

**A Social Movements Working Group Paper**

**Blurring the Boundaries:  
Knowledge Practice(s) in Contemporary Social Movements**

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## Blurring the Boundaries: Knowledge Practice(s) in Contemporary Social Movements

### Introduction

Social movements are arising in unexpected spaces and places, producing effects not normally associated with our commonplace 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 means such as protest and cultural contestation, they are also working *vis a vis* bodies, technologies, and landscapes, generating diverse political knowledges. From heated email, list-serve, and journal debates over the nature and meaning of Italy's *movimento no global*; to careful, real-time hours of direct action strategizing in Chicago's cooperative bookstores in which new subjectivities are created; to campground conferences engaging in the scientific debates affecting Native American communities, contemporary movements are important sites for knowledge creation. We argue that contemporary movements can be understood as actors and spaces in which various forms of knowledge – including concepts and theories, political analyses and situated, critical understandings of particular cultural worlds – become central parts of political action. Furthermore, the knowledges – what we herein refer to as *knowledge-practices* – being made and used in various ways are a crucial component of movements' creative and daily (even mundane) practice. This recognition on the one hand requires that we shift the methodological and epistemological basis of research on social movements, and on the other, pushes us towards an expanded notion of what the goals and effects of movements are, as well as what counts as the political.

Our political and epistemological impetus for this project finds roots in the contention that a great deal of even the most critical academic work on social movements has hidden assumptions that prevent many in the social sciences from seeing or making sense of various knowledge-practices and their political 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 – effects that include not only immediate objectives but the very constitution of different kinds of subjectivities, the generation of expertise as well as the vision and definition of

what comprises “the political.” Our illustration of these points is laid out in two main sections in this paper.. The first section attempts to explain the methodological and theoretical obstacles in current social movement research and argues for a different mode of engaging with social movements, one that studies social movements on their own terms, and consequently “sees” knowledge-practices. The second section describes three ethnographic instances of knowledge-practices at work in the three contemporary movements mentioned above.

### **I. Background: Moving Beyond Positivism and Structural Bias**

By now it has become a common recognition that the contemporary field of Social Movement Studies (SMS) – a veritable subdiscipline comprised mainly of sociologists and political scientists – has been snared in its own positivist and structuralist paradigms (Jaspers and Goodwin 2004). As a result, these dominant approaches to social movement research have conventionally treated movements as empirical “objects” of study to be subjected to the investigative inquiries of social *scientific* research. Heavily influenced by positivist and empiricist definitions of what constitutes something as properly scientific (a la Merton), as well as by political culture in the U.S. that largely understands the political as limited to the politico-institutional sphere, these dominant approaches (especially in North America) have treated social movements as objects whose emergence, growth and decline must be objectively explained and analyzed by researchers. As such, their focus has been almost exclusively on the “causal mechanisms” of movements, rather than on political effects or meaning-making. In other words, the emphasis has been almost exclusively on developing frameworks that deal with the “hows” of social movements – how they emerge, develop, grow, decline – and very little on the “why’s.”<sup>1</sup>

This strong emphasis on causality is itself deeply ingrained in the epistemological frameworks and methods that tend to underpin the majority of social movement research – even, we will argue, the work of those who are critical of the prominence of structural and positivist approaches. Dominant approaches to movements, relying on the

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<sup>1</sup> Notably many other disciplines study social movements and related subjects. However, the social movement studies field has established itself through decades of prolific work, institutionalization and strategic locations vis a vis funding and journal-production as *the* legitimate and authoritative voice on social movements, and social change (Conway 2006). These frameworks range from resource mobilization (RM) to political opportunity models. (For examples of this work see Tarrow, McAdam and Tilly 2001; Tarrow 1998; McCarthy, McAdam and Zald 1996; McAdam 1982, for a more thorough review and critique see Goodwin & Jasper, Jordan 2005, Osterweil, 2003).

explanatory devices of causal mechanisms and structural paradigms, lead to two major problems with which we are particularly concerned. First, they unquestioningly accept the modernist distinction between researcher and “object” of study. Second, and as a result, they are inherently tautological, because the commitment to *apriori* categories and models – causal mechanisms, or particular structural categories like “political opportunity,” or “resources” – leads the researcher to always find what s/he is looking for (see Jordan, Flacks, Goodwin and Jaspers, Osterweil 2004). For instance, when the researcher thinks in terms of political opportunity structure (POS) models as necessary for moments of collective action, then s/he locates POS models everywhere, defining almost anything as a political opportunity; the model, in effect, becomes naturalized and serves little analytical function. Furthermore, this modeling represents an imposition of the researcher’s categories of analysis onto the political actors themselves without any input from or real exchange with those actors. This in effect results in a denial of the agencies, complex identities, and the very knowledges of movements and their participants.

As such, the imposition of the researcher’s categories, and a strict subject/object divide also prevents the researcher from understanding movements according to their own analytic or descriptive terms. By foreclosing 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,<sup>2</sup> these conventional approaches miss or erase the knowledges and meanings that are being enacted and articulated through collective action. Such knowledges are important not only because they manifest the meanings activists and others are actually working from, but because they are generative of political theories, and of certain “realities,” in which the realm of the social is not prefigured or taken for granted by the analyst.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, this blind spot to the practices and visions of movements as expressed by movement actors themselves, 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 ultimately, according

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<sup>2</sup> One could say, paraphrasing Latour, we want to let the actors pose their own vocabularies, and define the terms of their own descriptions (see Latour 2005).

<sup>3</sup> In this we are very much influenced by Latour and others’ descriptive methodologies and particular approaches to, and conceptual repertoires for, Actor Network Theory. (See, in particular, Callon 1986; Latour 1993, 1997, 1999, 2005; Mol 2002; Raffles 2002; Tsing 2005).

to his/her own definition of the political, rather than acknowledging that the movements might be challenging that very definition of the social or political itself.

