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## MEANING-MAKING IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

# Blurring Boundaries: Recognizing Knowledge-Practices in the Study of Social Movements

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### Abstract

*Social movements are arising in unexpected places, producing effects not normally associated with our traditional understandings of either politics or movements. No longer, and perhaps never, solely the highly visible, modernist expressions of resistance to the state, movements are not only enacting politics through protest and cultural contestation, but are generating diverse knowledges. From heated debates over the meaning of Italy's alter-globalization movement; to careful direct-action strategizing in Chicago's cooperative bookstores; to conferences on Native American environmental justice issues, contemporary movements are important sites of knowledge creation, reformulation and diffusion. We call these "knowledge-practices." Building on interdisciplinary approaches to the study of social movements, we argue that when we recognize movements as processes through which knowledge is generated, modified and mobilized, we gain important insights into the politics of contemporary movements. This recognition also has important methodological implications. It requires that we shift the mode of engagement in our research, blurring established social scientific boundaries and promoting a more relational-symmetrical approach. [Keywords: Social movements, knowledge-practice, modes of engagement, place-basedness]*

## Introduction

Because there's enough for everyone...because sharing is more fulfilling than owning...because people getting things for free is better than landfills overflowing...because a beautiful day outside together is better than anything money could buy...because "free trade" is a contradiction in terms...because no one should be without food, community, or creative opportunities...because life should involve picnics, but it will only if we make them happen...because there is too such thing as a free lunch...

The Carrboro, North Carolina Really Really Free Market is happening again this weekend, as always on the first Saturday of the month....

So began an email announcement we each received in our inboxes. This alert has become a monthly reminder and call to action for an event that now shapes the alternative political economy of our small North Carolina town, even affecting laws regarding the use of public space. During our years together in the doctoral program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, we have worked closely with other university- and community-based organizers to help create this "Really Really Free Market" as a festive, monthly community event. First experimented as an interactive, "alternative economic" strategy at the grassroots mobilizations against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Miami in November 2003, part of a series of mobilizations against neoliberalism and free trade, Really Really Free Markets have since traveled and begun to appear in towns throughout the U.S. The Really Really Free Market in our town has become a much-anticipated event for local families, students, and workers, and is spoken about at similar gatherings across the country. A kind of ad hoc market of non-linear exchange, community members from diverse backgrounds gather, now at the Carrboro Town Commons on the first Saturday of the month, to give or take goods, services, skills, performances, stories, crafts, food, games, music, clothing, furniture, plants, and a wide range of used and recycled items and resources...all *for free*. This is not a barter system, nor does it imply a one-for-one exchange. A person freely brings and gifts items, sometimes selecting other free items to take home, in a spirit of very general reciprocity.

On this particular Saturday, Michal arrived and deposited an armful of free clothing, Dana laid out a batch of homecooked peach cobbler, and we three sat chatting beneath the ramada-style market space, watching others

arrive and lay out their goods. Some newcomers were timid—wrangling with their expectations that in order to take an item, they first had to give an item. Picking up books, kitchen items, and winter coats, without being required to provide something in direct exchange, people behaved with a different kind of economic sensibility. We marveled at how successful this experiment in alternative economy and community had become. A few meters from us Vinci, one of the most active organizers of the event, was giving a young girl a haircut. We could overhear her talking with someone who had come to the market for the first time, “This event allows us to see, maybe in a small way, how different our economic and community relations could be...” she explained. Maribel, who had come prepared to provide free Spanish lessons, whispered, “Our whole ‘cultures of economies’ reading group should be here!” We smiled, pondering how this event, and the various forms of knowledge it both creates and depends on, would be assessed/explained by our professors and classmates, as well as by the community members and families who carried “new” items home that day.

In recent years, we, the three authors of this paper—along with a very active Social Movements Working Group at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—have been grappling with examples and realities like the one above, in which movements we are studying, or are involved with (at times a combination of both), prolifically produce knowledge—often in forms, or on issues not so dissimilar to the social and political theories we ourselves are being trained in. We have been repeatedly struck, not only by the richness of insights available when knowledge is produced from a specific location, struggle, or situation; but also by the challenges it poses for us—methodologically, epistemologically and politically—as researchers. Not because it makes our work obsolete, but because it forces us to think about the “what for” of our research quite differently. In this paper, based on our own research, experiences, and many insights that have in many ways been co-authored by our colleagues in the Social Movements Working Group, we engage this challenge, proposing a rubric within which the “knowledge-practices” of social movements can be recognized, built upon, and engaged.

In this paper, building on interdisciplinary approaches to the study of social movements (including some outside of academia), we argue that knowledge-practices are a crucial component of the creative and daily practice of social movements. As we will demonstrate, encounters ranging from heated online and journal debates over the nature and meaning of Italy’s *movimento no global*, in which new forms of situated and reflexive

theoretical production are defined; to hours of direct-action strategizing in meetings at Chicago's cooperative bookstores, where theories of embodied democracy are derived; to campground conferences on Native American territories, where native knowledge contributes to the science of environmental justice issues; constitute, among other things, important sites of knowledge creation, reformulation, and diffusion. We call these diverse practices "knowledge-practices." This hyphenated term aims to escape from the abstract connotations usually associated with knowledge, arguing for its concrete, embodied, lived, and situated character. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues, "all social practices imply knowledge, and as such they are also knowledge-practices" (2005:19).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, we argue that when we recognize movements as spaces and processes in which knowledges are generated, modified, and mobilized by diverse actors, important political insights are gained—both into the politics of those contemporary movements, as well as into those of society more broadly. This recognition bears important implications for social movement researchers. It requires that we shift the mode of engagement in our research, blurring well-established boundaries in social science between the "subjects" and "objects" of knowledge production—a shift that has certainly been called for in anthropology for at least 20 years and by the critique of positivist and Cartesian epistemologies, more broadly.

Our impetus for this project comes from our contention that a great deal of even the most critical academic work on social movements has theoretical assumptions and methodological inclinations that prevent scholars from seeing or making sense of various knowledge-practices and their implications. This is significant, we argue, because the inability to recognize knowledge-practices as some of the central work that movements do, has made it difficult for social movement theorists to grasp the actual political effects of many movements. As the cases in the paper demonstrate, these effects include not only immediate strategic objectives for social or political change, but the very rethinking of democracy; the generation of expertise and new paradigms of being, as well as different modes of analyses of relevant political and social conjunctures.

The argument is taken up in two parts. In the first section, "Towards a Different Mode of Engagement," we suggest a need for a different mode of engagement in social movement research that recognizes social movements not simply as objects to be studied and understood, but as subjects or actors who are knowledge-producers in their own right. In so doing we challenge

the social scientific mode of empiricism that stresses the search for mechanisms and causal variables to be generalized. Instead, we argue for a mode of engaging with social movements that does not set “culture” (and those who bear it) as something “out there” to be accounted for and explained as an independent variable, but instead studies social movements on (and in) their own terms. As such, and building on criticisms of the structural and positivist orientations of the field articulated by authors associated with the “cultural turn” (Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Goodwin and Jasper 2004; Polletta 2004), we argue for the need to go beyond the emphasis on determining the mechanisms by which social movements work. We suggest that if we push the cultural turn even further, incorporating insights from multiple fields working to understand human agency in diverse cultural worlds (see Holland et al., this issue), we will be able to engage with movements not simply as objects to be explained by the distanced analyst, but as lively actors producing their own explanations and knowledges. These knowledges take the form of stories, ideas, narratives, and ideologies, but also theories, expertise, as well as political analyses and critical understandings of particular contexts. Their creation, modification and diverse enactments are what we call “knowledge-practice.”

As will become apparent, knowledge-practices in our view range from things we are more classically trained to define as knowledge, such as practices that engage and run parallel to the knowledge of scientists or policy experts, to micro-political and cultural interventions that have more to do with “know-how” or the “cognitive praxis that informs all social activity” and which vie with the most basic social institutions that teach us how to be in the world (see Varela 1999; Eyerman and Jamison 1991:49). Many have begun to speak of the centrality of knowledge to the understanding of practice and social life in the late twentieth century (Schatzki et al. 2001). Moreover, recent shifts in cognitive science emphasize more materialist understandings of knowledge such that “cognition consists not of representations but of embodied action” (Varela 1999:17). Departing from a grounded and plural understanding of the term, we claim that movements prolifically produce knowledge—a category often reserved for social and natural scientists, and other recognized “experts.” This both radically shifts our conception of what social movements have to offer, and potentially broadens our understandings of what constitutes “the social.”

In the second section, called “Understanding Knowledge-Practices,” we explore and explain our use of this hyphenated term and its implications.

The section begins with three ethnographic vignettes from our own research to illustrate what the category of “knowledge-practice” is and what it makes visible. The cases include descriptions of an Indigenous environmental justice network in North America, Chicago’s Direct Action Network collective, and a segment of Italy’s alter-globalization movement. Each case highlights a different way in which knowledge-practice is central to collective action. The cases (respectively) show how contemporary movements are: 1) engaging in co-producing, challenging, and transforming expert scientific discourses; 2) creating critical subjects whose embodied discourse produces new notions of democracy; and 3) generating reflexive conjunctural theories and analyses that go against more dogmatic and orthodox approaches to social change, and as such contribute to ethical ways of knowing. Building on these empirical cases and descriptions of the material and situated nature of these knowledge-practices, we then explain that these knowledges are unique and politically important largely due to their place-based natures.

