

# ‘We do not have to be vicious, competitive, or managerial’

Akwugo Emejulu talks to Jo Littler

## Communities and politics

**Jo:** *I love how your book Community Development as Micropolitics - which charts the different political histories of community development in the US and the UK since 1968 - ends with a broadside against entrepreneurialism. Instead, you champion democratic transformation and what you call ‘the deeply unfashionable subject of political education’. Can you tell us more about these tendencies and their more recent development?*

**Akwugo:** Well, first of all, wow, hardly anyone reads that book, so thank you! It has made possible all of my future work, and I’m still reckoning with what I was thinking about at that time. What I found really interesting about mapping the ideas and practices of community development in both Britain and America was observing the emergence of the concept that somehow capitalism could be tamed, and save us. The idea that somehow capitalism could be harnessed in such a way that it could be turned on its head, in a kind of jujitsu move, and then ‘save’ the communities it immiserated, was patently ridiculous. But it was taken up because of a rebalancing: there was a turn away from political education by activists and practitioners, and an increasing number of technocrats became involved in the social welfare state, and the void that this left was filled by entrepreneurial behaviour and action - was, frankly, colonised fully and completely by neoliberalism.

I think we can only understand that as a fundamental defeat of the left. And it’s

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really important to talk about it in those terms. It involves the defeat of political ideas, but also the defeat of the idea that we can do anything big and meaningful any more: it must only be incremental. The way my work developed is in some ways a kind of mapping of these further defeats. This sounds a little depressing, but I don't have any other way of talking about it. In my next book that I wrote with Leah Bassel, *Minority Women's Activism in Tough Times*, which compared France and the UK, we were surprised by the rapidity with which 'the third sector' - by now we were using this term instead of 'community development' - had taken up entrepreneurial thinking in spaces and places that we had thought would be more resistant to these ideas. For instance, the idea of 'poverty' or 'inequality' has been commodified: it's seen as something that funders or the state or NGOs can use to fight for their own piece of survival. The way that's played out is truly horrifying, on all counts. We mapped how this process played out in the anti-violence-against-women sector in particular. The fact that the idea and the process of women fleeing from violence could be commodified through the local state putting services out to tender, and that NGOs themselves would *collude* in that process - their inability to take a step back and say 'is this a process we should be engaging in?' - I found frankly unconscionable. But I completely understand the pressures they are under - that they either comply to this regime or they die, and then other organisations come in and replace them, and often do a worse job. For me, at the end of that book, it was a question of 'what happens next?'

*Has there now been an expansion of critical political education?*

Yes, and we can see this especially in this contemporary moment. At the time of my first two books, of course there were activists doing very interesting things, but mass mobilisations were absent. Now, with Extinction Rebellion, Sisters Uncut, Black Lives Matter, you see a range of groups doing very interesting things. And when you actually go and speak to activists in all these spaces, they now say, fundamentally this is about ideology. They reject the idea that there is no alternative; the activists themselves are very, very clear that they have a vision for another kind of society. And they undertake more spectacular protests as a form of education. And when I ask women of colour activists 'what goes on in your networks?', so much of it is now about political education. This means not only saying 'what is the role of

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capitalism?', but really insisting on understanding how dynamics of race and gender are encoded in capitalism and our everyday lives.

*Your work focuses mostly on grassroots and NGO/third sector activism, and it tends to be critical of political parties' lack of diversity - or as you pithily put it, 'the raceless discussions of the white left'. At the same time we clearly need mainstream political parties to diversify and get better and more democratic, and work in conjunction with grassroots movements, and it seems to me that there have been recent small but heartening and important moves in that direction. For example in the US Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has worked with the wider Justice Democrats movement, and in Britain people like the prospective MP Faiza Shaheen have worked with organisations like CLASS and The World Transformed. Do you think there needs to be more engagement between diverse grassroots groups and mainstream politics?*

Absolutely. The idea that any group that cares about the most marginalised, or a different society, can turn away from mainstream politics is a folly and a fallacy. Because what happens is that other groups, your opponents, will take up all that space. Nature abhors a vacuum. The best example of that can be seen in the US, and the ways in which the Tea Party colonised the Republican Party by filling that space at the local level and the state level and then by colonising the national party. Part of why Trump exists is because the left at that time turned away from, and did not take seriously, local and state politics.