Significant strides have been made in the Social Movement Studies tradition in an attempt to counter the positivism and structural bias of previous authors. For instance, pivotal arguments about the importance of bringing greater attention to culture (Poletta 2004, 2001), identity (Melucci, 1989, 1996), history (Clark, 2XXX), ideology (Larana et.al 1994), narratives (Davis et. al 2002) and framing (Benford and Snow, 2000, 1992, 1988), as means for countering the structural and macro-political bias of the dominant approach. Notably, many of these same authors call for researchers to pay more attention to what were previously considered “irrational” aspects of movements, such as emotion, affect, and culture – those elements that comprise the day-to-day life of a social movement. They also have made significant moves to employ more ethnographic methods in their research and to emphasize the narratives and stories movement activists tell (see especially Davis, 2002; Jaspers et.al. 2001).

For instance, Goodwin and Jasper’s 2004 edited volume, *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning and Emotion* has decisively popularized the call to move beyond the structural and politico-institutional biases in a large part of social movement research toward greater attention to the affective, emotive and historically specific aspects of movements. Their volume carries forward the work of researchers like Benford and Snow (1988, 1992, 2000) 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 participates in the “politics of signification” (Ibid, 2000, 613). That is, they treat meaning making as a direct intervention in the political field. The concept of framing is also significant because it not only recognizes the work necessary to translate structural opportunities into successful modes of mobilization, but because it allows for cultural and historical specificities to be taken into account when considering why certain frames resonate and others do not. However, their argument is almost always premised on the assumption that the key goal of any social movement is mobilization. For as they themselves write, “Collective action frames are action-oriented sets of beliefs that *inspire or legitimate* these activities and the campaigns of a social movement organization “ (2000: 614, italics added). This problem seeps beyond

framing to much of the writing on culture and its corollary terms in social movement studies. As such, overall in their edited volume, Jaspers and Goodwin convincingly show the flaws in the dominant, structuralist paradigms by arguing for the importance of culture, affect and meaning. However, ultimately in their approach, concepts like culture, meaning and affect, are important insofar as they *explain* mobilization – the presumed goal of a movement – but these concepts and their enactments are not seen as productive practices in their own right.

Francesca Poletta's work on culture, emotion and narrative (2001, 2004), and specifically her call to recognize the fact that the structural is always already cultural (2004a), is another critical move upon which our work builds. In the same volume mentioned above, Poletta rightfully points out that a continuing yet unrecognized problem in this supposed debate is the false separation between culture and structure (which in turn makes culture seem overly voluntaristic). This separation, she argues, does not allow us to recognize that structural, or political opportunities are themselves both culturally and historically specific, and discursively interpreted and constructed. She even goes so far as to insinuate the productive, generative work of movements, arguing that "movements invent new ideas and popularize conceptions" (Poletta 2004, 104), drawing her closer to theorists like Eyerman and Jamison who argue that social movements must be distinguished from other forms of political action "precisely in the creation, articulation, formulation of new thoughts and ideas – new knowledge" (Eyerman and Jamison, 55). We commend this turn toward the generative, emergent qualities of movements, and away from dominant definitions that have traditionally positioned movements solely as, contentious groups of social actors working in a static pre-given political field.

However, we would argue that it is precisely in failing to move from "ideas" to "new knowledges," that Poletta remains within the theoretical and methodological paradigm in which categories like culture are viewed as external lenses, useful to researchers who aim to explain what social movements do. That is, rather than treat these ideas and concepts as innovative and authoritative in their own right, Poletta is concerned with how these ideas impact upon an already formed social and political field, which is itself highly influenced by a state-centric and modernist notion of the political. She does not see these ideas and their creation as having political effects below the radar of what traditionally constitutes the political field, (i.e. on the subjectivities of the activists), nor as forms of knowledge attempting to interfere in technical or

theoretical debates. Ideas, for her, are ultimately forms of framing and mobilizing, and thus separate from acts of knowing, or the “cognitive praxis” that defines the rest of social life (Varela, Eyerman and Jamison).

In sum, while Social Movement Studies as a field has undergone many important changes in response to critiques of its positivism and political reductionism, and while it can hardly be said to represent a wholly coherent theoretical approach, we argue that there remain – even among those who critique the overemphasis on structural causes – major epistemological and methodological obstacles to understanding the “why’s” of studying social movements in the first place. Along with Conway, we believe that “the problem of knowledge for social movements is not simply or primarily one of appropriating or disseminating received knowledges, but one of producing the knowledges and identities that are constitutive of emancipatory agency – building their collective capacity to enter into contemporary political struggle in which contestations over knowledge are central” (2004, 58). In a sense, the very shift from concepts such as “frames”, “narratives” and “ideologies,” to “knowledge” allows us to see the work social movements do as similar to the work of many other social actors. In other words, if we move beyond terms like framing which essentially see movement language and imaginaries as instrumental rather than creative or generative, we recognize that movements are engaged in the epistemological work of analyzing, envisioning and elaborating new ways of knowing/being in the world. These are what we call knowledge-practices.

## **B. Beyond Frames, Ideology and Narratives**

Despite their critiques of the structuralist paradigm, even the work of Jaspers, Poletta, and others continues to work within the same epistemological and political framework set by the dominant theorists in Social Movement Studies. This paradigm includes a lingering focus on causal mechanisms – albeit of a different order or scale – and liberal definitions of what constitutes the political. In other words, despite the important moves toward culture, history, and affect, the terms of the conversation or debate themselves have not been challenged. It is still a debate framed around *how* movements work, while we would like to focus on *why* movements matter.

For us this means recognizing that the cultural aspects of social movements are not simply instrumental or additional factors to take into consideration in order to understand

the causes and courses of movements, but that these elements are productive in and of themselves. In other words, we want to argue that movements are not simply instrumentally reassembling or “framing” their claims in order to secure political opportunities, but are in fact sites of creative practices re-imagining the political itself. This then is essentially a call to treat movements as knowledge-producers in their own right, rather than as conduits of “narratives”, “ideologies” and “frames” in a pre-given social and political field. Our argument clearly builds on, but is ultimately critical of the work of social movement researchers that have argued for the centrality of culture<sup>4</sup>.

