalities and technologies of government (Dean, 1999, p. 120).

## Conceptual framework

### Governmentality

For Foucault (2007), *government* is more than the sum of political institutions and state management systems. It is ‘the conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, 1982, pp. 220–1). The thought involved in the practice of government is collective and relatively taken for granted, not usually open to questioning by its practitioners. It regulates thinking of individuals and groups, through a wide range of control techniques. *Governmentality* is the ‘art of government’. It is the process through which a form of government achieves specific ends (e.g. a happy and stable society), the means to these ends (‘apparatuses of security’; Rabinow & Rose, 2003, p. 244), and the particular type of knowledge used (‘political economy’; p. 244). Governmentality involves an understanding of power as the productive belief and opinion we are immersed in, and how we think about the governing of people’s conduct. Governmentality also involves ‘political power beyond the state’ (Rose & Miller, 1992). Rather than just control of resources, power operates when people conduct themselves and others within a field of regulations and discourses (Popescu, Comănescu, & Sabie, 2016).

### Power and counter-conducts

For Foucault (Dean, 1999), *power* is the forms of social control in disciplinary institutions such as schools, hospitals, and psychiatric institutions, and the forms of knowledge guiding the behaviour of populations. It manifests itself both by producing knowledge that enables individuals to govern themselves, and by producing certain internalized discourses, leading to more efficient forms of social control. Where power is viewed as a relationship, binaries such as government vs. resistance break down. These binaries are then seen as mutually constitutive (Death, 2010). In this approach, power is not a graspable thing, but rather a relation between entities. No party is entirely shaped by the governmental regime. Instead, they establish themselves both through and as opposed to dominant discourses (Nica, 2017, p. 82).

Foucault’s (1991) concept of *counter-conducts* extends governmentality by incorporating methods of resistance into the theoretical frame. Modes of governance work through technologies of the Self (Lemke, 2001) to create certain subjectivities, and the counter-conducts of resistance constantly rework these subjectivities. Foucauldian theory on counter-conducts acknowledges subjects’ capacity to perform, justify, and contest relations of power through critique, activity, and defiance (Deacon, 2003). Familiar archetypes such as the working class, environmentalists, democratic citizens, and the nation are constituted, at least partly, through collective resistance (Death, 2010).

### Neoliberal governmentality

*Neoliberalism* refers to ‘a new political, economic, and social arrangement emphasising market relations, minimal states, and individual responsibility’ (Springer, 2010, p. 1025). Leitner, Sheppard, Sziarto, and Maringanti (2007) argue that neoliberalism has promoted ‘the notion that markets are the best, most efficient, and socially optimal means of allocating scarce resources in virtually all realms of life’ (p. 225). Most proponents of neoliberalism share an unquestioned ‘common sense’ (Althusser, 1971) that the market is the dominant social institution and the main support of individual economic freedom. For Brown (2003), neoliberalism involves ‘extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action’ (p. 40).

Based on the predominance of market mechanisms and of the restriction of the action of the state, *neoliberal governmentality* characterizes advanced liberal democracies of post-welfare state politics, where power is de-centred, and its members play an active role in their own self-government. The responsibility for ensuring the ‘well-being’ of the population is outsourced to the Subject, who is characterized as an economically rational individual. Neoliberal subjectivities are expected to ‘look after themselves’. They need to be regulated from ‘inside’. The knowledge produced allows the construction of auto-regulated or auto-correcting, calculating, self-interested actors, encapsulated in the figure of *Homo economicus* (Ong, 2006).

This form of governmentality is implicated in even the most mundane practice of everyday life, including the role of expertise and professionalism. The work of experts (both inside and outside formal government institutions) helps to shape the norms of conduct, propagates certain discourses, and consequently promotes new forms of selfhood (Rose, 1996). As Maier and her colleagues observe in their systematic review (Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016, pp. 75–78), non-profit and activist organizations share in this role, affecting the standards and goals for their employees, volunteers, and beneficiaries. For example, economic factors such as competition with for-profit providers and availability of funding induce non-profits and activists to commercialize or demand payment for service to stay afloat (Kerlin & Pollak, 2011). Public management and liability reforms may induce NGOs to become more business-like (Liebschutz, 1992); donors who fund NGOs may prefer professionalism in receiving organizations (Bednall, Walker, Curl, & LeRoy, 2001).

### *Neoliberalization of social activism*

As an ideological approach, neoliberalization has engendered a disposition to regard free markets, commodification, formal organizations, and individuals as the vehicles for social change, rather than policies or organizational actions (Harvey, 2005). When applied to social activism, neoliberalization involves a ‘marketization’ of social engagement (Soederberg, 2009), which has led to ‘commodity activism’ (Murphy, 2015), ‘socially responsible investment’ (Soederberg, 2009, pp. 87–89), and ‘social entrepreneurship’ (Zhang & Swanson, 2013, p. 106). For example, anti-poverty activists focus on service delivery and highlight their own economic contributions rather than lobbying for policy development (Changfoot, 2007).

Tarrow and Della Porta (2005) argue that these shifts in the locus of political power from the state to various transnational and corporate organizations (combined, we argue, with neoliberal selfhood) has led to a corresponding shift in social activism. From being primarily local in scope, with the state as the target, social activism has evolved toward international forms of activity that primarily target the abuses of the global market (Tarrow & Della Porta, 2005). Social activism has changed through being drawn into market-like mentalities, which have reoriented non-profit organizations toward providing services rather than challenging the capitalist system (Dart, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Maier et al., 2016).

