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Social Movements and the Ethics of Knowledge Production

Introduction

In this chapter, I will argue that the study of social movements within the academy retains an implicit positivism that is underpinned by the idea that we live in a 'social movement society' (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). This idea is very appealing, suggesting as it does, that advanced industrial democracies have institutionalised social movement forms of representing claims to such an extent, that they have become a conventional part of the accepted mechanisms for democratic participation. However, the legacy of this normative framework is that movements are largely perceived as objects of knowledge for academics, rather than as knowledge-producers in their own right. So whilst the knowledge they formulate about their areas of concern is evidently interesting for policy makers, their ontological or epistemological frameworks are less so because they are already assimilated within the normative ontology of liberal democracy.

I will argue that this epistemological prioritization of academic knowledge production *about* movements continues, despite the turn towards a phenomenological epistemology by theorists of social movements, who recognise movements as knowledge producing subjects with whom the academy might engage in processes of co-production (Melucci, 1989, 1996b, Santos, 2003, Escobar, 2008). This is ethically problematic, not least because social movements are liable to be reduced to commodifiable objects of

knowledge to enhance either an academic's career or reputation and/or their university's competitive standing (Federici, 2009).

Instead, I will argue that social activism produces critical subjectivities whose contextual and situated knowledge is both independent of the academy and valuable in its own right (Conway, 2004, Casas-Cortés, Osterweil & Powell, 2008, Cox and Fominaya, 2009). This requires those of us situated in the academy to examine the ontological and epistemological basis from which we engage with social movements and the methodological commitments such an approach might oblige. Such an approach can be suggestive of an ethics of engagement that emphasises relationality, reciprocity, and an openness to causal mechanisms of 'becoming' that are outside liberal democratic strictures.

Consequently, the first half of this article seeks to situate the work of the influential social movement theorist Alberto Melucci (1996) within a realist ontological tradition (Giddens, 1984, Bhaskar, 1989) that can help us to understand the knowledge-practices of social movements. It then moves on to consider a methodological approach to research that is sensitive to the differing knowledge-practices of academics, activists, activist-academics and activist researchers and concludes by offering some examples of the methodological innovations such an account might require to be ethically consistent, drawing upon anthropological and feminist critiques of classical ethnography.

This article also contends that the ontological and epistemological frameworks articulated and practiced by some contemporary social movements offer sophisticated examples of how to think about the production of knowledge and its relationship to practice, and highlights instances of these within the contemporary movement milieu. To begin with though, it is perhaps worth reminding ourselves why the knowledge-practices of social movements are crucial to our understanding of new ways of being and acting together, that might address the failure of the 'business as usual' of the neoliberal model (Mattick, 2011, Harvey, 2010).

The contemporary context and a politics of possibilities[1]

At the end of the first decade of the 21st Century we are faced by a number of interrelated and dynamically connected complex crises, all of which involve potentially dramatic tipping points that will impact upon human/ecological systems. These range from irreversible climate change, peak oil and crises of food and fuel production to market crashes and financial contagion.

Civil society and social movements are frequently at the forefront of knowledge generation about potential crises in human/ecological systems and can be conceived as critical sensors of systems moving from the edge of chaos towards more profound societal and environmental change (Johnson, 2002). In some instances, social movements are also capable of acting as facilitators of feedback systems that can avert or promote

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[1] This is a term kindly suggested to me by Kevin Gillan.

these processes through their generation of different lifestyles, resistance or adaptation strategies, and alternative social and economic policies (Urry, 2003, Chesters & Welsh, 2006). Despite this, formal political systems are frequently slow to respond to the production of new knowledge by social movements and the relationship between movements and political elites is often antagonistic due to the inherent difficulty of accommodating social movement activism within representative democracies, without the loss of institutional political capital.

Therefore the motivation behind this paper is the observation that if we are going to respond in a just and sustainable way to the challenges of the complex and converging crises outlined above, we need to move beyond an analysis of movements that sees them solely as producers of knowledge about those things they campaign for, or against. Instead, we must recognize their capacity to develop alternative political imaginaries – a politics of possibilities - and theories of knowledge about how to actualize these imagined possibilities.

This will require a deepening in our understanding of how social movements can be recognised as mobilising knowledge and resources with the aim of generating tipping points in political values, actions and behaviours and helping us avert, or adapt to, potentially dramatic tipping points in human/ecological systems. In order to begin this process, I would argue we need to refine our understanding of how we undertake social movement research and to question the meaning of social movements for the academy.

Ethically informed and participatory approaches to researching with marginalized or oppressed communities are familiar from participatory action research (PAR) (Friere, 1982, Chambers, 1983), which explicitly incorporates an ethic of inclusion and 'care' (Gilligan, 1982) and also from within critical approaches to qualitative inquiry (Denzin, Lincoln, Tuhiwai Smith, 2008). I will argue that a further ethical consideration here is to conduct research that is consistent with the idea, voiced by social movements themselves (Collectivo Stuaciones, 2005, Shukaitis & Graeber 2007) and key movement theorists (Melucci, 1989, 1996b), that social movements are spaces of knowledge production about the limits and possibilities of agency and structure within a given society. I will further argue that Melucci's (1989, 1996b) ontology of movements is in keeping with a realist and materialist orientation in social science and that this provides the most appropriate conceptual framework for engaging with the social and political ontologies and epistemologies produced by social movements.