Furthermore, while the methodological implications of framing and narrative approaches continue to posit the logic of a strict subject/object divide, we argue for an ethnographic mode of engagement which reverses conventional social scientific approaches to studying political action. A mode of engagement we refer to as immanent, and that engages specifically with the intellectual and practical production of movements themselves. Instead of fitting case studies of social movements into pre-existing frameworks or conceptual orders of how collective action is or ought to be organized and deployed we aim to follow social movement actors themselves – tracing and mapping the work that they do to bring movements into being.<sup>5</sup> Work that involves the theories, analyses and concepts social movements generate as part of their material and everyday practice. This includes first and foremost *listening*<sup>6</sup> to their own explanations and arguments, locating these in tandem with related mainstream theories, as well as engaging with their knowledge-practices, from everyday life projects<sup>7</sup> to large-scale manifestations.

We want to call for a mode of engagement that does not stop with a consideration of methods, but questions the very logics that underpin our relationships to those we “study,” allowing what was previously perceived (by analysts) as “framing” and

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<sup>4</sup> Rather one of the main sources of inspirations for our claim is the introduction of post-structuralist notions of culture into the analysis of social movements brought by Alvarez, Escobar and Dagnino (1998).

<sup>5</sup> Here we use the terms mapping and following AGAINST notions of tracing, per Deleuze and Guattari. (1987 pp 12-15.)

<sup>6</sup> On the methodology of listening as a research tool both respective to and used by social movements see *The Six Declaration* of the EZLN at [www.lasexta.org](http://www.lasexta.org). Also see, Romand Coles, "IAF Social Movements and the Political Arts of Listening, Traveling, and Tabling", *Political Theory*, October 2004

<sup>7</sup> We borrow the notion of “life project” from Mario Blaser to illuminate the everyday realm of the often unexpectedly political.

“narrating” claims for political opportunities to give way to a less predictive logic.<sup>8</sup> This reversal allows us to recognize that a great deal of what social movements *do* is to produce and act upon various political knowledges, political knowledges that are as valid as the ones generated by those recognized as experts. A call for a rigorous re-conception of the relationship and location of the researcher *vis a vis* social movements is therefore fundamental to our argument. It is only by clearing the ground for this methodological and epistemological shift, that we can understand and begin to see social movements as producing knowledge through diverse practices, what we call “knowledge-practice(s)”.

Others in a large and growing literature on the study of social movements beyond ‘SMS proper’ have begun to highlight the centrality of knowledge to the work of social movements (Conway 2004, 2006; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Escobar 1998, 2002, 2004, Chesters and Welsh 2005, 2006 ; SMWG at UNC-CH). We see this emergent recognition as a sea change in the relationship of researchers to movements (especially when the researcher herself is already actively engaged with the movement, as is the case with Conway, ourselves, and others). It is within the emergence of this disperse yet interrelated work on social movements as linked to processes of knowledge production and struggle that we situate our claim. This literature, despite its different disciplinary specificities, shares a common problematic centered around knowledge production and social movements. Without entering into philosophical debates about the nature of knowledge,<sup>9</sup> this emergent work emphasizes how movements generate concepts, terminologies, analyses, theories, know-how, subjectivities/identities, discourses, common sense, projects of livelihood, technologies/devices of autonomy, etc. As a result, a main analytical goal of studying social movements becomes the documentation and engagement with *activist knowledges*, premised on a recognition of activist ideas as knowledge in their own right .

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<sup>8</sup> In fact we see this as a methodological shift that is nearly mandatory, given our understanding of the complexity of movements and our relationships to them, as well as our interest in political meaning and effects, rather than causality.

<sup>9</sup> However a good starting definition comes from Eyerman and Jamison, who write:

Knowledge for us is a fundamental category, providing the basis or the working materials for what Berger and Luckmann termed the social construction of reality. Society is constructed by ‘re-cognition,’ by recurrent acts of knowing that go on all the time. Knowledge in this perspective 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.” (49)

Janet Conway's ethnographic study of the Metro Network for Social Justice in Toronto, in which she was an activist for many years, emphasized the necessity of this approach for SMS:

"Despite what felt like endless rounds of struggle and defeat through the 1990s, I was struck by what activists *knew* in and through their activism. Through our activist attempts to further our knowledge about the world we sought to change and in the course of my own subsequent studies, I began to think that knowledges — rich, distinct and important to emancipatory politics — were being produced through activist practices. Furthermore, I realized that activist practice was essential and largely unvalued source for any scholarship claiming to be progressive" (2006: ix)

Together with authors like Conway, it is our contention that without taking into account activist-produced knowledges not only are we failing to fully understand processes of collective action, but, and perhaps even more importantly, we are missing key analytical and theoretical insights about current world transformations and possible interventions. Insights are actually rather unique due to the fact that their enunciations occur at the very sites of struggle and practical transformative action. We would suggest that with the current proliferation of this argument — one shared by movements themselves — it becomes possible to speak about a "knowledge turn," where movements are seen as generators of concepts, analyses, theories and inquiries (Casas-Cortés 2005)<sup>10</sup>.

Notably, though we situate our argument within this emergent and heterodox literature on social movements, it is not only in academic literature that this argument is being made. Some of the most explicit and forceful claims about the importance of knowledge production in processes of social struggle are being put forward by movements themselves. For example, in the introduction to a volume of 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

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<sup>10</sup> One of us is working on the phenomenon of *activist research* as a concrete manifestation of these modes of more formal inquiries conducted by social movements around the world. Trying to argue for a necessary "knowledge or epistemic turn" in social movements, several genealogies which point to the concept of *activist knowledges* have been identified: feminist epistemology, Latin-American De-colonial theory, Participatory Action Research and Freirean pedagogy, Science and Technology Studies, and post-structuralist notions of knowledge/power (Casas-Cortés 2005).

