

A workshop on:
Emerging Issues in Social Movement Research: Autonomy, Alternatives, and Knowledge.

It is argued that the seeming consolidation of neo-liberal capitalism as the main mode of globalization after 1990 has been accompanied by a concomitant change in the mode of operation of social movements. While some see in the ascendancy of globalization and the disappearance of “real socialism” the demise of social movements, others perceive in the incipient yet growing forms of global protest the beginning of a new round of resistance that is qualitatively different from those of the most recent past. If the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s failed to generate an autonomous critical imaginary of possible futures, will the movements that started to gain visibility in the mid-1990s run the same fate or, on the contrary, will they result in meaningful opportunities for the sustained construction of imaginaries for alternative worldviews, practices of world-making, and modes of analysis and social life? The answer to this question will depend in great part on the characteristics these social movements develop, and on the extent to which they generate their own “sustainable” structures for the production of knowledge. Both requirements demand new ways of thinking about activism on our part as analysts, academics, or intellectual-activists.

Aware of many of the doubts and uncertainty that characterize current evaluations of social movement practice, this workshop departs from two main premises: 1) that current social scientific frameworks are not equipped to make sense of the emerging practices and possibilities posed by the variety of social movements dotting the social landscape the world over. As such, we are concerned with finding more adequate analytical lenses and vocabularies for making sense of social movement practice(s). 2) This desire to make sense of social movements is itself derived from our belief that contemporary social movements are some of the most important actors working to create viable alternatives that can bring about more equitable, socially just and sustainable forms of living and organizing our societies. Notably, they do this by combining “traditional” protest activity with projects, experiments and debates aimed at creating and actually enacting politically, environmentally and socially just worlds. In other words, through a multiplicity of activities ranging from opposition to specific policies, to theorizing new forms of social organization, to making immediate changes in social relationships, movements are producing different knowledge(s) about social change, as well as experimenting with and devising more livable futures. As such, “Knowledge,” “Alternatives” and “Autonomy” are key concepts through which many of the critical practices and imaginaries social movements offer us, can be interrogated.

For this one-day exploratory workshop-- one that we hope will set the groundwork for ongoing conversations and collaborative research--we want to at least begin the work of thinking through and articulating some of the emerging issues in

social movement practice and theory. In order to do so, we ask each participant to write a brief (1-2 page), position paper or response to the themes of the workshop, based on your own experience and research. The responses can be organized as answers to the following three prompts/questions:

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- 1) Briefly introduce the work you are involved in, academically and/or activist-wise. Are there any “new” or “different” practices or observations you have been particularly struck or inspired by in the work of the movements you work with?

My recent work has involved community organizing organizations. I have ongoing research and activist and personal involvement with the Rastafari “movements” in Jamaica, and several years experience doing research and advocacy around welfare reform and access to higher education (the research was often aimed at assisting organizing and advocacy work while simultaneously addressing academic concerns. New practices that I see are a widespread interest in research, both doing and using it. Another important practice I see is a deep interest in self evaluation, reflection, and learning from practice. A third new practice I see is a growing number of academics assisting in various ways. Many groups are looking to universities for allies and support.

- 2) How are social movements rethinking the political? Do they offer any new articulations between the micro (cultural, everyday) and macro (politico-institutional, policy-oriented) political.

- A. model the behavior you want to see in society
- B. do not let ideology cripple pragmatic action
- C. Bring young people into social justice work early so as to prevent leadership development gaps
- D. The private sector and government should be organized too, by grassroots people
- E. Build broad class alliances
- F. Tap into culture and spirituality as a part of organizing and social justice work

- 3) What questions do you want to raise or point out as possible avenues of further discussion and research?

I wonder if people are interested in talking about the social justice industrial complex and what this means for movements, activism, social justice. Activism is being increasingly professionalized and commodified. What will this mean, if anything, to forms of movement and activism.

We hope to be able to make copies of these responses available to conference participants, so if you could email them to _____, by March 20, that would be greatly appreciated!