But everyone has to understand their role. Not everyone wants to be a politician or engage in the bureaucratic behaviour of parliamentary politics. That's fine. But you do need people there. And you need people there to have a conversation and dialogue with, in order to move and influence them. Parliamentary politics isn't a space for everyone - just as being out on the streets isn't a space for everyone. We need people in research, we need people in policy spaces, we need people in lots of *different* kinds of spaces and places in order to take back power. If we are serious we need an understanding of what power is, how to use it, and how to win for the most marginalised. You have to have a multi-pronged approach in order to combat the devastation of austerity, and the devastating and now routinised experiences of misogyny and racism and transphobia and all the rest of it. I think it's so important to have people in lots of different spaces.

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*I completely agree. When you were talking about the Democrats leaving that space at the local and grassroots level it made me think about the development of what the political theorist Peter Mair calls ‘partyless democracy’ under Blair in Britain - the abdication of real grassroots democratic involvement and the energetic structural work to make the Labour Party more of a managerial enterprise. You can map the same process in the UK.*

Yes absolutely, that’s exactly right.

### Reaching across

*Your work has a pronounced comparative dimension and points out how different nations operate in relation to BAME and feminist politics. Can you talk about why you take this approach? Presumably a key benefit of that comparative work is to indicate the international allegiances that can be made.*

Yes, my starting point is always about the possibilities for solidarity. I always assume until I’m shown otherwise that somehow we can find a way of working together - whether it’s different kinds of activists working in different spaces, or transnational connections between people. The only way you can do that is if you have a meaningful understanding of the similarities, but also the differences, and the particular dynamics at play that foment and make possible certain kinds of activism. Because activists don’t come out of nowhere. When you can understand that context, and understand what gives rise to the patterns of particular kinds of activism, it gives you the ability to *reach across*. This isn’t anything new; this is the lesson that Angela Davis and Assata Shakur taught us.

I think this kind of working together is different from the old-school internationalist solidarity of the left, which denied differences and said ‘capitalism above everything’. It is, but there’s also so much *more* going on than that. That’s why so many activists and academics are working on feminism for the 99%. Because learning not only how indigenous women in the global south are subjected, but also how they organise and talk back, *act* back, is crucial to building a broader movement. So the starting point is saying, ok, what is it that we have in common? Institutionalised misogyny, yes; land theft, yes; all of these things, that is our starting point. It’s not identical but that’s the beginning of a dialogue and a conversation. That’s why I think taking different nation states as cases is really interesting and important, and what’s

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driving my later work is really taking that comparison seriously. You learn a lot; and what you learn is that things look very similar everywhere. Rather than that generating hopelessness, that should be a galvanising process, realising that, wow, women of colour and Black women in particular are at the bottom and are hated everywhere, and yet we organise in very interesting and innovative ways. So let's get to work.

*Can you say more about the difficulties and strengths of Black feminist solidarities?*

There's a difficulty organising around both the pain and pleasure of being a Black woman - and also assuming that there's an agreed idea of what it means to be a Black woman. I think there's a conversation to be had about how we define these terms and who's allowed in this space. That has its own kind of difficulty, because of some very disturbing, excluding conversations about the status of trans women in Black feminist spaces.

For me it's about a balance. It's about the very real material and discursive inequalities that Black women experience: it's the rally cry, the clarion call for Black feminism. But that always and forever has to be linked to understanding the creativity, the innovation, the *pleasure* of joining in struggle with others, which I think is really important. I don't want the pain ever to overwhelm the pleasure. Adrienne Maree Brown has a new book out called *Pleasure Activism*. It's important to say we can't always organise around death. The reason why we join together is because there's some great injustice. But it can't always be a drag. There have to be spaces where we insist on community and enjoyment alongside the sadness and death and destruction. It's important to get that balance.