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>11</sup>

## II. Enacting and Defining Knowledge-Practice

It is this intersection between methodological and political critiques of dominant approaches and the proliferation of knowledge practices, pointed out and claimed by social movements themselves, that our argument engages. And so we begin from the recognition that a crucial part of the work that movements are doing in the various and diverse networks of political action in which they move is to generate and act upon various critical understandings of the world. By taking movements as generators of knowledge – including the very categories of collective-identification and political analysis according to which they act – we are better able to apprehend the emergent and alternative theories of social change and cultural critique that they are developing and enacting. Knowledge-practices, as the instances below will demonstrate, include participating in and contributing to specific scientific debates; becoming key sites of socialization and subjectification through embodying and enacting democratic processes; as well as creating, debating and theorizing the potentials and limitations of the movement and the political moment.

In what follows, based on our respective ethnographic research projects, we will show the centrality of various instances and forms of "knowledge-practice" to contemporary social movements. Each instance below shows the diversity and historicity of form, use, and effect of specific knowledge-practices. These include different meanings and uses of the term

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<sup>11</sup> This activist researcher continues on the theme of knowledge production in the following way: A peculiar proliferation of experiments with -and search among- the realms of thought, action and enunciation is found within social networks that seek to transform the current state of things (...). They are initiatives that explore: 1) how to break with ideological filters and inherited frameworks; 2) how to produce knowledge that emerges directly from the concrete analyses of the territories of life and cooperation, and experiences of uneasiness and rebellion; 3) how to make this knowledge work for social transformation; 4) how to make knowledges, that already circulate through movements' networks, operative; 5) how to empower those knowledges and articulate them with practices....and finally, 6) how to appropriate our intellectual and mental capacities from the dynamics of labor, production of profit, and/or governmentality and how to ally them with collective (subversive, transformative) action, guiding them towards creative interventions" (Malo 2004: 15).

“knowledge” itself, such as: 1) engaging debates on particular issues often limited to “experts” – therefore participating in claims to truth-making; 2) experimenting with new forms of democracy and in the process, creating alternative notions and forms of social relations; 3) elaborating conjunctural and experimental political theories that are actually tested in practice. Ultimately the importance of these knowledge-practices rest in the ways they challenge traditional terrain and definition of the political.

### **Native American Environmental Justice Movement: Translating Expertise**

*In the cool days of early June 2004, I arrived in the rural, Black Hills of South Dakota to pitch my tent with over three hundred other native and non-native activists for five days of workshops, panel discussions, debates, and educational sessions on the politics and science of environmentalism in Native North America. I was there as an ally, having worked with a particular vein of the Native American Environmental Justice (NAEJ) movement since 1999. The agenda of this year’s annual, outdoor conference of the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) was to produce better understandings and strategies for approaching climate change, globalization and free trade, renewable energy development, water and mineral resources, youth leadership, and other natural-cultural issues related to the ongoing movement for environmental justice in reservation-based communities. There was no media present and no official statement being issued. There were no confrontations with the state or visible demonstrations of resistance or direct action, although the appearance of a low-flying glider plane above the camp and conference site sparked speculation and rumors that this was nothing other than FBI surveillance. This was, however, a convergence site of critical subjects, enacting a particular style of social movement practice and knowledge production through a network of relationships, which crosses boundaries between generations, tribal affiliations, ethnic identifications, and the frontiers between humans, animals, spirits, machines, science and society.*

*At the conference were many veterans of the American Indian Movement of the 1960’s, as well as younger generations of grassroots activists, who together since the late 1980’s have reshaped an historical movement for recognition and sovereignty into an emergent movement for healthier lands, bodies, and communities. Most of the present organizing is in response to the ill effects of subterranean resource extraction and proposed nuclear waste storage on reservation lands. Local controversies were discussed through various workshops addressing, among other issues: understanding federal policies and environmental impact statements; the roles of tribes in relation to federal agencies; biotechnology and genetic engineering of foods; funding and engineering tribal-based wind and solar energy projects; and connecting local grassroots activism to transnational Indigenous movements and the growing global justice movement for fair trade and corporate accountability. Under the large, open-air tents set against slopes of ponderosa pines and through the crackling speakers of the portable audio system, the knowledge being mobilized and produced by these activists both called upon and challenged scientific expertise.*

*In the temporary landscape of nylon tents, RVs, pick-up trucks, teepees, and folding chairs, the conference was a momentary site in which the knowledge practices and geographically dispersed activists involved in this particular environmental justice movement could assemble. Through collaboration among activists working in grassroots organizing, engineering, environmental science, intertribal project building, medicine and community health in their respective reservation communities, panel discussions centered around the key concerns of the movement mentioned above. This collective sense of resistance and critical analysis stabilized the relationships of individuals and non-profit organizations to one another, making the movement – in this lived moment – more “real”.<sup>12</sup> The technical and ethical know-how<sup>13</sup> that comes from various embodied, activist experiences – from Gwi’ichn struggles in Alaska to Ponca struggles in Oklahoma – was translated by each participant through stories of place-based movements against mining corporations, coal-fired power plants, timber extraction, and nuclear waste disposal. Wind power advocates detailed the expertise involved in building tribal support, raising funds from the Department of Energy and donors, researching a turbine site, and contracting with private sector energy specialists such as Native Energy and Solar Energy International in order to bring wind and solar technology to rural reservations for an alternative project of “homeland security.” Thus, the notion of energy entered the debates of science and technology, environmental politics and conservation, capitalist consumption, the politics of development, and U.S. foreign policy.*