### **Toward a Different Mode of Engagement**

In recent years, critiques of positivist and structuralist orientations in the interdisciplinary field of social movement studies have become well known. Authors affiliated with what is known as the “cultural turn” in social movement studies have argued for the need to bring greater attention to culture (Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Polletta 2004; Polletta and Jasper 2001), identity (Melucci 1989, 1996), ideology (Laraña et al. 1994), narratives (Davis et al. 2002) and framing processes (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 1988, 1992) as a way of countering what these authors have identified as the overly structural and macro-political orientation of the prevailing, and primarily sociological, social-movement studies approach. Relatedly, many of these same authors call for researchers to pay more attention to what were previously considered “irrational” aspects of movements, including emotion, affect and identity. Finally, they have matched this call for a shift in content with a shift in methodology. That is, they have urged researchers to employ more ethnographic tools and analyses that focus on the meaning-making and cultural practices of collective action. This shifts the focus to the narratives and terms movement activists provide about themselves and their campaigns for justice (see especially Davis 2002; Goodwin et al. 2001), rather than answers to predetermined questions the social scientist brings to them.

This move is crucial, because as articulated by theorists within and beyond sociology (Escobar 1992; Goodwin and Jasper 2004; Johnston and Klandermans 1995; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Touraine 1988), social movement studies, especially in North America, has been heavily influenced by strict definitions of what constitutes the properly scientific object of study, as well as by political culture in the U.S. that reduces the political to a fixed and pre-determined politico-institutional sphere.<sup>2</sup> These conceptual boundaries around science and politics have influenced the field to treat movements frequently as objects whose existence, emergence, growth and decline must be objectively *explained*. This is in turn based on a notion of explanation that suggests analysis by properly distanced and neutral researchers, on the one hand, and by the pursuit of generalizable mechanisms and laws, on the other. While we recognize that generalizability can be commensurate with an interest in “culture,” our central concern is with the culturalist turn’s tendency to mechanize “culture” into an explanatory variable in human behavior.

We follow the path of these important culturalist critiques, but then move into a different terrain, raising the possibility of asking different questions, questions that aim to complicate notions of “culture” and alter the “what for” of social movement research. We argue that despite their important contributions, even those culturalists most critical of dominant approaches have not recognized the epistemological significance and political stakes of the underlying subject-object divide and its implications for their research. Moreover, they have not let go of seeing the ultimate “goal” of their work as a form of objective explanation. Consequently, we hope to draw the field’s attention to the centrality of knowledge-practices in movements and how these enactments destabilize the boundary between activist and academic (or other expert) knowledges. In what follows, we review the criticisms of the dominant approach to social movement studies and then go on to point out the persistent limitations of these critical approaches. Finally, we move to explain why shifting the mode of engagement in research on and with movements will not only enable knowledge-practices to be more visible, but will also provide valuable political insights.

### ***Rethinking the Treatment of Culture and Agency***

We depart from Goodwin and Jasper’s call for a “social movement analysis that rejects invariant modeling, is wary of conceptual stretching and recognizes the diverse ways that culture and agency [as opposed to only macro



and external causes], including emotions and strategizing, shape collective action” (1999:27). With Goodwin and others, we believe that the commitment to *a priori* models, categories, and frameworks such as “political opportunities” or “resource mobilizations” not only obscures the meaning-making and cultural aspects of social movements, but is ultimately tautological. Its redundancy lies in leading the researcher to always find what s/he is looking for, regardless of the analytical utility of the models they are using. For instance, when the researcher uses a political opportunity structure (POS) model based on the belief that such political opportunities are determinants for moments of collective action, then s/he locates POS everywhere, defining almost all aspects of creative movement practice as meeting or reacting to a political opportunity (Clark 2002). While political process is clearly an important element, even from the perspectives of activists, its over-use as an *a priori* analytical framework certainly predisposes the movement to be interpreted in this way, rather than according to what activists find important. As a result, while POS has been very useful in certain instances—taking state action and fissures into account, for example—it often leads analysts to ignore the creative work movements themselves do to create opportunities and other forms of political effect.

Notably, as Goodwin and Jasper show, this use of largely inflexible models and explanatory variables has also pervaded work on culture in social movements. In their 2004 edited volume, *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning and Emotion*, Goodwin and Jasper argue for the need for greater attention to the affective, emotive and historically specific aspects of movements as central to a form of research that does not force movements to fit into “invariant models.” Their volume advances the work of researchers like Benford and Snow, whose writing on “framing” not only brought the meaning-making work of social movements center-stage, but also acknowledged—using insights from cultural studies—that this meaning-making intervenes directly in the political field by participating in the “politics of signification” (Benford and Snow 2000:613). However, Goodwin and Jasper also argue (and we agree) that the concept of “frames” ultimately treats culture reductively. This is because the use of framing is almost always premised on the assumption that the key goal of any social movement is mobilization. Within this understanding, frames are merely instrumental tactics by which to achieve this prefigured goal (Goodwin and Jasper 2004). And while mobilization is indeed an important objective for many movement actors, it is

by no means the only one; furthermore, what it means “to mobilize” is always culturally and historically specific, exceeding the parameters of “framing” approaches. In sum, the literature on framing tends to treat culture as yet another variable to be added to the model according to which movements are studied. Building both on a critique of latent structuralism and on the work of European New Social Movement theorists, Goodwin and Jasper call for a recognition that cultures, identities, beliefs, and ideologies are not simply important insofar as they aid mobilization. Rather, they are in and of themselves critical subjects for understanding the nature, effects and goals of social movements.

The tendency towards rigid modeling that Goodwin and Jasper point to also suggests an imposition of the researcher’s categories of analysis *onto* the political actors they are studying without any actual exchange or dialogue with those actors (see Flacks 2004; Jordan 2005; Osterweil 2004). This omission of the visions and goals of movement actors, as they express them, falsely empowers the social scientist to judge the political efficacy of these movements according to his or her own model of what the political goals of a movement should be, and/or according to his/her own definition of the political. Such a conceptual imposition fails to acknowledge that movements are often challenging the very definitions of what in fact constitutes the social or political. In other words, the imposition of the researcher’s categories prevents the researcher from understanding movements according to their participants’ often diverse (even contradictory) analytic or descriptive terms, as well as obscuring the agencies, complex and changing identities, and cultural production of movement actors.

Responding to this dilemma, many researchers who emphasize the centrality of culture in social movement studies have argued for the importance of employing ethnographic research methods such as semi-structured interviews and forms of participant observation to allow actors to speak directly about their own cultural worlds, thus foregrounding the narratives, ideologies and stories rendered by activists themselves. For example, Francesca Polletta’s work on culture, emotion and narrative (2001, 2004) employs ethnographic methods and greatly contributes to our understanding of the place of culture in social movements. Polletta points out that a continuing yet unrecognized problem in the supposed debate between culturalists and structuralists is the false separation between culture and structure. This separation, she argues, causes several problems: It makes culture seem overly voluntaristic, as if it were some-

thing individuals choose to use, rather than are socially influenced to use. It also ignores the fact that structural causes or political opportunities are themselves culturally and historically specific, as well as discursively interpreted and constructed.<sup>3</sup> However, in addition to these crucial critiques, and perhaps more importantly for our purposes, Polletta also brings us closer to the notion of movements as knowledge producers when she suggests that as part of their cultural work, “movements invent new ideas and popularize conceptions” (Polletta 2004:104).

However, it is here, very much indebted to a renewed focus on human agency and culture, that our critique diverges from what we call the “culturalist turn.” For it is precisely in failing to move from “ideas” to “new knowledges,” or from a methodology that only allows an activist the possibility of answering certain questions posed by the researcher (rather than introducing their own questions or categories) that Polletta and others remain within a theoretical and methodological milieu we would like to move beyond. For it is a milieu in which categories like culture are viewed primarily as explanatory devices—tools for researchers who aim to explain and generalize social movement behavior. While explanation is not a bad thing in and of itself, it makes other readings and understandings less accessible. That is, rather than consider movements’ ideas and concepts as innovative and authoritative in their own right, these theorists maintain the distinction between that which movements do and the knowledge that comprises their own academic work and social life. Ideas, narratives, and ideologies generated by social movements are, in the end, located in a separate sphere from acts of knowing, or the “cognitive praxis” that defines the rest of social life (Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Varela 1999), despite their similarity to the knowledges produced by social movement researchers.

Although she emphasizes the culture, identities and meaning-making practices of the movements, Polletta ultimately forecloses the possibility for movements to speak for themselves, to posit their own vocabularies, cartographies and concepts of the world, and to articulate their own categories of analysis. As such, she and others miss or erase the fact that many of the meanings being enacted and articulated through collective action are also forms of knowledge. These knowledges are important not only because they manifest the values, visions, and theories movement actors are working from, but because such knowledges are generative of political theories and of certain “realities,” in which the realm of “the social” cannot be taken for granted by the analyst.