*In the introduction to To Exist is to Resist, the new book you've co-edited with Francesca Sobande, you mention that US Black feminism can overshadow European Black feminism. I was thinking about how that's part of wider forms of cultural imperialism - for instance, in the UK we have large exhibitions on Black American art, like the Tate's 'Soul of a Nation', but you don't have the equivalent on that scale in the UK, and we have far more prominence given to Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe than their UK equivalents. How is Black European feminism different, and what needs to be highlighted?*

I think what's so interesting about Black European feminism is to understand how it is firstly a diasporic feminism. It is always in conversation with the Caribbean

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and the African continent. The colonial legacies of empire live on through these particular kinds of feminism, where folks are here because the empire was there, and in the US case this is a very different experience, because - speaking as a Black American - we are cut off from our relationships to the continent. There are very important and crucial pan-African traditions, but in the American case those are in many ways *imagined* communities and solidarities. Whereas in the European case, people are travelling back and forth right at this moment. Some of the activists I talk to are second and third generation Europeans, and so their parents and grandparents are from the Caribbean or from the African continent. Travelling back and forth they have those very immediate connections that matter. So the struggle is not only about recognition and redistribution in Europe, but it's also about reparations and anti-colonial activism in the Caribbean and on the continent. All of those conflicts and debates that were taking place during empire, during imperialism live on in very real ways for folks in Europe. That's not the same as the US.

But the differences are not always clear because we're still in the middle of American empire. Many Black American feminists don't understand how they speak with authority and dominate by virtue of being at the heart of empire. It's oftentimes a very difficult conversation to have. How can you be at the bottom in one case but also be dominant in another? That's always an important lesson to learn. No one is saying that you are all powerful, but in this space, in terms of thinking about Black feminism, *you are*. You crowd out other conversations. Cultural hegemony is about the ways that American imperialism works. It's absolutely fascinating, particularly in the Black feminist case.

Linguistic distinctions are so crucial. In the case of Germany and France, for example, there are still plenty of key activists and theorists talking about all the same issues that are not translated - or their translations are hard to find. As English-only speakers, their analyses and ways of seeing the world are lost to us, or blocked from us. And that's our problem, as English speakers: if you are serious about solidarity that means you better go and learn another language. Because in the rest of Europe, they do.

*Why is Europe the frame that most interests you?*

For a number of reasons. We Americans kind of fetishise Europe - so sophisticated, so fabulous, no one's driving in cars! But when I was still living in Scotland I visited

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Luxembourg, and I saw more Black people there than in Scotland, which is one of the whitest places on the planet. But the way Luxembourg conceives of itself is that it imagines itself completely and totally white. And it made me furious. Scotland, on the other hand, is such an interesting place because it's trying to change. When I was there it was 98 per cent white, but it's starting to change because of migration, and that's very interesting when I go back, especially to Glasgow. But when you go literally anywhere else, you see all these Black people everywhere, but - in terms of European cinema, literature, for example - none of this is reflected. So I started asking some of my colleagues questions: you know, when you're talking about gender policies in Europe, where are the women of colour? Where are they in your theoretical conceptions? I was just getting furious. Because to see and to watch how Black women and other women of colour, especially on the continent, are written out of national stories, was fascinating and infuriating.

I was really interested in saying no, and telling a different story. It's not my place to tell someone else's story. But certainly what I can do is to try and create space to understand how these women are organising, and how that is an important counter-narrative. And this is not just about the culture industries but also about academics - especially in feminist social science in Europe, which works very hard to colonise Black women's ideas but refuses to have Black women in their spaces. Even in the European feminist imagination! I find that fascinating. I feel a keen responsibility to correct the record and not let people off the hook. To say, no, you're not going to use intersectionality simply as a way of talking about different kinds of white women, not on my watch. You're going to be asked some very hard questions, but also I am going to show you how you are using this term that actually centres the experiences of Black women and other women of colour. I feel there's some urgency there - trying to understand genuine dynamics. If you could understand these experiences, then the rise of the far right wouldn't be so shocking to you, you know? Or these awful border politics wouldn't be surprising to you. And then we would be much further on in actually trying to organise ourselves and others, and also in having some effective influence in terms of policy-making as well.