*In addition, critical discourses of “neo-colonialism” and “environmental justice” circulated among activists as we engaged one another publicly on panel discussions about local struggles as well as international summits and actions, and privately in small huddles around weak coffee and warm fry bread. At the IEN gathering, activists presented the concept of “Energy Justice” as an articulation of knowledge pertaining to the history of subterranean resource extraction on Native lands, and as a call for new ethics and methods of resource management. As such, this analytic is a prescription for action, historicizing and bringing a critical, situated edge to more abstract, universal discourses such as “climate change” or “economic development.” These global concepts thread into the NAEJ network through various points of entry, but are reworked by activists in relation to specific, concrete instances of environmental, economic, social, physical, and spiritual impact. In this sense, universal concepts such as climate change – one of the five key foci of the IEN conference – must somehow engage the embodied struggles and meanings of nature of particular communities. “Energy Justice” is presently doing that translation work.<sup>14</sup>*

*Thus “Energy Justice,” as articulated by activists,<sup>15</sup> presents a political analysis, challenges scientific expertise and signifies the production of new political meanings and cultural critique. Forged by a strong alliance between the nonprofit groups Honor the Earth and the Intertribal Council on Utility Policy, this concept lays claim to the highly contentious field*

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<sup>12</sup> As Bruno Latour has noted, “that which resists, is real” (Latour 1988).

<sup>13</sup> See Francisco Varela 1992.

<sup>14</sup> For more on a notion of “engaged universals” and the processes of translation in global environmental politics, see Anna Tsing 2005.

<sup>15</sup> This concept has been developed and written about largely by activist Winona LaDuke, Director of the organizations Honor the Earth and the White Earth Land Recovery Project, in collaboration with activists at 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).

*of knowledge surrounding energy policies, technologies, and tribal development projects. Energy Justice advocates discussed the history of uranium extraction on Navajo lands for plutonium production by the military and nuclear industries; 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 the above-ground 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 and spirits who are as intrinsic and authoritative in their politics of nature as soil samples or other material data. Scientific knowledge is not rejected outright, but is mobilized and commingled with so-called Indigenous knowledge for the purpose of making a case for alternative approaches to tribal energy development. The process of this hybridization of knowledge poses a challenge to the hegemonic discourses of science (embodied in institutions such as the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Department of Energy), which have reflected a will to progress and modernization via development, at the deadly and irreversible cost of lands and lives in Native communities.*

*I spoke with Bob Shimek, Associate Director of the Indigenous Environmental Network about why environmental justice and energy justice defined his organization's work and differentiated it from mainstream environmental movements in which the protection of a perceived "pure" nature was the essential moral imperative. He described the Indigenous environmental movement as being:*

*really about health and people dying ... people can't have an enjoyable life anymore. The work of the movement is never about the power plant itself, but about how all the EJ (environmental justice) issues come together and link up to affect people's lives. The heart disease, cancer and asthma in these communities is just not fair – especially the asthma up at Fort Berthold reservation, where they're surrounded by massive power plants.*

*As such, Energy Justice positions wind turbines and solar photovoltaic panels as counter-technologies to the destructive effects of science and technology. Yet at the same time, advocates are turning science to their advantage by promoting wind turbines and other renewable energy technologies particular as political techniques of engaging technoscience in the service of Native communities; such a turn challenges externally imposed forces of extraction with locally based projects of production. Through such discourse, wind turbines are, in the words of activist Winona LaDuke, "democratizing power" and reclaiming terrestrial and atmospheric space on behalf of communities. Opposing a science that has penetrated the earth with a knowing, authoritative gaze in search of subsurface answers to supply the country's insatiable energy consumption, Native activists are turning their gaze toward the skies, partnering with Native and non-Native engineers and Danish manufacturers to install commercial and residential scale wind turbines on the windiest reservations in the Great Plains and regain local control over the production and distribution of electrical power.*

*At stake in these contestations for authority in the field of science is the very question of sovereignty and of what kind of futures are being imagined. These debates are material and*

*holistic; on the one hand, they engage issues of environmental resource management, tribal development, and questions of sustainable technologies, and on the other hand, they engage questions of modernity, of what gets counted as truth or knowledge and “who will count as producers of that knowledge.”<sup>16</sup> Indigenous activists in the U.S. are challenging scientific expertise in ways that cannot be easily bracketed as “organic,” Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK), emanating from a realm of pure Nature (or the Natural History where Native peoples are often classified along with flora and fauna). Instead, the challenge becoming more and more audible from this movement directly engages and appropriates scientific knowledge, remaking its claims to universality in the context of local struggles and introducing alternative, situated, and subjugated knowledges by way of political claims such as “Energy Justice.” Also very relevant, is the fact that the enactment of knowledge at the IEN conference suggests “a sense of the political that has everything to do with life and death.”<sup>17</sup> As activists collaborate to produce and enlist others into the campaign for “Energy Justice,” they are constructing a future in which power production is locally controlled and “the good life” is the new measure of well-being in Native communities. In this way, activists call attention to the potential for science and technology as ethical practice. Not only are they challenging the separation and exclusivities of expertise accorded to these domains, but they are galvanizing and translating these domains through their own knowledge-practices in order to push for social change.*

### **Chicago Direct Action Network: A Laboratory of Collective Knowledges and Insurrectionary Subjects**

*Every Tuesday at 7:00 p.m. members of the Direct Action Network (DAN) converged at the cooperative-bookstore on 3459 North Fullerton Avenue in Chicago. Sitting in a circle, thirty people of different ages, genders, ethnicities, nationalities, professions, and political backgrounds, discussed the points on the weekly agenda. A careful respect towards a series of norms and roles, process, guided the discussion to ensure distribution of participation. At 11:00 p.m., the weekly meeting ended. Laughs and chatter in the bar in front of the bookstore.*

#### **WEEKLY AGENDA**

- 1) *State of the World*
- 2) *Report backs and evaluation of local struggles*
- 3) *Decision-making*
- 4) *Logistics*
- 5) *Announcements*