### ***Enacting New Modes of Engagement***

What would happen if rather than approaching culture, narratives, and ideas as interchangeable variables, or categories to be filled by the researcher of social movements, we were to recognize these “ideas” as knowledges? Moreover, what if we allowed that these knowledges have direct, political effects on the world? Such effects might range from attempts to interfere in technical or theoretical debates that effectively define “truth,” to effects that exist below the radar of what traditionally constitutes the political field by, for example, producing critical subjectivities or new ways of being?

By “knowledges” we mean experiences, stories, ideologies, and claims to various forms of expertise that define how social actors come to know and inhabit the world. Given this, the definition of knowledge from which we work is rather expansive. However the important point is that understanding that movements do produce knowledge—often as the very objective of their practice—has profound implications for social movement research. As generators of these forms of knowledge, social movements quite explicitly challenge the divide between subjects and objects of scientific explanation and compel researchers to rethink both the mode and the “what for?” of their research. This does not mean ignoring the importance of narratives, identity, culture and ideology, and the fact that they are often salient factors in explaining the why’s and how’s of collective action. Rather, it means recognizing that there is a need to augment and expand the kinds of questions asked by researchers of movements. This requires moving beyond the traditional social scientific schema of the explainers and the explained, to recognize that many of the conclusions and analyses resulting from the knowledge produced by social movements could be read alongside academic research on similar topics.

We seek a mode of engagement that does not stop with a consideration of the scientific veracity of certain methods, but questions the very logics and ethics that underpin our relationships to those we study. We suggest the need for a relational mode of engagement that shifts the focus and goals of our studies of collective political action: going beyond causal explanation, toward description, evocation, and translation (see Latour 2005; Strathern 1991; Tsing 2005). In so doing we identify our work as not simply “on,” but primarily *with* or *alongside* movements. As such, instead of aiming to fit case studies of social movements into existing frameworks or conceptual orders of how collective action is or ought to be deployed,

we aim to follow social movement actors themselves, listening, tracing, and mapping the work that they do to bring movements into being.<sup>4</sup> This shift does not deny some utility in explanatory concepts, but rather seeks to engage the explanatory concepts of the movement actors themselves, as well as concepts primarily drawn from academic scholarship. Following Romand Coles (2004), this method values “receptivity” and “listening” to the explanations and arguments posed by movements, which may, in turn, entail various forms of engagement with, or participation in, the movements’ own knowledge-practices, locating them in relation to more conventional, “expert” theories. Such a move not only avoids the pitfalls of inflexible and reductive modeling, it also enables us to recognize that a great deal of what social movements *do* is produce and act upon various *political* knowledges. Overall, this allows us to recognize that some (though certainly not all) movements are intensely involved in the epistemological work of analyzing, envisioning and elaborating new ways of knowing and being in the world.<sup>5</sup> These knowledges are, moreover, potentially as valid and significant as those generated by institutionally and culturally recognized experts, and are in fact often produced in dialogue and collaboration with them.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to introducing a new methodology and ethic,<sup>7</sup> understanding movements as knowledge producers also implies that a main analytical goal of studying social movements becomes the documentation of and engagement with *activist knowledges* that are in turn important and potentially useful for society at large. These activist knowledges are enacted through diverse forms of knowledge-practice. They include, on the one hand, analyses, concepts, theories, imaginaries—including the very categories of collective identification and political analysis according to which they act—and on the other, methodological devices and research tools. In addition, they also entail practices less obviously associated with knowledge, including the generation of subjectivities/identities, discourses, common-sense, and projects of autonomy and livelihood.

In the following section, we contend that two aspects of these diverse knowledge-practices are particularly significant. First, they are material and occupy a great deal of day-to-day movement activity; and second, they offer unique and important political perspectives. These perspectives are in turn critical not only for making sense of movements, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as political knowledge for society at large.

## **Recognizing Knowledge-Practice in Social Movements**

We begin the second part of our paper with the claim that a crucial part of the work that movements do in their diverse and dispersed networks of political action is to generate and act upon various critical understandings of the world. As we engage with these emergent theories of social change and cultural critique that movements develop and enact, we not only gain better knowledge about movements, but we also have access to socio-political theories and analyses that are uniquely insightful due to their conjunctural and situated nature. Following the work of many feminists, science studies, and other critical theorists, we recognize the distinct and embodied nature of situated—rather than detached or “universal”—knowledge (Haraway 1991, 1997; Latour 1988, 2005; Varela 1999). This claim can itself be located within a large history of debates on epistemology, hermeneutics and the sociology of knowledge, as well as recent social theory on the political importance of knowledge as it intersects with power. In addition to refining our understanding of the “what for?” of social movement research, then, we add the argument that this recognition provides access to insights about alternatives and processes of social change not easily available from other perspectives.

The discussion that follows begins with examples from each author’s ethnographic and activist work in order to illustrate three different instances of knowledge-practice. We then consider the concept of knowledge-practice and how it might contribute to ongoing debates about the material and situated nature of knowledge production as well as within a diverse and dispersed (yet growing) literature focused on the intersection of knowledge production with social movements and social change.

### ***Introducing Knowledge-Practice***

Each instance below seeks to reveal not only the centrality of knowledge production within specific movement practices, but also the diversity and historicity of the forms, uses, and effects of specific knowledge-practices. These include different meanings and uses of the term “knowledge” itself. For example, Powell’s vignette discusses how the Indigenous Environmental Justice (IEJ) movement in the U.S. engages, challenges and produces expertise and, therefore, participates in *claims to truth-making*, much like (and in dialogue with) scientists and policy-makers. In the second example, Casas-Cortés shows how the organizing work of Chicago’s Direct Action Network (DAN) can be understood as creating alternative subjectivities and new

forms of social relations as part of a process of developing new forms of democracy, producing *alternative micro-political and embodied knowledges*. Finally, Osterweil describes how Italian alter-globalization activists are developing *reflexive forms of theorizing* and analysis, ones that are conjunctural, experimental and partial, embracing an epistemology of unfixity.<sup>8</sup>

**INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT:  
ENGAGING EXPERTISE**

In the cool, early days of summer in 2004, I arrived in the Black Hills of South Dakota to pitch my tent with more than three hundred other activists, doctors, researchers, engineers, scientists, and tribal leaders for five days of workshops, panel discussions, debates, and educational sessions on the politics of environmentalism in Native North America. I was there as an ally, having worked with a particular vein of the Indigenous Environmental Justice (IEJ) movement in the U.S. since 1999 on projects targeting protection of sacred sites from industrial energy development. The agenda of this year's annual gathering was to collectively produce better knowledge and strategies for addressing climate change, globalization and free trade, renewable energy technologies such as wind and solar power, natural resource management, and the ongoing disproportionate siting of toxic and nuclear waste dumps on Indigenous territories. There was no media present and no official declaration being issued from the discussion groups, panels, prayers, and presentations that constituted this gathering. There were no confrontations with the state or spectacular demonstrations of direct action that would make this event conventionally recognizable as a site of resistance or even part of a "movement"; nor were there credentialed development "experts" with institutional backing debating the salient social and environmental issues. And yet, this was a site of rigorously re-imagining the futures of Native communities through engaging and producing a form of expertise tailored to the material and spiritual context of particular communities. The conference was a convergence site of critical subjects, enacting a particular style of social movement practice and knowledge production through a network of relationships, blurring boundaries between generations, tribal affiliations, ethnic identifications, and the frontiers between humans, animals, spirits, machines, nature, and culture.

Through daily presentations, meals shared at the picnic tables, and fire-side prayers and remembrances, the conference became a site of knowledge-practice. Under the large, open-air tents set against slopes of

Ponderosa pines and through the crackling speakers of the solar-powered audio system, the knowledge being mobilized and produced by these activists both drew upon and challenged dominant scientific expertise. Knowledge was expressed as socio-cultural critique and theory, as the ethics of making decisions with seven generations in mind, as traditional knowledge and oral histories, as principles of “precaution,” and as a translation of legal and scientific research; in all cases, these knowledges addressed the unequal, historically-produced fields of power in which these individuals and organizations must work. The contestation, mobilization, and production of knowledge is crucial to this particular movement, as evidenced in the construction of the annual conference itself as one of the central events of this transnational network of activists. Various panels addressed federal policies and environmental impact statements; the roles of tribes in relation to federal agencies; biotechnology and genetic engineering of foods; traditional knowledge and cultural preservation; funding and engineering tribal-based wind and solar energy projects; and connecting place-based grassroots activism on Indigenous lands to multi-issue, global movements. Legitimacy and expertise was not only relegated to those with institutional credentials, but was also demonstrated through the testimonies of elders and lifetime environmental and human rights advocates. While environmental policy specialists and biomedical doctors (who were both self-identified Native and non-Native) were also on site as important, recognized experts, their claims and analyses were tempered in this social context by the authority of stories, community-based research, and lived experience.