### **Activism**

*At the London book launch of To Exist is to Resist, you said 'no one is coming to save us, we have to do it ourselves'. Could you say a bit more about that, and about activism more broadly?*

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This is the first lesson of activism, right? If you see something that needs to change, you have to do it yourself. The idea that someone else either understands the issue better than you, or has better ideas than you, seems anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic. This does not mean you are making someone take all the responsibility for their own liberation - saying, 'well you pointed out the issues now you must go and do it'. Rather, it's to say: 'if you want change to happen then you actually have to grab a broom and gather with others to make that happen'.

When you see other people seeking to make change, there will always be something wrong with it. But I'm of the mind that you can't just criticise from the outside: you have agency, you have the ability to act to try and make a difference. I think it's beholden on all of us to do so - but not on our own. It shouldn't be an individualised process, it always has to be a collective process, where you can have a conversation: 'do you see this?! Isn't this madness? Maybe we should do something?'.

And time and time again, when you are speaking to activists, they say the experience of collective action is the most worthwhile thing that they have. It comes at great cost, in terms of burnout, and frayed friendships, and mental health issues and all the rest of it - and I think that's something we don't talk about enough. But we have activists saying, *that moment has completely changed our experience*. I was interviewing some folks who occupied Holloway Prison, and they talked about how it was the most consequential thing they'd ever done. Everything else is like a downer since then: that's in vivid colour and everything else is a bit in black and white. That's its own issue: the highs and lows, and the risks, of activism.

'No one is coming to save us and we have to do it ourselves' should be an incredibly empowering statement, but it's also frightening. Because I don't know how much more clearly the world can show us: you have Trump crazily tweeting about sending people back to where they come from, and half the country agrees with that. Literally, *no-one is coming*. In fact the only time anyone is coming is to try and deport you, or to try to do you harm. It's the greatest self-interest to understand that lesson. But it's also the greatest expression of the idea that we have to be in charge of our own liberation.

*In Minority, Women and Austerity you argue for an expansive conception of activism as a politics of survival. What does activism encompass, how far does it go, and what are its limits?*



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Leah and I have always been very clear. If you want to understand the failures of the Women's March, Occupy, XR - all of these folks, again and again - and as women of colour activists consistently argue - you have to realise that not only have these movements not been prepared to entertain conversations about intersectional inequalities or intersecting inequalities; they also have not entertained the differing *temporalities* of crisis, nor tried to make activism reflect everyday experience.

The women of colour antifascist activists I work with are very clear that they don't engage in the black bloc, they don't do any frontline work, because they are hyper-visible to the police and to fascists, who will come and either kettle them, take them to prison, or inflict very real material violence against them. If what you do is spectacular activism, many women of colour will say, we're not going to put our bodies on the line for that, because we have homes and children that we have to get to tonight.

You can't only look for activism in terms of spectacle. If we're honest about refocusing our attention on the most marginalised, then we also have to go looking for activism in other spaces and places. Activism also has to be about everyday struggles for survival, especially in and around issues of social welfare. Activism at the school gates often either gets branded as NIMBYism, or gets called something completely different from activism - such as parental involvement. It actually matters if your school or community centre is going to get taken over or closed down. It's these kinds of immediate quality of life issues that are felt hardest by women of colour, who are more likely to be living in the poorest, unsafest communities - which are also the dirtiest communities, because environmental services are also unevenly cleaning the streets, and all the rest of it.

That is activism, but it's not 'sexy'. You're not covering your face, in the streets, or smashing windows, you're not part of an encampment sleeping in the streets for several months - because you need to go to work and you have kids to look after. But sometimes that's the only kind of activism that's seen to count. This other stuff often doesn't get labelled as activism but as voluntary or community activity. The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids that are happening at the moment have been made less effective because there have been women of colour running 'know your rights' campaigns, so that people know not to open their door to ICE, or to say they're not going unless ICE get a warrant signed by a judge. That's not *seen* as activism, but that's actually what's going to have a real material consequence for

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people's lives. For me, having a broader understanding of what political behaviour looks like is crucial.