*From 1999 until 2002, this network -born when global resistance protests hit North America- repeatedly shared analyses of and strategies for the pre- and post-September 11<sup>th</sup> context. The quantity and quality of these reflections were inextricably linked to the political praxis of the group. This politics was based on consensus-group-process, a mode of decision-making and collective discussion defined in the following terms, according to one of the pamphlets that circulated in the meetings:*

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<sup>16</sup> Donna Haraway 1997: 249.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang 2005:306

“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” (A guide to consensus group process<sup>18</sup>)

*By focusing on the enacting of this process, this brief recollection of the now defunct Chicago DAN (in which I participated for two years) will try to capture the politics embedded in this way of operating, producing practical-knowledges that were not only written in books and pamphlets but tattooed onto our very selves.*

*Meetings were one of the most important sites for engaging the rules of process, as well as the few minutes of deliberation that would arise in the midst of a direct action when a decision needed to be made quickly in order to respond to the police, the media, or other unexpected factors. Chicago DAN meetings constituted spaces for experimenting with practices towards cooperative and non-authoritarian relationships following specific and basic rules such as: becoming a good listener; not interrupting people who are speaking; getting and giving support; not speaking on every subject; not putting others down; interrupting and calling attention to other’s oppressive behaviors; 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 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. There were techniques to express differences avoiding the imposition of a false homogenous face into the group. Each of us made a hand signal that could mean agreement, non-support, standing-aside, withdrawing, or blocking the proposal being set forth.*

*These meetings operated as temporary laboratories to test consensus based decision-making, and to explore different mechanisms of participation. In those meetings we discussed the current “state of the world” (e.g. Enron’s collapse and the Argentinean economic crisis followed by the popular uprising were topics that lasted weeks). We also dealt with the local struggles in Chicago and campaigns in which different members of the network participated (e.g. a campaign for a new school in a Latino neighborhood; the radicalizing of a carpenters’ union; organizing anti-International Monetary Fund and World Bank lectures at DePaul University). We also made time to take decisions and develop strategies for the group’s future direct actions, including several following September 11<sup>th</sup>: : hanging a large banner at a downtown Chicago bridge during the World Trade Organization meetings in Qatar; a four-van caravan to the*

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<sup>18</sup> “This was produced over several years by a young anarchist process hack. It is closely modeled after previously published leaflets arising from the anti-nuclear movement. It is meant to be reproduced, modified and distribute widely. [ ] Please remember that consensus is only one of several ways of making decisions in groups. It can actually make matters worse, so use this information to develop whatever works best for your situation”.

*World Economic Forum meetings in New York City; a street carnival against capitalism during Mayday at Pilsen- a Czech-Latino neighborhood; and anti-war news screenings in public spaces around Chicago during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.*

*Organizing and executing concrete direct actions was also facilitated according to the specific rules and techniques of consensus-group-process. Our practices were submitted to constant observation and self-checking, at times going through several trials and errors. We were busy: discussion and strategizing during meetings, preparing street-art, media reports and network communication to carry out the actions as well as regular reading of Zapatista writings, internal reports on WB and IMF policies, or social movements' histories such as Spanish anarchist organizing and the US Black Panther movement. During our weekly discussions about the state of the world, we brought media accounts -from both the popular press and indymedia- and also turned to work by Polanyi, Hardt and Negri, or Klein for example to help build our discussion and analysis.*

*We were all so excited and serious about process! It often mattered as much as the very topic we were discussing. All the great analyses and actions organized during that time shared an important component: the way in which each was organized. We all had to learn the new rules. It was challenging, since normally one is not supported to think and live in ways geared towards equal participation, anti-authoritarianism, radical diversity, and ultimately, collaboration and collective action. Have we been taught in school to write together or even 'think collectively'? Is not the "miracle" of individual genius rewarded everywhere? Is not diversity often treated as a problem, a threat, or an obstacle to unity rather than an asset? These standardized ways of thinking and acting convey a certain sense of the self and relating to others attuned to hyper-empowered individuals in search of maximizing self-advancement. These hegemonic forms of subject-making and social relationships are deeply inspired in the economic model of free-market/neo-liberalism/capitalism that we were trying to fight back. Yet, these very same notions have been culturally bombarded and disciplinary inscribed in most of us. They have been normalized as the way of inhabiting the world to the point that even those who most consciously wanted to reverse those prevailing practices were themselves caught up in that very form of individualized thinking and acting. The network was very conscious of this paradox, so our politics became the practice of overcoming hegemonic ways of relating to each other through a strong emphasis on the process as well as developing anti-systemic analyses and actions that would materialize through organizing around particular issues. Process-based direct action and direct democracy were used to blockade the system transforming its very foundations for self-reproduction: subjects and their relationships. It was the process itself that provided an oppositional theory both of the self and the collective.*

*Despite this knowledge production, public recognition of the group was limited to three moments. The first, and that which attracted the most attention, consisted of the spectacular element of the direct actions themselves. A second instance of public visibility occurred when campaign demands were achieved. A key example was the victory after a campaign to pressure the city administration (the so-called 'Daley dynasty') to build a high school in the Latino neighborhood 'La Villita'. This neighborhood had been marginalized from educational resources despite the more than two thousand high school age youths in need. Finally, the third moment relates to the attention sparked among state security forces when the DAN network became a target for surveillance and a matter of national security, especially after the acronym "DAN"*

appeared in a list of 'suspicious organizations' following the attack on the World Trade Center<sup>19</sup>.

So far, there has not been a systematic collection of the production of political analysis and unconventional democratic practices generated by this network. Many of us, participants in DAN, desired to see the network recognized not only for helping to organize the 'victory of Seattle' in 1999, but also for its pre-figurative practices, embedded in processes of direct action and direct democracy, that have been imprinted in a whole generation that has lived through those experiences. Maybe we could still put those together in some hypothetical book entitled "Direct Action Theory" or "Consensus-Process: a Technique for Antagonist Knowledge and Practice"?

