

LOOKING FOR RELEVANCE?

**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCES**

**ENGAGEMENT WORKSHOPS**

**PROFESSOR PHIL COHEN**

University of East London and University College, London

**Skin in the game? Some reflections  
on the role of organic intellectuals  
and the Dissenting Academy**

WHEN: MONDAY, NOV 5, 2018  
1.00PM-2.00PM

WHERE: LINKWAY ROOM, JOHN  
MEDLEY



## WHO AND WHAT?

### **Skin in the game? Some reflections on the role of organic intellectuals and the Dissenting Academy**

How is it possible to live in a society whose dominant values you abhor, but which invade your everyday life and even your dreams? Is possible to thrive under these conditions without retreating into some kind of private world, or else a subculture which insulates you from the very society you are seeking to change? How are we to sustain the courage, resourcefulness, cunning and fortitude to keep on keeping on in pursuit of forms of social justice we know will not be realised in our life time, and without falling back on some quasi religious or utopian/apocalyptic belief system? What is it about the political culture of the left that supports, or hollows out the emotional, moral and intellectual resources we need to sustain struggles of long duration? Finally, how far is it possible to build an intellectual counter culture within the Academy for this purpose?

In this talk I am going to address these questions in two ways. Firstly by critically reviewing Gramsci's and Said's theory of intellectuals to argue that the advent of the global knowledge economy, the neoliberal academy and social media has fundamentally changed the rules of the game, and made the position of the 'organic intellectual' ever more precarious, if not untenable. In particular sociology, for all its contemporary concern with 'bio-politics', is no longer, if it ever was, a skin trade, in John O'Neill's formulation. I will look at the debate around public sociology and citizen social science as a symptomatic response to this crisis of representation and accountability.

Secondly I will draw on my own experiences as an urban ethnographer and community activist working with young people in the east end of London over the past 50 years to consider the limits and conditions of participatory action research in challenging knowledge power relations. As an example of the problems I will conclude by discussing a project in which I am currently involved, namely working with marginalised communities to create a Citizens Atlas of London.



#### **Professor Phil Cohen**

**Emeritus Professor, Centre for Cultural Studies Research  
University of East London; Senior Research Fellow, Institute  
for Advanced Studies, University College London.**

Phil Cohen is the co-founder of Living Maps, a network of academics, artists and activists concerned to develop a creative and critical approach to the social mapping of the city and editor-in-chief of its online journal Livingmaps review.

Since the 1980's Phil has been carrying out a programme of ethnographic research on issues of class, race, and urban regeneration, working with young people and communities in East London to trace the impact of structural and demographic change on their livelihoods, life styles and life stories. As part of this he carried out a widely acclaimed study into the local impact of the Olympics; *On the Wrong Track: East London and the Post Olympics* was published in 2013 by Lawrence & Wishart and he recently co-edited a follow up *London 2012 and the Post Olympic City* (Palgrave 2017).

Amongst many other books, Phil is the author of *Knuckle Sandwich: Growing up in the working class city* (with Dave Robins 1978), *Re-thinking the Youth Question: Education, Labour and Cultural Studies* (1998); *Reading Room Only: memoir of a radical bibliophile* (2013) and *Graphologies*, a collection of his poetry and fiction was published by Mica Press in 2014. His most recent book is *Archive that, Comrade: Left Legacies and the counter culture of remembrance* (PM Press 2018) A collection of his recent academic work, *Material Dreams: studies in the un/making of modernity* is to be published next year. Website and blog: [www.philcohenworks.com](http://www.philcohenworks.com).

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