

Barcelona 22-25 January 2004: First International Conference on *Social Movements and Activist Research*

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If a writer on a political subject manages to preserve a detached attitude, it is nearly always because [s]he does not know what [s]he is talking about.

To understand a political movement, one has got to be involved in it ...

George Orwell

In my last contribution to the CSGR Newsletter (issue 10, September 2003), I closed with reference to Henry David Thoreau's statement that '[t]he thoughtful [wo]man becomes a hermit in the thoroughfares of the marketplace'. The implication was that one dimension of a global radical politics that contests the moralities of capitalism, neoliberalism and militarism is that it is opening spaces for intellectual endeavours to contribute to, and be part of, activist praxis.

The First International Conference on *Social Movements and Activist Research* was a key event in such a process. Its publicity leaflet states its objective as the establishment of an *adisciplinary* 'space of encounter, exchange, self-formation and debate' by those participating in 'social movements' as both activists and researchers. It declares three starting points or principles: 1. that activist research itself can be instrumental in 'a critical transformation of current reality'; 2. that the institutional academic environment is a space where the power relations contested in global radical politics are reproduced; and 3. that the privatisation, commoditisation and corporatisation of knowledges - a process to which universities worldwide are bound - acts both as a form of social exclusion and as a constraint on learning trajectories.

Held in north-east Barcelona in the Ateneu Popular de Nou Barris - a socio-cultural facility or community centre run by several local associations - the meeting attracted, at a guess, some 200 participants from throughout Europe and from North, South and Central Americas. As an organisational process as well as an event, great attention was paid to attempts to 'do things differently'. An open organisational assembly had been held regularly in Barcelona during the year leading up to the meeting where anyone who wanted to participate in the event's organisation could volunteer thoughts, experience, time and skills. A website (in Catalan, English, French, Italian and Spanish) was established in the months leading up to the event (www.investigaccio.org), where those interested were invited to propose themes, workshops and roundtables that might feature as part of the conference. As such, the event itself was 'self-constituted' to a large extent. Papers were placed on the website prior to the meeting, enabling participants to share work and to establish links and collaborations before arriving in Barcelona. This was not to be a process of contributing abstracts that are selected by a few event organisers and then presented to a variously receptive audience. In order that costs could be kept to a minimum and participants to a maximum, accommodation was organised via a process of 'buddying up' with those living in Barcelona: I stayed with Nùria, one of the organisers of the

meeting - a vivacious Catalan woman in the process of completing a masters degree, as well as involved in nationalist and gender-awareness initiatives. Several participants stayed in Can Masdeu: a self-sustaining social centre in squatted premises in the beautiful aromatic dry woodland of the hills surrounding Barcelona – a place and community that currently is under threat due to plans to build a road bypass through the valley in which it is located.

Of course, given its history, Barcelona was a provocative and pertinent setting for such an event. Here, the 19th century saw an expanding number of workers living in desperate conditions riot repeatedly against a bourgeoisie reaping the benefits of industrialisation. This created a fertile context for the growth of a militant anarcho-syndicalism, based on desires to establish decentralised and autonomously run productive ventures and services. In the early 20th century, Catalunyan socialists and anarchists began to resist Spain's militarised imperial pretensions, marking a period of unrest in a context of repression by the Castilian dictator, Primo de Rivera. In 1936 a federated, election-winning alliance of anarchists, radicals, socialists and republicans faced a full-blown civil war with Franco's militarised fascism. The toll for Catalunya's anarcho-syndicalists was disastrous. In recent years, people have been arrested in Barcelona for anarchist activism, and to judge from the anarchist symbols graffiti-ed around the city, an undercurrent of contemporary anarchisms bubbles away not so far from the city's surface. This accompanies widespread concern that repression and censorship has been increasing under the dictate of Spanish Prime Minister Aznar, himself a member of the fascist party during General Franco's leadership¹. As elsewhere, these trends are targeting cross-cutting precarious 'groups' such as immigrants, anarchists, squatters, separatists, and activists.

As such, the meeting's proactive focus interacted substantially with the local contexts in which it took place, highlighting the 'real world' complexities influencing activist practice and research. Important issues that came up included: relationships between Catalan separatist politics and a radical activist politics that focuses on transnational issues; the integral significance of maintaining physical spaces for the existence and enhancing of alternative communities and organising practices; and current processes and events in Barcelona that are demolishing existing inner-city communities in the process of gentrifying and cleansing the city, particularly in relation to the city's 2004 business and tourism-oriented Cultural Forum.

A key thread weaving through the intent and assumptions of the meeting was a validation of the knowledges that can be generated via subjective experience of, and participation in, multiple contexts. For many, this has arisen from a frustration with the methodological assumption of objective distance pursued in the burgeoning field of 'social movement studies'. As Colin Barker and Lawrence Cox argue in a paper submitted as a contribution to the meeting², such an approach contains within it its own limit: that in pursuing the observation, description and explanation of social movements as a distant object of research, the processual and recursively 'agentic' participation of the active subject is denied.

¹ This piece was written prior to the Madrid bombing of March 2004 and the shift to a left-oriented government.

² Barker, C. and Cox, L. (2003) "What have the Romans ever done for us?" Academic and activist forms of movement theorizing², On-line: <http://www.iol.ie/~mazzoldi/toolsforchange/afpp/afpp8.html> (20 January 2004).