One of the central and most evident articulations of knowledge-practice was the concept of “Energy Justice,” a challenge to the history of subterranean resource extraction on Indigenous lands led by tribal-federal or tribal-utility contracts, and a call for alternative ethics and methods of resource management. Activists posed this concept as both an analytic and a prescription for action, historicizing and bringing a critical, situated edge to more abstract, often unmoored discourses such as “climate change” or “economic development.” Such global concepts thread into the IEJ network through various points of entry, but are translated by activists in relation to particular, geo-historical instances of environmental, economic, social, physical, and spiritual impact. In this sense, universal concepts such as climate change—one of the five key focus areas of the Indigenous Environmental Network conference and its ongoing campaigns—must be worked out to



engage the embodied struggles, specific histories of colonization and resource extraction, and meanings of nature in certain Native communities. “Energy justice” is presently attempting to do that translation work.<sup>9</sup>

Thus “energy justice” as articulated by movement activists (LaDuke 1999, 2005)<sup>10</sup> presents a political analysis of the chain of energy production and policy in several ways. As a concept, it also posits an alternative knowledge of the impacts of resource extraction on particular Native communities. At the same time, it influences scientific investigation on the viability of renewable energy technologies, such as wind and solar power, on Native territories. Finally, it lays claim to the highly contentious field of knowledge surrounding energy policies, technologies, and economic “development” projects for tribes and First Nations. “Energy Justice” advocates (Native and non-Native) presented empirical research on uranium extraction on Navajo lands for plutonium production by U.S. military and nuclear industries. They also shared knowledge of coal extraction and refineries in places such as the Fort Berthold reservation in South Dakota and Ponca land in Oklahoma—communities that are soot-soaked and asthma-ridden from decades of pollution. They discussed the two current federal proposals for storage of high-level nuclear waste, one on Skull Valley Goshute land in southern Utah and the other on Western Shoshone land at Yucca Mountain, Nevada. Outlining the controversies surrounding the Yucca Mountain site in particular, activists articulated their critiques of federal and tribal energy development with scientific discourses of geography, geology and physics, as well as with a cosmology of ancestors, spirits and animate ecologies, which are as intrinsic and authoritative in their politics of nature as soil samples or other material data. In this way, “energy justice” emerges from a commingling of epistemological practices: “Western” and “natural” science and technology, economics, Native epistemologies and the lived experiences of members in these impacted communities.

Scientific knowledge is thus not rejected outright, but is mobilized and intertwined with traditional knowledge and technological knowledge for the purpose of making a case for alternative approaches to energy production and, more broadly, for analyzing the present conditions of economic and health disparities among Native communities. “Energy justice” can thus be seen not only as a prescriptive concept, but also as a claim seeking to transform conventional thought about the historical production and consumption of electrical and nuclear power in the United States. Enacted through legislative and juridical means, direct action events, scientific

research, community organizing, and a series of pamphlets and publications, the concept claims that historically, the impacts and benefits of energy production have been disproportionately distributed.<sup>11</sup> Knowledge-practice is thus, in this sense, a theoretical event with pragmatic intentions. The process of this hybridization of knowledge poses a challenge to the hegemonic discourses of science and federal policy (embodied, for movement actors, in institutions of power such as the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Department of Energy), which have reflected a desire for progress and modernization via development, at the deadly and irreversible cost of lands and lives in Native communities.

### **CHICAGO DIRECT ACTION NETWORK: A LABORATORY FOR THE MICRO-POLITICS OF DEMOCRACY**

Every Tuesday at 7:00 p.m. members of the Direct Action Network (DAN) converged at the cooperative bookstore on North Fullerton Avenue in Chicago. Sitting in a circle, thirty people of different ages, genders, ethnicities, national origins, professions and political backgrounds, discussed the points on the weekly agenda. Careful respect towards a series of norms, roles and processes guided the discussion to ensure the distribution of participation. At 11:00 p.m., the weekly meeting ended followed by laughs and chatter in the bar next door.

The Direct Action Network was born when global resistance protests hit North America. It was one of the main organizers of the shutdown of the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle in 1999, developing complex strategic maneuvers that fascinated many, including the conservative think tank the RAND corporation. DAN did not constitute itself as a non-profit, union, or party, though members of all three (and beyond) participated in DAN activities. It functioned as an autonomous network of groups and individuals that would coordinate direct action protests against local and international targets, attempting to integrate a critique of global capitalism in all of its work. For a time, it functioned as one the most public faces of global justice movements in North America. From 1999 until 2002, the Chicago branch of this national network repeatedly shared analyses of, and strategies for, the pre- and post-September 11th context. I had the opportunity to join the group during the last two years of its existence, while working at a Chicago-based NGO.

While DAN's spectacular moments of direct action attracted media agents, state forces of "order," other activists and some academics, those

instances were just the most visible aspects of what DAN was. What I would like to recall here as an example of knowledge-practice is the “process” on which our activities as a group were based. Such activities included meetings, street-art preparations, road-trips, actions, and moments of jail-solidarity. The group’s praxis followed what is called “consensus process,” a mode of decision-making and collective discussion defined in the following terms, according to an anonymous pamphlet that circulated at the meetings:

Consensus process is a way of working together in groups so that everyone participates fully in truly democratic decision-making. We seek to resolve conflicts creatively and to work together in a way that empowers all of us together and does not allow anyone to dominate or be dominated. [...] Groups which operate by consensus respect the opinion of every member and agree not to take any action which is strongly opposed by anyone in the group. This requires that we cooperate and overcome our competitiveness so that the group can proceed together. Consensus encourages us to value everyone’s ideas and abilities, not just those of dominant individuals.

Meetings were one of the most important sites for engaging the rules of consensus-process in the Chicago DAN. By following specific prescriptions, these weekly gatherings acted much like experiments in a lab working on generating co-operative and non-authoritarian relationships as the basis of a rethought understanding of democracy. Some of these basic rules were: becoming a good listener; not interrupting people who are speaking; getting and giving support; not speaking on every subject; not putting others down; being explicit and calling attention to oppressive behaviors based on gender/class/race/national origin; and finally the very fact of setting aside time to deal with process. The latter was called a “point of process” and could interrupt the discussion at any point during its course in order to address any question related to procedures. Also, at the moment in which a group decision needed to be made, different steps were taken: clarification, discussion, synthesis and proposal. The engagement of the proposal tried to avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority vote, averages, or coin-tossing, embracing the creative production born from disagreements and diverse participation. There were techniques to express differences and avoid the imposition of a false homogenous face onto the

group. This was done through hand signals that could mean agreement, non-support, standing-aside, withdrawing or blocking the proposal being set forth. We were all so excited and serious about process! It often mattered as much as the very topic we were discussing. Here, the long tradition of consensus-decision-making practiced by movements at different times in U.S. history, ranging from anti-nuclear activists or the Quaker Friends' meetings, was actualized in our weekly meetings. Most of us were learning the procedures for the first time, although a few of the participants had used consensus-based discussions in other settings.

All the great analyses and actions organized during that time shared an important component: the way in which each was organized. While perhaps this is not so obviously a form of "knowledge," it definitely implies a re-learning of how to act and think about democracy. Even though we were familiar with representative democratic procedures, these rules were substantially distinct. Engaging them was challenging, since normally, in many social settings, one is not supported to think and live in ways geared towards equal participation, anti-authoritarianism, radical diversity, non-supremacist behavior, and ultimately, democratic collective action. What mainstream schools teach us to write together or even "think collectively?" Is not the "miracle" of individual genius normally rewarded? These standardized ways of thinking and acting convey a certain sense of the self and relating to others attuned to hyper-empowered individuals—without sensitivity towards oppressive dynamics—in search of maximizing self-advancement. These deeply anti-democratic forms of subject-making and social relationships are consistently inspired in the socio-political and economic reality that we were trying to fight against. Yet, these very same notions have been culturally bombarded and disciplinarily inscribed on most of us to a great extent. They have been normalized as the way of inhabiting the world to the point that even those who most consciously want to reverse the prevailing practices were themselves caught up in the same form of individualized thinking and acting. We realized how "democracy," as we understood it, needed to (re)learn a solid set of micro-political practices in order to live up to its promise, yet it was precisely these sorts of everyday practices that seemed to be ignored to a large degree both in policy and political science (Alvarez In Press). The network was very conscious of this challenge, so one of our main goals was to overcome hegemonic ways of relating to each other through a strong emphasis on process. Process-based direct actions, as well as the meetings, were used to democratize a hierar-

chical and supremacist system, transforming its foundations for self-reproduction: subjects themselves and their relationships. As such, this emphasis on the micro-political, producing new ways of being in the world, constitute knowledge-practices in two ways: 1) they came from a distinct analysis of capitalism as itself embodied, relational and micropolitical, and 2) they stemmed from the belief that contemporary subjects learn how to behave and be in the world through embodied micropolitical practices.