In the same way that one is subjectified as an expert knowledge producer through university training, laboratory research and the institutional mechanisms of dissertation writing, the DAN member would become an "expert" on analysis of the political conjuncture, direct action and direct forms of democracy, as well as on the intricacies of the subject-formation and social relations; producing these collective knowledges through the practice of consensus-based process.

### **Italy's Movimento: Theoretical-Practice and Finding the Politically Effective Movement**

On July 20, 2002 over 150, 000 people from throughout Italy came to Genova 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 followed a week of workshops, meetings and discussions allowing many Italians to revisit the site where the violent and eventful anti-G8 protests had marked an important moment for both the national and transnational Alternative Globalization Movement just one year earlier. Notably, even one week before this anniversary march, organizers were predicting a low turnout of maximum 30,000 people. As such, when, following a moment of silence observed in various piazzas throughout the city, the march began and people suddenly became aware of the large numbers who had actually shown up, the reactions were dramatic. The day following this unexpected turnout, "movement" participants from all over Italy – from different political and organizational affiliations, as well as many unaffiliated individuals and smaller collectives, met in the Teatro dello Corteo near Genova's train station. This collective of diverse groups was taking advantage of the opportunity presented by being in the same place, with no immediate or urgent political objectives, in order to have an open and spontaneous discussion about their thoughts on this somewhat enigmatic entity they had been calling the movimento "no global," "new global" or, most recently, "il movimento dei movimenti" (the movement of movements).

While I sat in the crowded auditorium of the Teatro dello Corteo, listening to over 90 people speak, I remember being particularly struck by the words of Francesco Caruso, a rather well known Neapolitan spokesperson for the Disobbedienti.<sup>20</sup> When he began to talk, I was almost startled by his seriousness: he

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<sup>19</sup> "In February 20, 2004, a court-mandated internal police audit revealed that undercover officers infiltrated five Chicago organizations: Not In Our Name – Chicago, Direct Action Network, Anarchist Black Cross, American Friends Service Committee, and the Autonomous Zone. Chicago undercover police targeted five local social justice groups for political spying in 2002 and launched at least four other spying operations in 2003, according to a CPD internal audit obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times". From <http://www.notinourname.net/restrictions/infiltration-19feb04.htm>

<sup>20</sup>The Disobbedienti are probably the most internationally visible and nationally notorious activists in the Italian movement. They are known for civil disobedience and radical direct action and are considered to be

shook his head and said. “Non ci capiamo questo movimento.” (We don’t understand this movement.) He went on: “How,” he asked, “had over 150,000 people arrived for the march when both the organizers and the press expected and predicted (and so theoretically worked to mobilize) only 10-30,000?!” He concluded by challenging the audience, made up not only of the movement militants, but also of people who tend to come out just for big events like this march, to acknowledge that this movement did not work according to the rules and logics they— as organizers and citizens—were accustomed to. He invited everyone to work to make sense of it.

Almost two years later, in a far less comfortable auditorium – an enormous unheated room of the warehouse-like complex that served as the site for a Bolognese social center Teatro Polivalente Occupato (TPO) – in the midst of Bologna’s nastily cold-winter, I found myself once again seated among hundreds of people from all over Italy and from multiple parts of the movimento. And, once again, I was listening to speaker after speaker take the stage to give his or her perspective on what can most succinctly be described as the “state of the movement.” As in Genova, these interventions included a number of speeches attempting to explain both what the movement was, and what it could, or should be. However, in stark contrast to the warm and effervescent meeting in the summer of 2002, this time the coldness of Bologna’s winter air in that unheated auditorium was matched (or augmented) by a chilly tension in the air. The people here were all concerned about the “movement” because since at least the start of the Iraq war the year before, the movement(s) had suffered a great deal, both in terms of morale and energy, as well as in terms of visibility and popularity. But, despite the shared concern, the activists present were deeply divided about exactly what was wrong, and how to proceed. While no-one said so explicitly, I think it was clear that one reason they could not agree on what was wrong, was because they had never managed to arrive at a consensus about what had been so right in the years prior. That is, they had never been able to fulfill Caruso’s earlier call to understand, or make sense of, the movement.<sup>21</sup> While most activists and attendees appeared to leave feeling rather discouraged about the movement, I was particularly struck by the fact that at no time did anyone question the category or concept of “movement” itself. In other words it was a matter of getting the movement right, not finding another movement, or another approach altogether.

Throughout what is now over 3 years of research on and with the Italian movimento, I have watched the question(s) of what is this movement? what are its objectives and political meanings? how do we make sense of it in order to elaborate and develop it? and what is the nature of the political conjuncture to which we are responding? being posed numerous times, and in multiple forms. In large assemblies like those described above; in smaller meetings that comprise the day to day life of most activist groups; in countless articles in journals and books dedicated to making sense of contemporary political moments; in the lengthy interviews and less formal conversations activists and I have shared (and where the line

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the movement troublemakers by the “authorities,” although the truth of the matter is that they tend to be tactically more moderate than some anarchist and other less identifiable groups.

<sup>21</sup> Throughout the weekend, a number of people spoke of two major areas of difficulty: The first, was that after years of being able to work through or around tactical and even more fundamental differences, now people were returning to a stance in which certain approaches and tactics were perceived as less desirable to the overall movement than others. The second was the sense that what was being called “movement” was missing the “real” or “effective” sites and practices of social struggle, which were actually occurring elsewhere in Italian society. The few months leading up to this meeting were characterized by a great deal of social unrest throughout Italy. This included wildcat strikes in the transportation sector that paralyzed many Italian cities, as well as anti-nuclear waste protests that managed to block the entire North/South railway line for several days.