*So what links them all together? How would you define activism?*

I always think about it as a *collective public politics*. It's a 'going-together' of different kinds of people in solidarity who are seeking to make some sort of change in public space. That's what it's about. It's a public politics, whatever that looks like. I have a particular interest in people who are choosing to defend and expand the welfare state, or are involved in antifascist resistance, and migrant justice. There are other ways of thinking about one's public politics. But for me it's collective, and it's about taking the risk, a real risk, of interacting in public space in particular ways. There are issues about what counts as public space. To me it's about joining together to say: we're going to do something, something that has immediate material consequences and makes a difference to people's lives.

*Should academics be more activist?*

You know, I don't know about that. It's one of those things where folks got to do what they got to do. As I was saying before, we need to have different kinds of people in different spaces. Those who care about these issues and are engaged with them should be activists. I have a lot of colleagues who talk about the kind of activism that they do, but they keep it very separate from their academic work. They might be very active in their local community, doing stuff with their kids' schools, or doing really interesting undercover migrant justice work, but they don't ever talk about it, because they don't want it captured by 'impact' and the Research Excellence Framework and all the rest of it. Whereas I do all this stuff and I'm very happily writing my REF impact case study about it as well - which is, I understand, a little gross. But I don't think anyone should feel compelled to do either. And I also don't think an identity as an academic should frame what you do. You should do something because you care. And not everyone will be in a position to understand their activism through their working lives.

*Can you outline your path from community organiser and trade unionist to academic?*

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While I was still at university I was part of a programme called Americorps, which President Clinton set up, which was meant to be like a domestic peace corps (I know ...). The university was in Washington DC, and I was working in a poor black community in the city. That was a really interesting experience for lots of different reasons, and I thought, I want to do more of this! I was working on a youth literacy programme and I bonded with the kids and it was all lovely. Then I did some organising around migrant justice and anti-poverty in Edinburgh for a time. After that I went back to the US briefly, for two years, to Texas, where I was a trade union organiser for one of the big public sector unions - but a union that had no power because in Texas it is illegal to strike for public sector workers. So it was a union in name only, because you couldn't withdraw your labour, and that's your main union tool.

It was probably one of the worst experiences of my life, but also the most important. It brought me to political maturation. The teachers' unions were separate - they're the most powerful because they're easy to organise - so we were organising other kinds of public sector workers. We were organising a very disparate group of people: folks who worked in welfare offices and benefits agencies, in the probation service, in mental health institutions, all of them located in rural areas and spread out.

I'll never forget getting up in the morning in a place called Brenham, Texas, where Bluebell, a famous ice cream brand from the South, is headquartered, near to a massive secure unit for people with learning disabilities plus people who have committed crimes and are locked up. It's a prison but also not a prison. (In the US we still have large hospitals where we keep people in secure accommodation, which is truly barbaric and unbelievable). We were not allowed to be in the grounds, so we had to stand at the gates at every shift change, starting at 5am. So we were there at 5am, 1pm, 6pm - handing out flyers, trying to get people to organise. It was one of my worst experiences ever because people were like 'You want me to join the union? Do you *know* how many packs of cigarettes that is?'. And ours was a very weird, non-ideological union. People didn't once talk about political education because it was thought that would be 'alienating' to these workers. It was only about bread and butter issues - more pension contributions and a higher wage. That was it. No talk of socialism, none of that. That seemed crazy to me because it was as if we were fighting for some vague gain in the distant future, which might one day be an extra £100 in your pocket; but in the meantime we're denying you the instant gratification

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of smoking your cigarettes. It was a terrible transaction. We weren't asking people to make some sort of immediate sacrifices for the sake of some kind of social change, a distant revolution to come - it wasn't even that! But what was being presented as, effectively, a simple financial transaction was still always talked about in this weird middle-class way of entailing delayed gratification for the goodness to come later. Plus it was a super insulting, top-down, hierarchical approach - working *on* people, not *with* people. It was gross, and ridiculous. But it was one of those great experiences that taught me lots of things. I thought, 'I don't want to do this any more'. I probably always knew I was going to drift back into academia eventually. Now I guess I'm making sense of the experiences that I've had.