For myself as an anthropologist (+ecologist/dancer/woman/activist), this emphasis was particularly relevant. Perhaps because social and cultural anthropologists have tended to work in cultures outside their own which, in the context of post-colonialism and ‘development’ has meant experiencing stark political and economic inequalities, they/we have long been grappling with the ethical circumstances of their/our work. For many, this has carried an attendant desire to effect some sort of ‘public service’: to speak out – to *do* something – about observed injustices. We become part of the contexts we work within, we are taken up as political currency within these contexts and we would be naïve to imagine that by being part of a ‘northern’ academic tradition our research is thereby, or should be, apolitical. But we face enormous institutional and other obstacles to our ability to contribute: ranging from a lack of support from formal academic institutions to publish work in local contexts, to threats of litigation if we publish analyses that expose local resistance to powerful international NGOs, donors and corporations.

Having been at the receiving end of such threats for published research during the neoliberal nineties in Namibia³, I personally am rather bored with a conventional dichotomising of positions: between academia and activism, theory and practice, objectivity and subjectivity, and the traditional and organic intellectual (cf. Gramsci). These are categories which themselves maintain a hegemonic status quo in intellectual and pragmatic arenas. Objectivity, for example, is a constructed (and experientially impossible) analytical position that arguably is not ethically desirable, even if it remains a cornerstone for many in the social sciences. I – in fact, the multiple and shifting ‘Is’ that constitute ‘I’ (cf. Deleuze and Guattari) – am more interested, intellectually and organically, in ways of excavating and subverting these categories and their correspondences. If I validate, empower and reflect on my experiences, it becomes clear that theory has been critical in helping me to make sense of my ‘real world’ engagements; which at the same time have also informed my readings of theory; which has influenced my ‘real world’ practices; which have informed my intellectual endeavours; and so on These are not separate domains, and if ‘we’ continue to think of them as separable then we simply maintain the universalist fragmentation on which modernity thrives, and on which exploitative political and economic practices feed.

Instead, and echoing Julia Kristeva⁴, I favour a theoretical opening of the field of active subjectivity that makes possible a corresponding opening of the hermeneutic tautology that ‘theory harbours its object within its own [enclosed] logic’. Such an opening eliminates the distance between theory and action by affirming the ‘*willful*’ and agentic possibilities infusing the continuous phenomenon of *interpretation*. As such it posits ‘an ethics of the open subject’: an embracing of contingency, ambiguity and agency; a discarding of an assumption that anything should be taken as given; and

³ Cf. Sullivan, S. (2003) ‘Protest, conflict and litigation: dissent or libel in resistance to a conservancy in north-west Namibia’, pp. 69-86 in Berglund, E. and Anderson, D. (eds.) *Ethnographies of conservation: environmentalism and the distribution of privilege*. Oxford: Berghahn Press. <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/CSGR/Publications/Sullivan/Oct03.pdf>.

⁴ Kristeva, J. (1997 (1982)) Psychoanalysis and the polis. pp. 228-231 in Kemp, S. and Squires, J. (eds.) *Feminisms*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

a strong theoretical support for our always active and *constitutive* engagement with the world⁵.

I greatly appreciated the supportive space of the Barcelona meeting to share such thoughts with other activist-academics and academic-activists, and particularly with the other anthropologists present. Workshops and roundtables in which I participated with interest included one on the organisational implications of networks, in terms of both theory and practice, and an afternoon spent reflecting on the socio-political implications of particular activist tactics, from direct action to mass marches. As with most conferences, however, the scheduled meetings were greatly enhanced by *sharings* in the spaces outside these meetings: sitting on the steps outside the conference one evening discussing the analytical relevance for social movements of conceptual metaphors drawn from physics and the life sciences; building links over tapas in a cheap restaurant with academic-activists from Greece, Israel, France, and the UK; and talking with fellow anthropologists about the problems, both personal and professional, engendered by an ethnographic and participatory orientation to research.

It seems to me that this meeting was indicative of a current zeitgeist and effervescence of the theory:practice:praxis nexus. It is part of a number of new and emerging initiatives – some of which have bubbled up in isolation but which are overlapping, coalescing and re-constituting in novel ways. CSGR is linked in several ways to this activity in the UK context. For example, I was part of a group of six people who registered a Radical Theory Workshop at the November 2003 European Social Forum in Paris - a workshop which attracted an unexpectedly high number of participants. This effort is continuing via an e-list and plans to organise a one-day Radical Theory Forum to coincide with the next European Social Forum, as well as to register possibly more Workshops within the Forum process itself. Independently of this an ‘anarchist:academics’ e-list emerged from a meeting at the Anarchist Bookfair in London, October 2003. Currently there is some cross-over of participants occurring between the two lists and the beginnings of discussion regarding shared interests and intent. The theoretical and pragmatic interests of these events and discussions, groups and individuals, are reflected in a process of ‘talkshops’ supported by CSGR due to take during 2004, under the title of *academia, activism and postanarchism: theory and practice in (anti-)globalisation politics*. All these initiatives build and magnify existing UK-based theory:practice initiatives such as Signs of the Times (www.signsofthetimes.org.uk) and Shifting Ground Collective (www.shiftingground.org). It is tempting to see in them some renewed vigour in the recursive relationship between theory and practice, as well as between the ivory tower of academia and the real world ‘out there’.

⁵ Cf. Battaglia, D. (1999) ‘Towards an ethics of the open subject: writing culture in good conscience’, pp. 114-150 in Moore, H. (ed.) *Anthropological Theory Today*, Cambridge: Polity Press.