### *Business-like model*

Since the 1980s, non-profit (NPO) and non-governmental (NGO) organizations have increasingly adopted the management styles and structures of corporate governance (Diani & Donati, 1999; Maier et al., 2016). This process is referred to as ‘NGOs becoming business-like’ in terms of professionalization, managerialization, and marketization (Maier et al., 2016). Dart (2004) outlines three categories of ‘business-like’ elements: rhetoric, organization, and goals. Business-like *rhetoric* refers

to the use of market-related terms, narratives, and images, along with subjective expressions of organizational identity and value frames. Business-like *organization*—alternatively called ‘organizational rationalization’ (Hwang & Powell, 2009) or ‘managerialization’ (Maier et al., 2016)—refers to an understanding that NGOs are best managed by models of corporate operations (Roberts, Jones, & Fröhling, 2005). Business-like *goals* involve the tendency to frame objectives ‘primarily ... in revenue generation, profit, or financial surplus terms’ (Dart, 2004, p. 297).

### **Professionalization**

The division of labour inherent in complex organizations facilitates specialization in terms of skills, functions, and levels of dedication (Diani & Forno, 2003, p. 159). Some observers have lauded the benefits of professionalized activism, such as greater efficiency in mobilizing resources and greater perceived legitimacy (e.g. Salamon, 1993). Others believe that this process has brought a conventionalization of activism, wherein protests and alternative ideas are replaced with institutionalized forms of action such as lobbying or service provision. Rather than calling for substantive policy change, incentivized conformity and self-promotion have become the end goals of professionalized social activist organizations (Della Porta & Diani, 1999; Diani & Forno, 2003; Rucht & Roose, 2001). Reeser (1991) found that professionalization was not really associated with decreased activist behaviour among social workers. However, it was found that the activist behaviours they engaged in were relatively conservative (i.e. lobbying, petitioning) compared to those of social workers who did not value professionalism as highly. Commitment to professionalism was also found to be associated with less approval of activism in general.

The process of professionalization, which requires credentials and standards of ‘practice’, in a social activism context is inherently paradoxical. As Touraine (2005) argues, social activism is intimately tied to the autonomy of individual participants. Indeed, for Touraine, autonomy and agency are the underlying goals of all social activism. However, professionalization demands methods of disciplinary control to regulate and standardize employees through constructing “‘appropriate’ work, identities, and constructs’ (Fournier, 1999, p. 281). Professionalization inevitably encroaches on the autonomy of the activist subject. However, the ways in which this process manifests itself can be varied and complex. For example, Hart (2008) outlines the ways two feminist university faculty associations incorporated professionalization into their activism differently: One by being a professional association first that happened to promote feminist issues in the workplace, the other by being a feminist activist organization comprised of professional faculty. Although similar in many respects, the difference in emphasis on either professionalization or disruptive social activism greatly influenced the culture, behaviour, and values of the two associations.

### **Social activist as neoliberal subject**

From a Foucauldian perspective, *social activism* has the potential to embody or support certain dominant modes of governance, while working to challenge and undermine them. The term ‘social activist’ refers to people who assert their capacity to enact social change on behalf of a cause, often from outside the conventional means of politics. Activists may aim to raise awareness for a political cause or to influence laws and regulations. Their actions can range from signing petitions to protesting in the street, from sit-ins to ‘hactivism’. Social activism is usually associated with collective action. Larger collectives can mobilize greater resources, retain professional staff, and deploy many volunteers (cf. Doh & Zachar, 2012; Martin, 2007).

In our study, we analyze ACFs as social activism performed within a neoliberal framework. Specifically, we view ACFs as an apparatus of subject formation that valorizes market rationalities, individual autonomy, and professionalism. Social activism influenced by neoliberal ideology emphasizes certain ways of knowing, such as instrumental or utilitarian rationality (Bromley, 2010; Treleven & Sykes, 2005). Social activists influenced by neoliberal governmentality become advocates of professionalism, efficiency, entrepreneurialism, and flexibility (Rose, 1996). Neoliberalism treats the human subject as an individualized, autonomous, rational, self-interested agent with a certain degree of control over social factors. Therefore—despite its association with the highly individualized consumer-citizen—the neoliberal world view can be attractive to social activists.

Three main characteristics define neoliberal governmentality in social activism: (a) a tendency to push activist organizations toward a business-like model (e.g. ACFs); (b) a tendency toward the professionalization of social activist roles, with a shift from advocating change to providing services (e.g. ACF professionals); and (c) a tendency to view individuals as responsible for creating social change, and to see the market as the medium for this change (e.g. ACF clients and audience) (cf. Bondi & Lauri, 2005). These characteristics privilege specific forms of social justice, for example, applying certain rationalities and practices of protest, and making dissent a kind of professional performance (Death, 2010). Through the specific strategies, important issues, and modes of conduct that they promote, ACFs operate with an assumption of the free market as the main medium of protest for social activists, rather than something to be protested in itself. Further, how they interact with clients and structure their firms promote professionalism, not grassroots approaches, as the preferred method of organizing activism.