This constant performing of the “process” became a way to make a laboratory out of our collective organizing and personal behaviors. By experimenting with different practices during our activities, we would further refine and perfect our knowledge of how to organize and relate to each other in non-egocentric and non-hierarchical ways. Through constant trial and error, we would become aware of the multiple and subtle ways that “abstract” systems of oppression (such as racism, linguistic privilege, classism, ageism) could become manifest in our own group, interrupting the democratic practice we wanted our organizing to prefigure. The notion of pre-figurative politics becomes very important here: the Chicago DAN was putting special emphasis on decision-making as a site to enact democratic principles of horizontality, cooperation, diversity and self-organization. The procedures involved and the relations that are rendered during this process of decision-making become an instantiation of the world we were fighting for.<sup>12</sup> The knowledge-practice that was being developed in DAN was thus an embodied rethinking of democracy that brought the level of micro-politics to light. In this way this knowledge-practice enriched the democratic imagination and contributed more generally to political theory on democracy.

This brief recollection of the now-defunct Chicago DAN tries to show how by engaging in this mode of operating, called consensus process, a practical and embodied knowledge about fighting oppression and promoting democratic principles was generated. This knowledge-practice allowed us to develop a grounded notion of democracy, based on concrete daily relationships, beyond the conventional representational one.<sup>13</sup> By experimenting with micro-political practices, focusing on issues of privilege and different social hierarchies, our laboratory generated a political knowledge on democracy that so far has not been written about in books, but is tattooed onto our very selves. Since participating in DAN, my partner and I developed a special awareness towards micro-political dynamics in our own lives. We now pay careful attention to possible hid-

den privileges and participatory possibilities not only in organizing meetings, but also in other social settings, ranging from workplaces and academic activities,<sup>14</sup> to more domestic issues such as child-raising!

The knowledge-practices exhibited by DAN, but also pertinent to a certain extent in the case of the Indigenous Environmental Justice movement, highlights how knowledge must be understood not simply as the abstract or de-contextualized knowledge often dominating policy, science, and academia. Rather, knowledge-practices are also about the ways of knowing how each of us is disciplined and socialized via multiple institutions and apparatuses (including the family, school, state, church, economies, etc.) of our societies. Moreover, not only is the emphasis on process a way of creating new ways of knowing how to be in the world, it is also based on an analysis of modern capitalist democracies as themselves relying on the micro-political inscription of individualism and consumption. As explored further in the final example below, many movements are deeply involved in producing analyses and insights not only about how best to achieve social change, but also about how the current dominant system is perpetuated and reproduced.

**ITALY'S MOVIMENTO: "WALKING WHILE QUESTIONING"—  
TO KNOW AND TO KNOW TO ASK**

On July 22, 2002, over 150,000 people from throughout Italy came to Genoa to commemorate the death of Carlo Giuliani, a young protestor who had been killed by police in the massive actions against the G8 the year before. The commemorative march allowed many Italians to revisit the site where the anti-G8 protests had marked both a violent and memorable moment for both the national and transnational Alternative Globalization Movement just one year earlier, but it had no obvious political goals. In fact the turnout far exceeded anyone's expectations or mobilizing work. The day after the march, "movement" participants from all over Italy—from different national organizations and several political parties, as well as many unaffiliated individuals and smaller collectives—met in a theater near Genoa's train station for an open discussion about the future of this somewhat enigmatic entity they had been calling "*il movimento dei movimenti*" (the movement of movements).

I was in Italy doing preliminary dissertation research on this vibrant yet extremely heterogeneous "movement." As an activist and politically-minded individual myself, I had chosen to study the Italian movement

because it had gained an international reputation for having one of the largest, most active and most ideologically diverse (in terms of political ideologies) array of participants in the global justice movement. I thought understanding it could give me clues about movement prospects elsewhere. At that time I did not imagine that much of my research would involve making sense of the ways that understanding and questioning the movement were so central to the material life of the movement itself.

That day, exhausted from a late night of music and intense analyses of the day's events at various bars, I sat in the crowded auditorium listening to more than 90 people take turns speaking. I remember being particularly impressed by the words of a well-known Napoletani activist who emphatically stated: "*Non ci capiamo questo movimento.*" (We don't understand this movement.) "How had 150,000 people arrived when both the organizers and the press expected and predicted only 10–30,000? And when there was no direct political target?" He concluded by challenging the audience to participate in the critical work of trying to make sense of this movement, one that obviously did not work according to the logics they were accustomed to. Almost immediately I was struck by both the content of the question, and the fact that it was posed, there, to an audience of thousands. Was he seriously asking the audience to begin to research the movement? Or did the question mean something else? What I soon came to find out was that the answer was yes to both.

Throughout five years of research on and with the Italian "movement of movements," I have continuously watched and listened to activists (and intellectuals) pose questions about its nature and meaning, as well as about the political and social context in which they were trying to move. These interrogative and reflective practices take place in myriad sites, in various forms: in large assemblies like the one described above; in the smaller meetings comprising the day-to-day life of most activist groups; in countless articles in journals and books; at bars; and, almost daily, on the myriad online list-serves and websites that constitute major sites of movement activity.

Producing knowledge and comprehension, then, is clearly important to contemporary Italian movements. However, in addition to the traditional role of "intellectual work" present in most movements (Gramsci 1971)—i.e. consciousness-raising, analyzing and theorizing the necessary steps forward—in the case of the activists I was engaged with, these acts of questioning and reflection seemed to be something more. At times in fact

the very acts of asking questions and being reflexive seemed to be important in and of themselves.

For example, building on a particularly Italian tradition of “*conricerca*” (research-with) and worker “*inchiestas*” (surveys), which were historically used on the factory floor to come to a mutual understanding about the working conditions, activists and collectives have recently worked to update these research tools in order to try to make sense of the more dif-fused struggle in the less delimited space of contemporary cities.<sup>15</sup> While this research is clearly intended to gain knowledge, activists also see the very fact of raising questions as both a politicizing moment, and as a central part of their activism. As was posted to a list-serve of political science students at the University of Bologna in 2003,

So many questions, no given certainty: we need new lenses with which to read reality, new forms of collective action to transform it. Ambitiously we speak of “*conricerca*” to point to a process of production of know-how [*conoscenza*] and other knowledges [*saperi*], of experimentation in new forms of social and political cooperation, of the construction of languages and communication, ...of opening spaces of self-formation and counter-formation. ...Insofar as they are non-conclusive, open and transformative, *conricerca* is really an open-source, non-patentable and constitutively contrary to any form of copyright! (*Coscienzapolitica* website post, December 12, 2003)

So, the point is not simply to do research in order to find answers or produce blueprints that everyone should follow. Rather, the ability to research and the fact of researching, the recognition that there are no clear or universal answers, have become the basis for political and ethical action.

In fact, in various interviews and essays since 2001, many activists point to a fundamental shift in the political culture and approach that characterized extra-parliamentary action in Italy. A move away from a culture and tradition of universal and formulaic political paradigms with strict notions about the necessary role of the vanguard, the revolutionary class, the seizure of power, etc., to a more humble approach, in which they recognize themselves “not as the vanguard, but one part.” They themselves state that this shift is in part epistemological,<sup>16</sup> and they attribute it, in large part, to the influence of the Zapatistas,<sup>17</sup> especially to one of their most cited slogan—“*caminar preguntando*”—to walk while questioning.



The concept of “*caminar preguntando*” was itself a product of cultural “clashes” between urban guerrillas and indigenous communities in Mexico’s Southeast as the urban guerrillas tried to bring their Marxist visions of social change to one of the poorest regions in the country. Rather than convince Indigenous people that the guerrillas (who were more educated, white, etc.) held the recipe for revolution and an end to poverty, the dissidents learned that the Indigenous communities had their own systems of knowledge and worldviews that were intelligent and good in their own right. Beyond this, both parties learned that working with (rather than in spite of) difference could actually be quite productive, though it required letting go of some of the certainty or authority which each thought they had in terms of “knowing” the truth or the right way forward.

This resonated greatly in Italy, where ideological clashes and factionalism were common (Revelli 2004). Whereas in the past, organizations might have proceeded thinking they already “knew” what should happen—so that if others didn’t follow it was a matter of false consciousness or apathy—today there are meant to be less pretensions to such certainty (various interviews, Bologna, 2002).<sup>18</sup> The entire process of organizing the massive protests against the G8 through the Genoa Social Forum—involving more “radical” groups from social centers to more mainstream NGOs and Catholic associations—was one of the first examples and experiences of such an insight in action. Moreover, there is a widely held belief that effective political work requires ongoing practices of investigation, experimentation, and imagination. This investigation and experimentation comes in many forms. For example, in 2003, social centers in Milan and Bologna organized direct actions in the form of self-reducing supermarket prices. Arriving at various supermarkets in large groups, they would hand out cards with prayers to “San Precario” (the Saint of Precarity), using humor and theatrics to invite other shoppers to join them. Of course, the activists certainly did not believe they would reduce prices permanently by convincing the shoppers or managers of their point. Instead, the event was an experiment—to see if this kind of performance had positive effects—either inspiring others to do the same thing in the near future, spreading the critique of high costs, and more importantly the inability of many Italians to afford them due to increasingly low salaries; or contributing to opening up a space of critique, where the hegemony of neoliberalism and the cultural system that accompanied it could be destabilized, in turn allowing space for even the

possibility of constructing a different kind of system.<sup>19</sup> The open-ended, experimental and playful nature of these politics stands in contrast to the rigid ideological dogmatism of past leftist paradigms—the party line no one could cross, often defended by both parties and extra-parliamentary groups with violence or other severe consequences (interviews, Bologna, 2007)—as well as the more “militant” or aggressive forms of struggle, such as throwing Molotov cocktails. While older versions of left politics persist and certainly also produce and use knowledge, they tend to have little room for either dealing with inconsistencies between their theory and the reality on the ground, or for experimentally and playfully working to see what might catch people’s energies and imaginations. Today’s “new politics” are almost completely the opposite, so that even more traditional activist practices like protests and direct actions become part of an extended experimental moment in which activists experiment with, and then analyze and theorize about the effects—symbolic, cultural or otherwise—their actions (may) have within the broader socio-political sphere.