## Change in the university

*In the UK you are one of 24 Black female professors out of nineteen thousand professors nationwide, fourteen thousand of whom are male. What does it feel like to be in that position? How do you negotiate it? What are the main factors that could drive progressive change?*

How does it feel? For me now, being at work is very interesting because when I fled my last position - and fleeing is what I did - all I wanted was to be respected and left alone. Those were the two things that I got at Warwick. People are very nice and they let me get on with things without being harassed and managed. I guess you can ask others about their experience of working with me, but what's nice is to be able to model behaviours that I would have appreciated when I was a junior colleague, and then also to have the power to shape the life of a department, and to be able to actually encourage and support junior colleagues and early career researchers. I keenly feel that it is my responsibility to say 'no, first of all, we do not have to be vicious, competitive, or managerial'. Everyone knows what their job is and that there are other ways of thinking about and being an academic, and one of the ways you can do that is not be an asshole. Many academics seem to be unable to understand that basic lesson. Do you know what I mean? I say to people all the time, academics are so weird. Because there are so few people that you meet that are actually geniuses. Everyone is just rubbing along in the middle. So everyone just needs to get a grip.

*Sometimes being an asshole is a criteria for promotion.*

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Well this is it! For me one thing that's important is that apparently I am the first Black woman professor ever in the history of the University of Warwick, which is both hilarious and ridiculous. But if that is the case, then not on my watch are we going to engage in terrible behaviour. It's going to be called out publicly. And behind the scenes we are going to support those who, in other places, would have been crushed under foot. I feel as if that's my duty and responsibility.

We also need to think about this issue in larger terms. Our friend up at Durham, the educational sociologist Vicky Boliver, has done very helpful work that shows that Russell Group universities refuse to give offers to best performing black and minority ethnic students - so we are not using the right words when we talk about 'a pipeline problem'. It's *not* a pipeline problem. It is institutionalised racism in the higher education system. It's an absolute scandal. So, first of all, the best performing black and minority ethnic students are less likely to gain entry into the most elite universities (and Warwick is just as guilty of this as anywhere else). Then we have what is called 'the attainment gap': when they have managed to break through into these elite spaces, even though they're there with the same qualifications, or better, than their white counterparts, black and minority ethnic students are less likely to leave with a first or a 2:1. And I am actually seeing it happen in front of my eyes. At Warwick, I teach third years on a very specialist module called 'Feminist Pedagogy, Feminist Activism'. So you're only getting a certain kind of student who wants to engage in this kind of conversation. And let me tell you, my Black women students are broken by the time they come to me. There's something that has happened to them, even in right-on Warwick Sociology: they are less willing to speak, though they have a whole lot to say. Even if their analyses are fantastic, they have to be coaxed in ways that I find surprising. Something has happened to them. We know what's happened: all the research says they're talked down to, they're disrespected, in their tutorials, in their seminars, in their lectures. They're not learning about experiences that are *meaningful* to them, but when they make suggestions they're shut down, and so it's a process of demoralisation. It's the brave few who, when they get to masters and PhDs, are able to get through it. It's truly incredible what happens.

Just two weeks ago I was at a politics and gender conference in a room where a woman was using Nancy Fraser and Iris Marion Young to defend the far right. It was insane. When I said, 'what are you saying?', she doubled down on it. There wasn't a

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session at that conference where something crazy didn't happen. And I thought, 'if I was an early career researcher, could I survive this?'. At every stage of the process, BAME young people are less likely to get studentships, to get the mentoring, to gain access to those career-defining networks with the big name, to be pushed; they are not getting put on grants. We *know* what to do about this. We know exactly what needs to be done. But again it goes back to: are academics assholes? You know what I mean? We're thinking this is some huge mystery. But it's not.

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