By positioning themselves as professional authorities offering services to other social activists, ACF professionals inevitably cast themselves in a relation of power. Power relations do not simply misrepresent truth or dominate individuals. Deference to an ideology and its prescriptive modes of conduct is an intricate and heterogeneous set of internal and external connections (Nica, Manole, & Brișcariu, 2016). For Touraine (2005), social activism relies on a kind of subjectivity that endorses autonomous action for enacting social change, and this sentiment tends to make attractive neoliberal notions of individual autonomy and agency. Such social activism most clearly expresses itself in resisting subordination, so the individualization of identity within collective action fits neatly with the neoliberal world view.

## Methodology

Using an exploratory case study approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008), we provide an inductive account of ACFs and the discourses they draw on. We map the neoliberal methods and goals of ACFs, examining how BAC and SI interpret social activism, and we consider the wider implications of their professionalized approaches. The texts analyzed were publicly available online at the time of data collection. Some of the source material is not available currently, as both BAC's and SI's websites are under maintenance, and some of the webpages we analyzed have since been closed. They include interviews, commentaries, and testimonials found in publications, blogs, posts, and web pages authored or sponsored by BAC and SI.

In considering language in 'real' language contexts, conventional discourse analysis fails to consider how social relations impinge upon the production of speech and texts (Mills, 1997, pp. 141–144). To overcome this social disembodiedness, Fairclough (1989, 1995) proposed the idea of 'critical discourse analysis' (CDA), which focuses on how power relations shape discourse practices. It examines the constructive effect that discourse has on social identities, relations, and systems of

knowledge or belief (Fairclough, 2007, pp. 12–14). Practitioners of CDA assume that there is no such thing as value-free research (van Dijk, 2003). CDA entails a focus on issues of social inequality and justice; it presupposes an ethical assessment of the subject texts.

Our CDA examines how discursive practices constitute the social realities, identities, power relations, and social positions in ACFs. We investigate how these practices serve the interests of particular social groups. Through CDA, we aim to understand where ACFs position themselves in the world of social activism. We consider the nature of their goals and how they use their position to reach these goals. Through their texts, ACFs construct particular world views regarding social activism. Their value statements interact with complex systems of power. Any claim to being a value-neutral professional is problematic in social activism: activism is inherently ideological.

### Analysis: ACFs as enactments of neoliberal governmentality

BAC, a group founded in 2013 by Chiara Ricciardone and Micah White, describes itself as ‘an activist think-tank specializing in impossible campaigns’ (Micah White – The Future of Protest’, n.d.). White is best known for his role in the Occupy Wall Street movement; he describes himself as a ‘lifelong activist’ (‘Team’, n.d.). BAC’s approach reflects White’s ideas on social activism, which involve an aversion to traditional street protest and an emphasis on tactical innovation. BAC’s ‘unique approach is grounded in a commitment to protest innovation and a fundamental rethinking of the theory behind contemporary activism’ (‘About Boutique Activist Consultancy’, n.d.).

SI was founded in 2013 by Dan Johnson, who played a foundational role in the People Against the National Defense Authorization Act. SI originally described itself as the first no-cost activist consulting firm (‘Dramatic Ending’, 2015), but later changed its description to the first-ever activist training centre (‘About Us’, n.d.). SI prides itself on political neutrality. Its advisors and clients come from a variety of political and activist backgrounds. However, many of its core staff and advisors are drawn from civil liberty or watchdog organizations and are associated with right-wing political campaigns. As of December 2015, SI had 28 members and affiliate advisors. SI’s organizational maxims reflect the predominantly libertarian background of its advisors. These maxims include a commitment to nonviolence and the rational process, a focus on teaching the know-how of empowering social activists, and a mission to minimize governmental powers in any situation.

Professionals who are also social activists are not a new phenomenon—other kinds of associations have previously described themselves as activist consultants. Some consultancies broker relations between corporations, government agencies, and social activist organizations as a means of fostering corporate social responsibility. What distinguishes BAC and SI is that, as shown in the quotes below, they self-identify as ACFs with professional expertise in all aspects of social activism:

The Solutions Institute, the first no-cost consulting firm for activists (‘Dramatic Ending’, 2015)

The Solutions Institute is the first-ever activist training center dedicated entirely to helping people take their power back from politicians. While many organizations have a single focus or issue that they advocate for, the Solutions Institute focuses on teaching people around the world how to make a difference, and, if they are already an activist, how to do it better. (‘About Us’, n.d.)

BOUTIQUE a small firm offering a highly specialized service to a sophisticated clientele. ACTIVIST the use of innovative protest to bring about political or social change. CONSULTANCY the work of giving professional advice within an exclusive field. (‘Contact Us’, n.d.)

Although many of their advisors are involved in particular social movements, BAC and SI are not committed to any specific movement. Instead, they provide services to other social activists.

With insights gained from co-creating Occupy Wall Street, Boutique Activist Consultancy provides discreet service to political mavericks, emergent movements, and creative activists. Our unique approach is grounded in a commitment to protest innovation and a fundamental rethinking of the theory behind contemporary activism. ('Boutique', n.d.)

Solutions Institute promises to assist anyone, regardless of political ideology. The advisers don't share a common ideology. There are admitted anarchists and far-right wing activists that are at the disposal of anyone trying to make a change. ('Global Change Awareness', n.d.)