As such, contemporary activist networks in Italy build on learnt lessons from the past, replacing dogmatic and formulaic political approaches with more open-ended and flexible ones. In this way, these movements are not only actively and critically working to understand their circumstances and possibilities; they are also, and like many academics, participating in theorizing different forms and ways of knowing. Unlike, but sometimes building upon, academic theories of situated and partial knowledges (Haraway 1991), activist knowledges add their ability to more immediately “test” a theory’s veracity or resonance on the ground, revising it if need be. In this way their open-endedness and unfixedness is more tangible than much academic work.

\* \* \*

These three accounts briefly describe how movements engage in diverse knowledge-practices that include traditional ethics as well as technical knowledge about alternative approaches to energy development and natural resource management; embodied knowledge about creating real democracy; and participation in theoretical and analytical debates on the current political conjuncture. Each highlights the production and development of concepts, theories and analyses as well as new political and life practices, including the production of subjectivities and critical capaci-

ties, that, at their best, might enable alternative social and political forms of organization, institutions or even societies to emerge. Furthermore, each instance involves a nearly constant engagement with and creation of situated theorizing about contemporary power conditions as well as about the political effectiveness of diverse movement strategies.

Notably, these knowledge-practices range from things we are more classically trained to define as knowledge, such as research practices and critiques that engage, augment, and sometimes challenge the knowledge of scientists or policy experts, to micro-political and cultural interventions that have more to do with “know-how” or the “cognitive praxis that informs all social activity” and which vie with the most basic social institutions that teach us how to be in the world (see Varela 1999; Eyerman and Jamison 1991:49). While these knowledge-practices are certainly part of the cultural and ideological production of movements, when they are recognized as knowledge-practices they become much more than that. Not only an important part of daily movement practice that a researcher studies for empirical precision, knowledge-practices offer understandings and information of potential relevance to the life of the researcher her/himself. In other words, the importance of recognizing these activities and events as knowledge-practices finds its full expression in the analytical and epistemological shift that is then required in analyzing and interpreting the data.

Thinking back to the “culturalist turn” upon which we build, we can note the shift. For example, there is a marked, yet subtle difference between the analytical conclusion that movements produce different *ideas* or *narratives* about democracy (Polletta 2002), to a conclusion that recognizes these as theoretical and practical creations and/or applications of a theory or knowledge of democracy. That is to say, in modern societies ideas are simply not given as much weight or authority as “knowledge” or “theory.” Theories of democracy can more easily offer themselves as interlocutors with political theories produced in the academy, by politicians, etc., and thus become much more clearly applicable and engaged with the world of the sociologist or political scientist herself. Thus investigations of social movements and their knowledges yield different kinds of knowledges—of, with and for the social movement.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the fact that the knowledges produced in these various instances are embedded in and embodied through lived, place-based experiences, means that they offer *different*

kinds of answers than more abstract knowledge: knowledges that are situated and embodied, rather than supposedly neutral and distanced. For example, in the first case above, the fact that knowledge about resource management and energy production is produced by the very people whose lives are affected by extractive technologies means that considerations of newer, sustainable technologies must account for place-based experiences of toxic contamination and the particular possibilities for social and environmental change. Similarly, in the DAN example, the fact that these new theories and forms of democracy are being processually created by people who are responding both to positive experiences of why these forms of democracy are more effective, as well as negative experiences of previous political modalities, is not inconsequential. It suggests that this democratic theory is of a situated and reflexive nature, and the same activists who develop the theories can continue to revise them based on how they “work” in practice. It suggests that there is a more direct and accountable authority. Finally, and also closely related, in Italy’s *movimiento no global*, the conjunctural, self-reflexive and un-fixed *forms* of analyses and theory developed by movement activists are largely reactions to universalizing and generalizing political theories of the past—mostly of a Marxist bent—that had little ability to take place-based or circumstantial specificities into account. As a result, they not only failed to achieve radical social change, but often, even if unwittingly, produced exclusions and marginalizations that exacerbated political problems because of their lack of accountability and reflexivity.

As such, the place-based nature of movement knowledges offers a counterpoint to conventional academic and scientific modes of knowledge production. The latter tend to be predicated on an authority that often lies precisely in being unattached, removed from “place,” in order to gain the necessary status of generalizability; whereas the knowledges produced by movements are enriched by their spatial and temporal proximity and accountability to the places which they affect, and from which they come. That is, the examples above show how their place-based nature—a closer connection to the sites where theories are lived and produced—makes them qualitatively different, in terms of both their abilities to take “place-based” specificities into account, as well as their more obvious and deliberate connection to “places” of accountability and revisability. (For more on “place-based politics,” see Harcourt and Escobar 2005; Massey 1994; Prazniak and Dirlik 2001.)

As Janet Conway notes, “the knowledges and agencies needed to change the world do not yet exist in fully developed and easily identifiable forms, but in the micro-processes of [certain] social movements...they are being incubated” (2004:239). This can be expanded to suggest that while it is true that overall we lack good answers or even appropriate questions to many of the most urgent political problems of our day, movements are some of the most promising places to look for salient questions and potential answers. There are no guarantees, of course, nor is this a romantic view of political movements. It is, however, a call to recognize that the norms of institutional expertise have obscured other knowledges in other locations. We feel it is no coincidence that some of the most explicit claims about the importance of situated knowledge production in processes of social struggle are being put forward by movements themselves. For example, in the introduction to a volume about different contemporary activist/militant research initiatives produced and published by social movement networks, the centrality of knowledge in social struggle is emphasized:

In those processes of struggle and self-organization that have been the most vivid and dynamic, there has been an incentive to produce their own knowledges, languages and images, through procedures of articulation between theory and praxis, departing from a concrete reality, proceeding from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract. The goal is that of creating an appropriate and operative theoretical horizon, very close to the surface of the “lived,” where the simplicity and concreteness of elements from which it has emerged, achieve meaning and potential (Malo 2004:13).<sup>20</sup>

### ***Knowledge-Practice as Material, Situated, Political Praxis***

While knowledge production has always been part of processes of struggle, for the most part, the field of social movement studies has largely neglected it as an area worthy of description and exploration in its own right. Furthermore, movements themselves have oftentimes posited an opposition between “theory” or “intellectual work” over and against “practice” or “real-world” work. This scholarly neglect, combined with some activists’ shirking of “theory,” has resulted in a gap in our understanding of the theoretical practice of movements themselves.

There is, however, a broad, interdisciplinary set of literature addressing knowledge production, particularly its intersections with materiality, situatedness, knowledge and power. With the concept of knowledge-practice we hope to start making visible the commonalities and resonances among these various literatures, as well as advance a deeper understanding of the effects of this epistemological shift—both for our methodologies and our political analyses. Bringing diverse works into a common orbit, then, our argument is two-fold. First, movements generate knowledge and that *knowledge is material*—that is, concrete and embodied in practice. As such, it is *situated*. Second, knowledge-practices are politically crucial, both because of the inextricable relationship between *knowledge and power* and because of the uniquely situated locations of these practices. We elaborate these claims by drawing together a diverse set of literatures that engage the material and situated nature of knowledge production.

As material movement activity, knowledge-practices are an essential and mundane part of the day-to-day work that constitutes a movement. That is, knowledge-practice is enacted by various people, institutions, and organizations in particular times and places. Consider the Black Hills Indigenous environmental conference, the weekly meetings in the independent bookstore in Chicago, and the heated post-event discussions in Italy. In this sense, knowledge-practices can be identified and studied by focusing on the production of texts, images and media, as well as strategies, tactics and other events like protests, marches, meetings and direct actions, more classically understood to be movement activities. Like processes of collective-identity formation, knowledges are meaningful and emerge only in and through practice in the day-to-day life of a movement. Following the social-practice theory tradition, movements can be considered as creating their own forms of social practice, even habitus, and constituting their own figured worlds (Bourdieu 1977; Crossley 2002; Holland et al. 1998).