*between researcher, researchee and politically concerned individuals were thoroughly blurred), and, almost daily, on the myriad listservs and websites that constitute major sites of movement activity; these and related questions have been posed, theorized, debated and discussed – often in quite heated and animated forms. Throughout these years I have been particularly impressed, on the one hand, by the level of importance, even urgency, given to understanding the movement, its potentials, limits and possibilities, and, on the other, by the ways these practices of questioning, discussing, and debating (as well as other more traditional “activist-practices like protests) both modify and emphasize the theoretical moment of political action. In addition, I have been rather overwhelmed by the breadth and depth of the theoretical and practical knowledge – including not only sophisticated knowledge of philosophy and theory, but also technical skills such as web-design, hacking, siphoning electricity to run a squatted social center, building-- employed and developed by the movements. In my mind, these practices have significant consequences for how we conceive of social movements, as well as how we understand the role of theory in movements’ attempts to be politically effective.*

*Notably, and as the examples above show, often the lack of ready-made or clear-cut answers to these questions was perceived as a “problem” – in the negative sense of the term – and as an impediment to elaborating a truly effective political project. In fact, although movement activists definitely saw themselves as part of the global AGM, their politics could not be understood simply as opposing the WTO, IMF, World Bank, etc. Rather, opposing these institutions were means for creating political alternatives to neo-liberalism, but perhaps even moreso, to the related yet not identical failure of representative democracy. Understanding the movement, then, is treated as a requirement to creating effective political oppositions and alternatives, something viewed as particularly urgent now, as conservatism and neoliberalism in Italy (as well as globally) seem to be growing. As such, these questions and discussions can be understood as conjunctural research and analysis of the movements themselves as well as of the political context in which they emerge. In the absence of any consensus on the meta-narratives or models of social change, following the end of the Cold War and the disillusionment even among much of the Left about the effectiveness of Marxism or Socialism, these become increasingly important.<sup>22</sup>*

*At the same time, however, these questions are not always pronounced desperately or negatively. In fact, at times (and I would argue increasingly) uncertainty is seen as productive. For example, following the third European Social Forum, a network of Italian activists published an open letter on several international websites, as well as on their own listservs in an attempt to evaluate the contemporary situation and prospects of the movement. In the letter, following a longer written assessment of the Forum, the activists conclude:*

*“There are no shortcuts and if there are they are only ‘table tricks.’ There is only experimentation as method and substance of the “becoming-movement”.*  
*([www.globalmagazine.org](http://www.globalmagazine.org). October 20, 2004).*

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<sup>22</sup> It is important to recognize that a critique of traditional Marxism has long characterized the extraparlimentary Left in Italy. Today, however, it is almost possible to say that even the Communist party has come to criticize traditional conceptions aims and means of the Left. Though particular to Italy, one of the things that very clearly characterizes a great deal of the AGM is this rejection of formulaic models of social change, of which various brands of Marxism have been a part.

*Here, as in many moments before, movement activists recognize il movimento as a sort of puzzle with no clear-cut solutions. But rather than see this as a problem to be fixed, they identify in this inexplicability the call for a positive political practice of investigation, experimentation and “becoming.” This open-ended, experimental politics, on the one hand stands in stark contrast to the rigid ideological dogmatism of past leftist politics, and on the other, it emphasizes the theoretical and investigative moment of political practice. Furthermore, with the very conscious use of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming,” – conscious because activists actually refer to Deleuze and Guattari by name-- the activists demonstrate the ways in which these processes of research and experimentation are themselves not limited to, or bound by, the sorts of strategic and self-reflexive discussions mentioned above. Rather, their own experiments and theorizations participate in, and are a part of key theoretical debates that social scientists and activists often distinguish from political practice by defining such debates as academic or intellectual. (In a sense they are themselves doing social movements studies!) In contrast to understandings of movements and politics that treat intellectual and theoretical work as merely instrumental to achieving more important “political” goals, it becomes clear that various forms of what we have called “knowledge-practice,” and what in Italy is sometimes referred to as “theoretical-practice,” are in fact constitutive of what the movement is and does.*

These three accounts describe how movements engage in material and diverse knowledge-practices that are not necessarily visible on a traditional, or politico-institutional terrain. Each of these experiences highlight the production of concepts, theories and analyses as well as new political and life practices, including the production of subjectivities and critical capacities to face the complex political and social terrain we are faced with today. These knowledge practices include bringing scientific and situated knowledges to bear on lived experiences of contaminated lands and bodies; the generation of laboratory-like spaces to experiment with ways of building collaborative and anti-systemic politics, as well as enabling ways of living and modes of being in the world to be remade. They involve a near constant engagement with and creation of situated theorizing about both contemporary power conditions and the political effectiveness of diverse movement strategies.

Even beyond the specific cases we have described we can understand many movement related activities as knowledge-practices. Activities like building counter-technologies of sustainable energy; fair trade networks, non-hierarchical organizations; collaborative reading and writing groups; grassroots unions, squats; action-research projects; cooperatively-run factories; horizontally organized schools; or declaring self-reduction of prices at the supermarket, to be enacted not as pre-given solutions, but as

forms of experimentation, as well as means for enabling and generating critical capacities and subjectivities. As such these knowledge-practices not only critically engage and redraw the map of what comprises the political, but they also produce practices and bodies according to different logics. As 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). 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. What the shift in the methodological and epistemological approach that we have proposed makes visible and points to has entirely different goals and effects. It shows a continuous generation and circulation of heterogeneous knowledge(s), that in and of themselves work to make different futures possible -- futures that do not exist in a narrow, or campaign-specific space that ends once a certain demand has been met or a mobilization realized. In fact rather than engage solely or primarily with the macro-political, these practices seem to work on the level of the micro-political, a level of experimentation and deliberate research rather than the production of new and final solutions (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; see D’Ignazio, 2004). When movements are understood as knowledge-practitioners, and not simply as campaigners, their importance and potential as critical actors involved in creating new worlds and their possibility, is clear, and at least for us, incredibly inspiring.

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