Furthermore, both conceptualize social activism as a discipline, a body of knowledge, and a set of skills, separate from related professions such as NGO management. Their advisors claim to be professionals in activism; they offer paid consultation services regarding how to practise activism more effectively, and they offer training in developing and managing social movements. ACFs tend to focus on the market as a medium of social change and seek to professionalize the field. They are developing a market for a new service, namely, teaching the skills and strategies of successful activism.

### *Services offered*

The skills and services that BAC claims to offer include 'protest innovation, activism and movement strategy workshops, campaign direction, movement storyline, research and insights, invent[ing] novel protest methods, and full-service social movement creation' (Contact Us', n.d.). How these services are provided is unclear, but BAC makes a general claim of excellence: 'Boutique Activist Consultancy brings passion, intelligence, integrity, and a love of the art of activism to every project we work on' ('Services', n.d.).

BAC's Activist Annuity, which is a form of membership programme, grants subscribers access to a series of online public lectures, an open house every year, and a subscription to an e-magazine: 'Subscribers receive exclusive insights into the future of protest and social mobilization. Together we'll spark the next uprising again and again' (White, 2015).

Activist Annuity operates on a 'name a fair price' system, which means that subscribers can choose what they pay for subscription, with a minimum of \$15 per month up to a maximum of \$1,000 per month (as of October 16, 2015) ('Activist Annuity', n.d.). With respect to one-on-one consultation, BAC asks its clients to name their budget range in their application form, and then a fee is negotiated. Clients have the option to ask for pro bono consulting, which BAC may choose to decline.

SI offers advice in over 50 areas, with varying degrees of involvement. Three levels of service are offered: (a) pro bono consulting; (b) SI Active (extended services for which the client pays a \$100 per month flat rate fee); and (c) direct hiring of an advisor, with the price negotiated between the client and the advisor. SI also accepts donations, which are used for 'travel expenses, advertising, web expenses, [and] expanding SI programs' ('SI Active', n.d.), and for enabling pro bono services. The areas of advice SI offers are in general bureaucratically and legally oriented. Examples include navigating bureaucratic issues and political landscapes, translating 'legalese', and administration of social activist organizations. The agency also conducts group workshops for clients, and operates an annual convention, ActCon: 'ActCon is a consistently successful nonpartisan activist training series, bringing in over fifty activist leaders from around the world to learn the 'how-to' of implementing political change from the top activists in the world' ('Sponsor ActCon III', n.d.).

In terms of who their target demographic are, BAC claims to offer ‘discreet service to a hand-picked international clientele of mavericks, movements and celebrities’ (‘Activist Annuity’, n.d.). The firm targets ‘social change creators, humanitarian NGOs, security researchers, anti-state communists, anarchist undergrads, culture jammers, [and] occupiers’ (White, 2015). Without providing specifics, BAC claims that its partners have included political celebrities, social movement campaigns, and new peoples’ parties. No testimonials or reviews are presented. Concerning the expectations of its audience, BAC gives generalized appeals: ‘Support our effort to reshape contemporary activism by shifting the paradigms of protest’; ‘receive exclusive insights into the future of protest’ (‘Activist Annuity’, n.d.).

SI is more forthcoming with its client list: its publicity materials display sixteen testimonials. These come predominantly from clients involved with issues of civil liberties, property rights, and tax reform (‘Endorsements’, n.d.), for example, the Citizens Allied for Integrity and Accountability, an organization that opposes ‘forced pooling’ regulations, which they contend promote illegal theft of private property by the state (Collins, 2015).

### *Business-like model*

Both SI and BAC practise certain modes of operation that resemble the ‘business-like’ practices outlined by Dart (2004). In their rhetoric, both firms use market-related terms, narratives, and images. For example, BAC offers membership, benefits, and consultations on a monthly subscription basis, which they refer to as ‘crowdfunding’ (‘Activist Annuity’, n.d.). Further, BAC refers to social activism as a career, and organizing social movements as a ‘dream job’ (Revolutionary Career, 2014). BAC and SI foster neoliberal subjectivities through their terminology, referring to those who use their services as clients, donors, and investors, and to themselves as entrepreneurs and advisors. Their social activism is associated with ‘innovation’ and ‘innovators’ (‘About Us’, n.d.; ‘Activist Annuity’, n.d.; White, 2010), ‘crowd funding’ (‘Activist Annuity’, n.d.), and ‘audience engagement’ (‘Building Coalitions’, n.d.). The use of a neoliberal vocabulary emphasizes the market as an identity referent for both advisors and service users. This terminology potentially conditions the tactics and goals available to social activists.

The structures and social atmospheres of ACFs are consistent with the characteristics normally associated with for-profit businesses. BAC and SI are dedicated to service delivery rather than advocacy. Their organizational structures reflect those of corporate management, and their goals implicitly involve revenue generation. Although their founders express political beliefs and values, and they are forthcoming about their personal social advocacy, they avoid bringing an explicit advocacy dimension to their work. SI, in particular, is committed to service delivery over advocacy:

The Solutions Institute only takes one position: We want to reduce political force. Otherwise, each article published at the Solutions Institute is chosen for its focus on the process and how-to instruction. Any opinions expressed on any issue, by any author, are strictly their own. (‘Disclaimers’, n.d.)