Analogous to practice theory, certain authors working within the heterogeneous field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) have focused on the construction of claims to truth and expertise, emphasizing the centrality of practice and multiple actors in the making of knowledge. STS scholars have studied assemblages of human and non-human actors that act, collectively, to produce scientific and technological knowledge and distinctly networked worlds. STS has thus dismantled some of the unquestioned legitimacy and black-boxing of knowledge production, and

brought to light the intricate work, trials and errors of scientific genius and artifacts (Latour 1988; Callon 1986; Law 1999, 2006). Notably, STS often uses ethnographic approaches to reveal the material, particular, historical contingencies that play a part in making things appear to bear truth or authority. In this sense, these studies make visible the heterogeneous networks of knowledge-production and practices, including processes of enrollment, translation and coordination among distinct actors involved in making scientific theories into facts, that hold and endure (see Callon 1986; Latour 1986; Law 1999; Raffles 2002; Star and Griesemer 1989). A few STS authors have begun to turn their gaze toward the work of social movements (see Hess 1995, 2005, 2007; Redfield 2005; Woodhouse et al. 2002),<sup>21</sup> though it is unclear that this turn is having reciprocal effects within the mainstream of social movement studies. We are not suggesting STS offers all of the necessary correctives, but rather that applying the methodological insights about the material and situated nature of the production of scientific knowledge is helpful in both seeing and explaining the knowledge-practices of movements.<sup>22</sup>

Insofar as knowledge-practices are forged in fields of power, to claim social movements as knowledge-makers has political significance. Movements' theoretical practice is generated in relation to epistemic and ontological regimes they are striving to transform. In this sense, the importance of knowledge-practices rests on the one hand on the unique sites of enunciation—their situatedness—and on the other, in their engagement with dominant (even repressive) regimes of truth (Foucault 1980) or hegemones (Gramsci 1971). Whether through direct and explicit contestation of “expert” discourses, or through proliferating a variety of alternative ways of knowing and being, including alternative economic, social and cultural models, the production of knowledges by movements intervenes in important operations of power. As such, practices such as fighting for an alternative concept and practice of development, engaging in a distinct notion and enactment of democracy, and articulating different questions and analyses of political contexts, should not only all be understood as knowledge-practices but the knowledge thus produced must be understood as intervening in a complex, contentious, political field.

The importance of knowledge then lies not only in the fact that it is a series of concrete, material practices, but also in the fact that it is located in relationship to dominant as well as alternative paradigms of thinking and being. As Eyerman and Jamison write:

Society is constructed by recurrent acts of knowing. Knowledge that is not only or primarily the systematized, formalized knowledge of the academic world, nor (merely) the scientific knowledge produced by sanctioned professionals. It is rather the broader cognitive praxis that informs all social activity (Eyerman and Jamison 1991:49).

The centrality of knowledge to contemporary definitions of power was perhaps made most famously in the work of Michel Foucault and his conceptual pairing of “power/knowledge” (1980, 2003). According to Foucault, much of reality is maintained through the creation of discursive formations, and the relative power of certain regimes of truth. These regimes of truth are made real through discourse—very often scientific or expert discourses—to produce “truth-effects.” These truth-effects in turn define and shape what we see, experience and think; what it is possible to say and do, *as well as* what is outside the realm of comprehensibility.<sup>23</sup> In effect, our knowledge of the world, as well as how we understand “truth” and “reality” both enables and constrains our actions in the world.

In fact, in addition to STS briefly described above, a number of literatures have addressed this political nature and significance of knowledge: in what follows we briefly review three traditions that are particularly useful for the argument we are making. These include feminism, Participatory Action Research and Modernity/Coloniality, as well as an emergent yet disparate set of literatures on social movements at the margins of the field.

First, by pointing to how knowledge-practices are located in relation to power as well as resistance, we follow feminist arguments (which also often build upon Foucault) that knowledge is always *situated*. Feminist theorists working at the intersection of science, technology and epistemology have made this argument to challenge conventional, gendered understandings of what constitutes “theory” and “expertise.” This lens of “socially lived theorizing” (MacKinnon 2001) has long questioned hegemonies of authority that lay claim to universal truths (Haraway 1991; Harding 1988; Lutz 1995; Smith 2004). Their intention was at once to point out the non-neutral or situated character of both science and expertise, and also to argue for the possibility of different standards of “knowledge,” “theory,” and “objectivity.” They argue for the epistemic relevance and validity of knowledges coming from “marked” locations (women, people of color, people of the Global South, etc.) and point out that all knowledge is in a sense “marked,” in that it is located historically, geographically, and produced



through the work of specific, “local” individuals. This shift is to move away from the “God tricks” performed by a large amount of theorizing, which portends to emanate from nowhere, and everywhere at once, and to move toward an appreciation of all knowledges, perhaps especially scientific knowledges, as a “located and heterogenous practice...[as a] fragile, human achievement” (Haraway 1997:137–138).

The “marked” location inhabited by social movements engaged in issues of social and environmental justice is, in conventional terms, a location of exclusion and subalterity. These exclusions vary from the most obvious material deprivations, to less glaring cultural and epistemic exclusions, where one’s way of being, values and lifeworld are denied by the dominant culture or political system. The initiatives of Participatory Action Research (PAR), born out of decolonization movements of the 1960s and 70s, as well as Freirian Pedagogy, point precisely to how marginal and exploited communities produce emancipatory knowledge through their processes of collective struggle. The uniqueness of knowledge produced by subaltern groups organized for social transformation resided in its potential to offer “better” analysis and responses to situations of exploitation and exclusion because those situations were the *lived* experiences of those producing the knowledge. If scientific knowledge aspires to develop generalizeable theoretical and methodological models (some of which is indeed often relied upon by movement actors), “peoples’ knowledge” is based on grounded experience that can differently enhance particular processes of social emancipation (see Fals-Borda 1985; Fals Borda and Rahman 1991). While the contributions made by PAR are important precursors to our argument linking knowledge and social movements, we distance ourselves from some clear shortcomings: the ontological separation between scientific knowledge and people’s knowledge without interrogating the validity or social-situatedness of science itself; and second, the tendency towards essentializing or romanticizing the knowledge of certain groups as necessarily and naturally “better” than all others.

This attentiveness to subaltern locations in the production of knowledge is further elaborated by the more recent and perhaps less known Modernity/Coloniality approach developed by an interdisciplinary group of scholars, primarily in and from Latin America. This approach is working to critique and move beyond Eurocentric or “universal” knowledge by developing theoretical frameworks based on a situated critique of colonialism. For them, this requires understanding the unique knowledges

that particular experiences of and geographically-specific encounters with coloniality concede. With their notion of “sites of enunciation,” they argue that the place from which one speaks is both historically and geopolitically significant. Moreover, they argue that there are certain locations that are worth considering as “epistemically different,” especially in relation to certain issues, such as colonization of the Americas. Whereas PAR’s notion of subaltern, exploited or marginalized people was defined mainly in terms of class, the Modernity/Coloniality focus is on the position marked by the experience of “coloniality.” Many social movements emerge from such positions of difference, working both outside of and under power structures to provide alternatives to hegemonic forms. Such proposed alternatives are often different ways of knowing. In this way, movements generate what this perspective terms “subaltern knowledges,” or “worlds and knowledges otherwise” (Escobar 2002; Mignolo 2000; Mignolo and Nouzeilles 2003).

Finally, a few authors and activists working on the edge of the field of social movement studies have also begun to link social movements to knowledge practices more explicitly. These studies have largely focused on the way social movements produce knowledge and information to compete with “expert knowledges” of their opponents, such as the state, the World Bank, and other institutions (Conway 2004; Paley 2001; Powell 2006). A few shorter pieces have discussed the production of evaluative or strategic knowledges (Gruesso 2005; Wainwright 1994), as well as the political importance of knowledge in the production of critical subjects (Casas-Cortés 2005; Conway 2004; Giroux 1997; Horton and Freire 1990). Notably, a few scholar-activists publishing largely on the internet have begun advancing arguments about the theoretical contributions of social movements (Barker and Cox 2001). Arturo Escobar has developed a series of articles where he explores how different movements are engaging in the production of distinct environmental knowledges that become the basis for struggles against globalization and for autonomy (Escobar 1998). The cognitive approach to social movements advanced by Jamison and Eyerman (1991), which is also based on a critique of the dominant field of social movement research, calls on similar social-theoretical frameworks (including science studies) and comes quite close to our argument, yet without recognizing the extent of knowledge-practices by social movements. Chesters and Welsh’s work on complexity in social movements, and the centrality of communicative and sense-making practices, also sees knowledge at the forefront of what movements do (2006). All of

these build in some sense upon the groundbreaking work of Alberto Melucci, whose recognition of movements as “prophets of the present” that work at multiple levels of action to challenge the very cultural codes underpinning contemporary complex systems of power (1989, 1996), is important both methodologically and conceptually, as a precursor to the notions and epistemologies necessary for recognizing the focus on “knowledge-practice” that we employ. Finally, experiments in collaborative research such as the Center for Integrating Research and Action and the Social Movements Working Group at the University of North Carolina (processes of which this paper is a part), are presently striving to highlight and advance knowledge production between scholars and activists.<sup>24</sup> Building upon these interdisciplinary projects, we maintain that the supposed dichotomy among academic knowledge production and movement knowledge production is breaking down and being productively rearranged. There appears to be a significant trend towards recognizing the importance of the use and production of various knowledges by social movements in multiple literatures and, even more forcefully, by movements themselves (Borio et al. 2002; Horton and Freire 1990; LaDuke 1999, 2005; Malo 2004).