According to Scott and Davis (2015), an organization is considered formalized ‘to the extent that the rules governing behavior are precisely and explicitly formulated and to the extent that roles and role relations are prescribed independently of the attributes and relations of individuals occupying positions within the organization’ (p. 59). Both BAC and SI emphasize service delivery, but SI has a more formalized set of rules. Rules guide the behaviour of its advisors and clients; a sanctions system enforces these rules; a hierarchical structure assigns clearly defined roles. For example, clients or advisors that express a desire to use any form of coercion or violent force

are given a warning. If they persist, SI will remove all services and/or association with the offending party.

In the case of a Solutions Institute client advocating increased political force, they will receive a warning and Solutions Institute Advisers will ensure there is a clear understanding of the cardinal rule. If the client chooses to continue to advocate force, they will no longer receive Solutions Institute assistance, and any association with the Solutions Institute must be immediately removed. ('Disclaimers', n.d.)

BAC's and SI's goals of revenue generation are 'business-like', and this goal is justified as being necessary to fund pro bono consulting. Furthermore, BAC justifies revenue generation on the grounds that consulting is a full-time occupation, and therefore its clients are obliged to pay for the services they receive. White claims that 'Revolution is my dream job and my daily life' (Hay, 2014). Clearly, however, BAC's operations are at least partially motivated by financial considerations, and the organization has been criticized for being an 'unabashedly for-profit' venture (Cortes, 2014):

Occupy Wall Street generated tremendous money', says White. 'This whole idea that activists should do it for free and all that bullshit is over. Like somehow I'm supposed to be a full-time activist and have zero income from it? It's ridiculous. (Cortes, 2014)

Social activism does not inherently have the characteristics of a market, nor does it operate like one. Given their experience, it is probable that the staff of both ACFs are fully aware of the ways they have marketized social change. The tension between social activism and its marketization is exemplified in BAC's ambivalent engagement with the process. In some ways, BAC supports the use of marketing strategies, and in other ways condemns it.

For example, White states 'the trouble is that this [digital] model of activism uncritically embraces the ideology of marketing. It accepts that the tactics of advertising and market research used to sell toilet paper can also build social movements' (White, 2010). He goes on to explain that 'Digital activism is a danger to the left. Its ineffectual marketing campaigns spread political cynicism and draw attention away from genuinely radical movements. Political passivity is the end result of replacing salient political critique with the logic of advertising' (White, 2010).

Yet BAC's brand management and advertising techniques are obviously similar to those of any market-driven consulting firm. This ambivalence between embracing marketization and a commitment to social activism is reflected in BAC's use of vague, grandiose statements that aim to leave readers feeling empowered. The BAC web page claims that 'We create surprising protests and dynamic social movements that change the course of history' ('Services', n.d.). Various observers (Self, 2013) feel that BAC's self-promotion materials offer hollow claims without substantive proposals. Such generic statements suggest that BAC may be little more than a group of 'publicity hounds' or enthusiastic amateurs. Self (2013) believes that BAC produces nothing but sensationalism: 'politics dressed up in a clown suit'. Despite White's arguments to the contrary, Self holds that BAC exemplifies the marketization of social activism and is simply hypocritical in its criticisms of marketing and consumerism.

SI is perhaps less hypocritical in directly referring to social activism as an industry: 'Activism, perhaps more than any other industry, raises fierce passions on all sides' ('Disclaimers', n.d.). The use of the term 'industry' is significant, as it implies that SI's conceptualization of social activism is consistent with a for-profit venture that is subject to market norms, discourses, and values. This fits with their rhetoric in other areas, where they refer to recipients of their services as 'clients' ('Disclaimers', n.d.; 'Global Change Awareness', n.d.) or promote marketing and project management as core competencies of social activism ('Endorsements', n.d.).

## Professionalization

Professional status presumes the capacity to govern operations and to exercise autonomy without close supervision. The qualifications for professional status require the completion of a recognized programme and evidence of satisfactory practice under some form of provisional licence. Professionals are assumed to possess certified knowledge and skills in their field, and to have their competence recognized by a governing body (Friedson, 1994, pp. 151–152). To differing degrees, ACFs show many characteristics of professional associations: rules, impersonal positions, bureaucratic structures, and sanctions to ensure compliance with norms.

A process of exclusion determines who is qualified to serve in the consultancy profession and perform the work correctly. In social activism, this process generally involves the separation of paid employees (who are deemed professional) from volunteers (regarded as well-meaning amateurs) (Hwang & Powell, 2009). The process of credentializing relies on developing a body of specialized knowledge and controlling access to it through formalized means such as training programmes (Friedson, 1988, p. 69). With the development of training programmes comes the establishment of professional associations, which prescribe and enforce codes of conduct, rules, and regulations for members (Fournier, 1999, p. 281). As yet, no such professional body exists for social activism, nor does the study of social activism constitute an independent field or practice. Therefore, establishing professional status is problematic for ACFs. To deal with this problem, BAC and SI emphasize alternative forms of legitimacy, such as recognition by clients (e.g. ‘Endorsements’, n.d.), credentials from other disciplines (Ricciardone, n.d.), and portfolios that describe previous successful campaigns (‘Contact Us’, n.d.), as the following examples show:

Micah [White] is a lifelong activist who won his first campaign in high school. He is recognized as the co-creator of the Occupy Wall Street movement and was recently named ‘one of the most influential under-35 year olds’ by Esquire. (‘Contact Us’, n.d.)

Chiara’s unique approach to activism is shaped by her experience growing up in Cairo, Egypt and Ankara, Turkey. She is currently finishing her Ph.D. in Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. (Ricciardone, n.d.)

Due to the intangibility of services offered by most professionals, establishment of trust is a key feature in the professional-client relationship (Macdonald, 1995). Given the lack of a credentialing and disciplining body, trust is especially important for ACFs. In most situations, clients can rely on an overarching professional body with the capacity to punish cases of misconduct and ensure minimum levels of competency among its members. However, ACF clients have few guarantees beyond the good will of the consultants themselves. Furthermore, contractual guarantees delineating the services provided by ACFs are problematic due to the lack of specificity concerning what the consultants actually do. As institutional guarantees are limited, clients rely more heavily on relations, interactions, and reputations. This tendency is reflected in the clientele list of SI, which largely consists of people who either knew their advisor beforehand or developed long-term relations during the consulting process.

On what basis, then, do ACFs establish trust and claim the authority to advise others? Like other client-seeking firms, SI presents endorsements:

Knowledge is power and [SI advisor] Jason Casella has the knowledge on how to get things done. We have been working with Jason for the past year on local issues. We have learned through Jason that we as individuals, small towns and counties, can make a difference one issue at a time. Thanks Jason! (‘Endorsements’, n.d.)

Not only has SI helped me turned my dream as an activist into reality, they have communicated quickly, given me the resources of other like-minded activists and have helped build my knowledge about activism 100 fold. ('Endorsements', n.d.)

To provide services in teaching and facilitating social activism, the members of ACFs use their various professional skills in the service of a social cause. Advisors in both BAC and SI report previous successes in social activism to boost their credibility as professionals. The BAC staff highlight their university degrees to signal cultural capital ('Biography and Background Information', n.d.). However, the specific type of professional expertise they claim concerns social activism itself. SI advocate Dan Johnson explains:

If you're in a company, you can hire a consulting firm. If you're on a football team, you've got a coach. If you're a politician, you hire a campaign manager. Activists haven't had anyone. ... We're going to teach the process, regardless of our own personal activism. That's the Solutions Institute. (Manko, 2015)

In BAC—a partnership of two equals with no disciplinary body—the development of standardized practices is limited. SI, on the other hand, has twenty-eight members and a degree of organizational hierarchy. Many of the staff follow similar practices. Their tendency to draw members from the activist organizations they already work with creates a self-selection bias in their team. This congruence of values and practices minimizes the need for self-discipline within the organization. However, three axioms act as disciplinary rules for the advisors. Advisors are warned not to advocate the use of force for any reason, to maintain objectivity and provide advice free of judgement, and to provide service in a respectful manner. Although sanctions for trespassing these rules are not explicit, violations of the axioms can result in warnings, followed by removal of SI support ('Legal', n.d.).

### **Activist subject**

Death (2010, p. 241) argues that any analysis of activism from a Foucauldian perspective must consider what kinds of personal identities are developed by different forms of counter-conduct. Both BAC and SI rely on individual autonomy, and BAC gives all responsibility for innovation to the individuals concerned. SI's slogan, however, is empowering activists to be self-sufficient, which is consistent with its mission to 'take power away from politicians' ('About Us', n.d.). The associates at SI are themselves social activists, empowering other activists by teaching the know-how of activism. They consult with their clients in a non-invasive way, to minimize the risk of co-opting their clients' activism. By focusing on the how-to of social activism rather than its motives, SI claims to be value-free: 'While many organizations have a single focus or issue that they advocate for, the Solutions Institute focuses on teaching people around the world how to make a difference, and, if they are already an activist, how to do it better' ('About Us', n.d.).

Nevertheless, the choice to focus on know-how is itself value-laden. Although SI's mission to empower activists is laudable, it is arguably a means to a further end. Empowering activists may be a means to the greater mission of reducing civic authority. If SI's purpose for empowering social activists is to take power away from politicians, it raises the possibility that their involvement with other organizations may be directed to this end. SI's commitment to empowerment, therefore, may be an internalized expression of the neoliberal injunction to seek autonomy and self-responsibility (cf. Lemke, 2001, p. 201). It appears that SI has a strong commitment to maximizing individual autonomy and agency, particularly in the civic sphere ('About Us', n.d.), and this is likely closely connected to their objective to 'reduce political force' ('Disclaimers', n.d.). Few values exist solely within the purview of one rationality. Different rationalities can coexist and intertwine, so that the same

actions can further the goals and performance of different rationalities (e.g. minimizing state power while maximizing citizen autonomy) (Lippert & Brady, 2016, p. 272).

For BAC, the path and goal seem more complicated. BAC accepts that bringing substantial change involves gaining influential positions of responsibility: 'But if we're not going to govern ourselves, then somebody else is going to. And then you're stuck in a position of just complaining and arguing with this person in power, instead of being the ones in power' (Campbell, 2015).

Therefore, BAC's commitment to innovative activism is a means to a larger goal. As White states, 'Simply changing the ways we are disruptive, doesn't in itself really solve the fundamental problem, which is, how are we going to become sovereign?' (quoted by Campbell, 2015). For BAC, the larger goal is not to attack the state, but to empower activists to bring about social change through reforming governmental institutions.