### **Conclusion: Towards Social Movement Research on Knowledge-Practice**

In spite of the breadth and resonance of the literatures briefly reviewed above, there is yet to be a common recognition leading to a coherent theoretical framework of knowledge-practices. Such a framework would understand knowledge-practice as an important part of the crucial collective work movements do. Likewise, it might transform our own theories and methods as researchers, refocusing our work on the processes of “fieldwork” and ethnographic practice, rather than only its “findings” and textual products. Along with feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham, we want to join a number of social scientists who are trying to “think about practicing research *alongside* rather than *on* a group or organization, collaborating with what [Callon] calls ‘researchers in the wild,’ not by becoming an activist, but by maintaining a specificity of one’s activities as a social scientist and making connections with other knowledge producers” (Gibson-Graham 2006:xvii).

We have, in this paper, attempted to sketch the blueprints for such a framework to come together. This article has tried to map out a trajecto-

ry that builds upon the important “turn to culture” in social movement studies, but then draws out the largely unexamined category of “knowledge,” linking it to relevant literatures on knowledge and social struggle, and finally, calling upon social movement researchers to transform their mode of engaging movements through a recognition of relational and even, sometimes, horizontality in knowledge production. It is a modest beginning to what we hope will be more fruitful discussions and more effective actions centered around seeing, nurturing and exploring the vitality of knowledge-practices in struggles to transform various worlds.

In sum, when movements are understood as knowledge-practitioners, and not simply as campaigners, or subjects to be understood by social movement researchers, their importance is rearticulated, challenging our habits of practice and modes of engagement as researchers. Even beyond the specific cases we have described above, we can understand many movement-related activities as knowledge-practices, which not only critically engage and redraw the map of what comprises the political, but also produce practices and subjects according to different logics. As such, knowledge-practices are part of the investigative and creative work necessary for (re)making politics, both from the micro-political inscribed on our bodies and lived in the everyday, to broader institutional and systemic change. It is in this sense that movements can be understood in and of themselves as spaces for the production of situated knowledges of the political.

Despite these multiple and rich expressions of knowledge-practice, many social movements’ visibility in public and academic debates is still confined to media-grabbing mobilizations, concrete and measurable victories, or moments when bodily repression is suffered and sustained. The methodological and theoretical shift in social movement studies that we propose makes visible different goals and effects of knowledge production. Instead of detached, academic knowledge about movements that operate “out there,” we argue for the value of seeing the continuous generation, circulation and networked nature of heterogeneous knowledges, which in themselves work to make different futures possible—futures that do not exist in a narrow or campaign-specific space that closes once a certain demand has been met or a mobilization realized. In fact, rather than engage solely or primarily with the macro-political, knowledge-practices seem to work as much on the level of the micro-political, a level of experimentation, memory, analysis and intentional and ongoing critique, rather than the produc-

tion of new and final solutions (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; see also D'Ignazio 2004). We, too, offer not a new and final solution, but what we hope is an opening for greater recognition, valorization and engagement with the conceptual praxis of movements themselves.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Finding the article in which Santos uses this term explicitly more than a year after we began writing this essay was quite an experience! Far from mere coincidence, we felt that the resonance was an exciting indication of an emerging common-sense among those who are working to engage and make sense of contemporary social movements.

<sup>2</sup>See Stanley Aronowitz's foreword to Touraine's *Return of the Actor* (Touraine 1988).

<sup>3</sup>This false division, we would suggest, becomes especially evident from an anthropological perspective where one is attuned to the cultural specificity of political practices, and the full gamut of human institutions

<sup>4</sup>Here we use the terms "mapping" and "following" against notions of tracing, per Deleuze and Guattari (1987:12–15).

<sup>5</sup>We are aware that our claims apply primarily to social movements that align with our own political sensibilities and sympathies. Because the three of us have solid backgrounds in the work of progressive movements, our approach to movements is already intertwined with our own personal and intellectual affiliations. We do not approach movements as objects "out there" for empirical study, so much as we approach them as extensions of our own knowledge-practice, as scholar-activists. Naturally, this affects and positions us as sympathetic critics and allies of movements we work alongside, and we recognize our distance from movements on the so-called "right" (to use the conventional categorization). While we acknowledge that many forms of "conservative" collective action, such as religious fundamentalism and anti-abortion movements, also exist, in this paper we write from our experiences, as well as from the tradition of research regarding progressive movements. Extending our argument to consider conservative movements requires further research by individuals uniquely positioned for ethnographic inquiry into such movements.

<sup>6</sup>Behind our argument is also the belief that movement actors are not necessarily easily distinguished from academics and others, and that because movement-practice involves knowledge production they often work together. We do not mean to imply that there is an inherent clash between academics and activists but only that often activists are not recognized as respectable knowledge producers.

<sup>7</sup>The authors of this paper are currently working on another project that delves more thoroughly into this new mode of engagement, based on experimentations and experiences from each of our own research and collaborative work.

<sup>8</sup>The isolation of one "type" of knowledge-practice per case is in no way meant to suggest that there are, for example, no embodied, subject formation, or micro-political knowledge-practices in the Italian or Native American cases, or no truth-making practices in the DAN case. While we could point to a multiplicity of knowledge-practices in each example, we have chosen—for the purposes of clarity and explication—to focus on one type in each case.

<sup>9</sup>For more on a notion of "engaged universals" and the processes of translation in global environmental politics, see Tsing (2005).

<sup>10</sup>This concept has been developed and written about extensively by activist Winona LaDuke, director of the organizations Honor the Earth and the White Earth Land Recovery Project, in collaboration with activists Robert Gough and Pat Spears of the Intertribal Council on Utility Policy. This concept is also used by Tom Goldtooth and others at the Indigenous Environmental Network and circulates among grassroots, Native environmental groups who are taking up this critical analysis in their local projects. See [www.honorearth.org](http://www.honorearth.org) and [www.ienearth.org](http://www.ienearth.org).

<sup>11</sup>For a more extensive, historical discussion of energy development on Native American lands, see LaDuke (2005) and Smith and Frehner, eds. (n.d.).

<sup>12</sup>On the notion of “prefigurative politics” see Sitrin (2004) and Graeber (2002). Both authors are simultaneously academics and active participants in direct action movements. Both emphasize how movements are providing alternatives on the ground without waiting for a hypothetical future.

<sup>13</sup>In a similar kind of argument, Francesca Polletta (2002) shows how some social movements practice participatory democracy—not just representative democracy—using bottom-up decision-making as a powerful tool for political change. We wanted to push this argument further, by showing how these democratic practices expand beyond meetings to be carried on in everyday life, providing a new understanding of democracy as such, based on a relearned mode of relationality between individuals.

<sup>14</sup>This influence affected even the very working group from which we are writing this paper: the Social Movement Working Group at the University of North Carolina. Many of its participants, including the three of us, have directly engaged and/or were very interested in experiences based on consensus decision-making; and attempted to bring those lessons to the *modus operandi* of the working group.

<sup>15</sup>See Borio et al. (2002), as well as Conti et al. (2007) for definitions of *conricerca* and *inchiesta*.

<sup>16</sup>See Revelli (2004); but also various interviews, 2002.

<sup>17</sup>The Zapatista Uprising in 1994 is seen by many Italians, as well as many others in the alter-globalization movement, as signifying both the birth of the global movement, and of a new political paradigm, one with new tools, insights and concepts. For more see Holloway et al. (1998).

<sup>18</sup>In practice this is much harder than in theory, and Italian groups struggle to maintain an openness to “other” points of view.

<sup>19</sup>One of the main tenets used by neoliberalism is TINA: there is no alternative. As such, part of what activists do is try to stir people’s imaginations, pointing out what they see as the absurd and non-necessary nature of the current system.

<sup>20</sup>This is but one of a growing list of movement texts working at the nexus of activism and research, or theory and practice. English translation by Casas-Cortés, forthcoming in *Cultural Studies*. For more see Shukaitis et al. (2007).

<sup>21</sup>STS approaches vary a great deal, and some in fact reproduce the subject/object divide we criticize above. We are not engaging the field of STS in its entirety, but rather pointing to how some authors lend us important insights, specifically about the material nature of knowledge.

<sup>22</sup>One of the shortcomings of some strains of STS is a confusion around questions of difference and power. That is why we look to feminist versions and other literatures that emphasize the situatedness of knowledge (Haraway 1991), addressing the hierarchies, privileges and other questions of difference pertinent to the politics of knowledge production.

<sup>23</sup>For example, with his famous example of sexuality, Foucault demonstrates that sexuality is not a natural entity that is repressed by modern human societies, but rather

that sexuality is itself produced through various discourses, including that of repression generated through the very discourses of repression among others.

<sup>24</sup>For additional examples, see the Activist Anthropology program at the University of Texas at Austin, and the *Programa de la Academia-Activismo a CIESAS-Sureste*, Chiapas, Mexico.

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