Social movements and protests are events where dominant norms of behaviour, discourse, and social identity are transgressed, subverted, and re-imagined. Yet social movements have their own codes of conduct and discursive norms—nonviolence, patriotism, ecological sustainability, and egalitarian democracy—that are constantly negotiated and disseminated (Death, 2010, p. 241). The tactics used by social activists are not just instrumental. Various subjectivities and ideologies of activism are performed through acts of protest. The tactics chosen, like the marches in the civil rights movement, are important in setting the tone. ACFs are involved in such movements, and they may be vehicles through which new norms and values are transmitted to social activists. The organizational structure, rhetoric, and conduct of the consultants themselves reflect the vision of social change they subscribe to.

SI's commitment to consultation without discrimination between left- or right-wing politics aims to promote self-autonomy, and it positions the government and social activists as binary opponents:

We are professionals and activists from across the political spectrum, from March Against Monsanto to 2nd Amendment advocacy, from medical cannabis to civil liberties, and from the 'left' to the 'right'. We are radio hosts, community organizers, psychologists, IT wizards, media professionals and public speakers, street activists, video artists, and researchers, united for one purpose: Take power away from politicians. ('About Us', n.d.)

This approach indicates a neoliberal conception of social activism. SI is composed of autonomous, empowered social activists who provide professional consultation on a pay-for-service basis.

SI is able to claim non-partisanship and neutrality by focusing on the how-to process, and by providing consultation to any social activist who asks for it ('About Us', n.d.). Consistent with a neoliberal approach, SI positions itself in opposition to civil authority. This is not unusual. However, unlike many other social activists, SI does not criticize large corporations. Instead, SI often endorses business organizations that undermine the authority or responsibility of the government by providing privatized services.

Uber and Bitcoin are taking out, nonviolently, large pillars of government. And despite every effort to stop them, they are getting more popular, innovating further, and rendering states confused and helpless to stop them. ('A Violent Revolution?', n.d.)

Although SI claims neutrality, the act of providing consultation is more than an exercise of blind support for clients. Consultation involves the promotion of particular knowledge, which suggests a 'right' way to behave and think. This knowledge is not born in the vacuum of natural rights, but is value-laden, normative, and, in this case, inextricably enmeshed with a neoliberal conception of the good.

BAC also advocates bipartisanship in social activism. In an interview with *This Is Hell*, White states,

I think that we overemphasize ... how they express that dissent, and then we judge them. Are they using the words of the left or the words of the right? I believe that a global coalition will always need to be some sort of blend of left and right. ('Open House', n.d.)

In practice, however, White and Ricciardone, the founders of BAC, do not display such adherence to political neutrality. BAC does not explicitly claim to provide services regardless of their clients' political causes. Instead, the clients seem to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

### *Visions for the future of social activism*

Whereas SI's dominant theme is the empowerment of social activists through teaching the how-to of social activism, BAC's overarching theme is enabling innovation in social activism. As BAC's web page proclaims,

WE BELIEVE: Attracting millions of people to the streets no longer guarantees the success of a movement. PROTEST IS BROKEN. We are living through a period with the largest protests in human history. But they are not working. And when you reach that point, instead of repeating the traditional protest behaviors, screaming and holding posters, you have to innovate. ('Activism Is Broken', n.d.)

For BAC, innovation itself is not the end goal, but social activists need to innovate as a way to empower themselves and to gain influential positions in both state and market institutions: 'We must show that social movements require difficult behaviours [like] winning elections, drafting legislation, governing our cities. ... We need to demand a greater investment than just show up' ('About Boutique Activist Consultancy', n.d.).

White sees the future of social movements as creating 'a contagious mood of fearlessness'. He explains that 'what we learned from Occupy, and also with the Arab Spring, is that revolutions happen when people lose their fear' ('Protest Is Broken', n.d.). He proposes 'a type of activism that focuses on creating a mental shift in people. Basically an epiphany' ('Protest Is Broken', n.d.). Such statements exemplify the sensational rhetoric that BAC uses to brand itself.

Howard Zinn (1997) famously stated that 'protest beyond the law is not a departure from democracy; it is absolutely essential to it' (p. 383). For Zinn, street protests are a part of a healthy democratic system, and the absence of such protest signifies an oppressive, stagnant state. For Zinn, the function of social activism is to constantly challenge the status quo and to propose alternatives. White, however, emphasizes change in tactics more than development of new ideas. For BAC, social movements can only be fulfilled if activists constantly find novel ways to enact social change. As the repertoire of collective actions available to social activists are repeatedly used, the targets of protest adapt and find new ways to resist.

For BAC, innovation in social activism is 'a constant game': 'It's an arms race, basically, between protesters and power' ('Micah White - The End of Protest', n.d.). White declares BAC's mission in hyperbolic terms: 'This "arms race" demands continuous innovation in social activism: ... we vow to invent totally new forms of protest ('Services', n.d.). He describes himself as 'a pioneer of social movement creation' ('Biography', n.d.).

BAC argues that the 'how' of creating social movements can be learned by identifying social movements when they occur, and discerning the most effective forms of protest in those movements. For BAC, the Occupy movement exemplified the failure of current methods of protest. They argue that Occupy's participants assumed that if enough people participated in a protest and showed a

collective will, then elected politicians would respond to their demands. This traditional approach was exposed as ineffectual in dealing with new challenges, they argue, and new methods of protest need to be developed ('About Boutique Activist Consultancy', n.d.).

BAC speculates that the next innovation in social activism will be the growth of political parties paired with social movements, similar to the relationship that emerged between unionism and labour parties. By gaining political and social positions of power, social activists will achieve significant, long-lasting social change. BAC offers several alternative theories as to what sort of collective behaviour can create the necessary social change. One such alternative is a 'contagious mood of fearlessness' that 'spreads throughout the world' ('About BAC', n.d.).

The BAC literature implies that protests are successful when they convince people to 'depattern' themselves ('Esquire Names', n.d.). Rather than attempting to change policies or coerce the population into new behavioural patterns, BAC's subjectivist approach implies that when people change their thought and behaviour, the personal changes will affect others around them. If enough people change, a tipping point will be reached, and we will experience a 'kind of collective epiphany' ('Esquire Names', n.d.). A new mentality will become normalized, and social change will be achieved. Real social change, therefore, happens through a subjective shift on a large scale: 'Revolutions are actually caused by a spiritual kind of awakening that happens within people' ('Open House', n.d.). By implication, shifts in ideas are not enough—a collective epiphany must be 'harnessed' and pushed beyond expressions of protest. Sustainable social change happens when a collective epiphany involves the civic administration and legal system at the local and global levels.

### **Postscript: 'members only'**

As of October 2018, both BAC and SI continue to operate. To our knowledge, both BAC and SI continue to take clients and offer services in social activism consulting. Micah White's new book, *The End of Protest* (2016), has brought new attention to the author and his work. It is telling that one of the reviews highlights the potential benefits of White's work for HR practitioners, including strengthening employee engagement, amplifying customers' voices, and promoting innovation in democratic business organizations (Radziwill, 2016), while the other, in line with some of the commentators in our analysis (i.e. Self, 2013), dismisses White's work as sensationalism (Camfield, 2017). BAC has recently instituted a policy where full access to their website is no longer possible. Similar to how SI re-branded themselves as an activist training centre, the co-creators of BAC along with other prominent social activists have recently founded the Activist Graduate School, which offers a series of webinars, online courses, and in-person lectures on the theory and practice of social activism (Activist Graduate School, n.d.). Unfortunately, this has also affected public access to some of our original source material. While to our knowledge no additional organizations that self-identify as professional social activist consultancy firms have appeared since our initial analysis in 2015, in September 2018, similar organizations to BAC and SI have appeared. Two may be briefly identified. The Management Action Center, an extension of the Management Center, offers training and consultation to all social activists—not just NGOs and NPOs—in everything from project management to marketing to contract law (Management Action Center, n.d.). The second example is Ashoka, which provides pay-for-service consultation to social entrepreneurs (Ashoka, n.d.). It is evident that the general trend of marketization in social activism is expanding, and research to better understand the specific instances of the phenomenon continues to be needed.

## Future research

The rise of ACFs has significant implications for how social movements are structured. For example, the contractual relations they require to interact with social activists necessitate clearly defined entities. Such relations may be incompatible with the decentralized, polynodal qualities of many contemporary social movements (Diani, 2000; Strawn, 2009). If ACFs cannot interact with the members of decentralized movements in a meaningful way, then they might inadvertently help larger, more hierarchical activist organizations to out-compete the smaller, horizontal ones, with implications for the democratic health of social movements. This trend could even contribute to the monopolization of social movements by a handful of activist organizations. This outcome would be even more constrictive if ACFs were to follow a for-profit corporate scheme, similar to that of traditional business consultancies.

As previously mentioned, the ACFs examined here operate on both a for-profit and a pro bono basis. However, the paying clients are prioritized: they receive faster, better service. Whether this format continues as is or develops toward a wholly volunteer or wholly for-profit basis will have major consequences for the development of ACFs. Depending upon the approach taken, ACFs may contribute to the flattening of activist power structures by providing smaller activist groups with access to resources they would otherwise lack. Alternatively, ACFs could create larger imbalances by providing services only to larger and better-funded organizations.

The ACFs' ambivalent engagement with professionalization is the most notable finding of our research. Foucault (1991) argues that once the mechanisms and technologies of governance are assembled, they can constitute what is deemed authoritative within a particular realm, for example, in the area of market values. The technologies of governance can operate to colonize a domain, reshaping it according to its own requisites. The manner in which the professionalization of social activism unfolds may follow the patterns seen in other professions.

As yet, social activism is not a solidified discipline or area of practice, and therefore no legitimizing body exists to back the ACFs' claims of professionalization. However, we can see the beginnings of such professionalization in the emerging ACFs. SI in particular shows many characteristics of a professional association. Future research may explore how such agencies navigate the apparent incompatibility of professionalization and autonomous subjectivity that characterize their approaches to social activism.

ACFs are a newly emergent phenomenon; more research is required to flesh out a theoretical understanding of these organizations. We hope that other ACF-like organizations may be identified. In addition to assessing textual data, future studies could use interviews with practitioners and clients. Such studies would generate a wider conversation and a more nuanced understanding of ACFs' roles in social activism.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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