Engaging with movements: ontology first?

Social movement activism is normally premised on a critique of the status quo and an analysis of possibilities for change (Gillan, 2008). It requires the communication of both critiques and alternatives and an appeal to what is presumed to be the shared morality of wider publics, for whom the alternatives asserted might be regarded as superior on grounds of equality, justice or sustainability. In this sense movements operationalise the idea of the ontological as a realm of possibility – a strategy illustrated by the slogan 'Another World is Possible' (Fisher and Ponniah, 2003), which subsequently became pluralized to 'Other Worlds Are Possible'. Ontology comes first, the assertion of a

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political imaginary that is recursively developed epistemologically through experiences of experimentation with counter-normative forms of expression, relationship or lifestyle.

Consequently, the knowledge-practices of movements frequently result from embodied and affective experiences that are outside of the analytical standpoint of the academic, whose methodology is reliant upon the presumed reliability of simple representative forms - interviews and other texts that 'retain an implicit ontology of the "empirical world"' (Outhwaite, 1987:32). From the perspective of critical realists this is an 'epistemic fallacy' (Collier, 1994:137) which has misled positivists, empiricists and 'rationalists' since Descartes (Collier, 1994:137, Outhwaite, 1987:36-37).   It is this critique and its relationship to social movement studies, methodology and ethics that we can now begin to explore.

What are we seeking knowledge of?

In order to know, we must first have something to know about, and we must distinguish what properties this 'something' has in order to ascertain whether it is a possible source of knowledge for us (Bhaskar, 1989:13). For social scientists, the sources of possible knowledge are people and societies, and as Collier (1994) observes we are therefore obliged to offer some model of what people and societies are or might become. This, of course, is also a foundational question for social movements concerned with radical social change. Meaning that if social scientists are to act ethically towards social movements and to treat them as knowledge-producers, social scientists are required to take account of the ontological frameworks movements advance – the political

imaginaries and alternative accounts of what might be possible within a given society.

In order to attempt this, this article will show how methodological guidelines for engaging in the co-production of knowledge with social movement actors can be elicited from within 'classical' attempts at articulating complex ontologies. After consideration of these perspectives I will then turn to the social movement theorist who is perhaps most sensitive to these issues - Alberto Melucci (1989, 1996a, 1996b), and describe his journey from ontology to methodology in his analysis of collective action, replete with critical reflection on the effectiveness or indeed the desirability of such a journey. Furthermore I will argue that a 'realist' ontology is ethical because it provides for claims to knowledge 'by' social movements that have urgent social and political implications, rather than knowledge 'about' social movements which treats their own concerns as secondary or relative to their own specific ontology/cosmology.

I begin this task by confronting the dualistic heritage of 'sociological modernism' (Stones, 1996:1), the somewhat artificial division between structure and agency, which continues to problematise our understanding of what we can know. Possibly the most well known attempt to resolve this dichotomy is Giddens' (1984) 'Structuration Theory' and I will try and show how consideration of such frameworks might lead us deeper in to consideration of an informed and ethically consistent research methodology.

Giddens' conception of society is 'relational'; that is, we are defined in a given context by our relation, one to another. My subjectivity is constituted as a product of a complex

set of relations situated within a web of other relations and material contexts. Subjectivity is continuously (re)constructed and therefore continuously (re)constructs; self and society are therefore two sides of the same coin. Society is, and can only ever be, people and the material results of their actions (Collier, 1994:139). However, this does not imply some reductionist or individualist conception of society; rather it demonstrates the complexity of a society, where who we are becomes a matter of who is asking the question because of the multiple networks of relationships in which we are embedded (Melucci, 1996a:50).

Although Giddens' articulation of a rich, diverse, and flexible ontology is premised on a relational understanding of how society and the self are formulated, and this accords with other advanced ontologies such as those of the critical realist Roy Bhaskar (1989), it also suggests epistemological and methodological questions which ultimately neither Giddens (1994) nor Bhaskar (1989) resolve.

Giddens' own foray into methodology alights upon a reflexive and hermeneutically informed ethnographic research as consistent with his ontology. However, his apparent unwillingness to develop or advocate a methodology incorporating these musings has been interpreted by Stones (1996:88) as a reluctance to engage with a view of epistemology and methodology 'taken from the past', where 'methodological rules were mean spirited and narrow, desiring to squash all the variety of the world into the same small bottle'. Although Giddens demonstrably privileges a methodology that seeks to represent social phenomena in all their ontological richness, the ontologically sensitised researcher, seeking guidance on co-producing knowledge, is left wondering how s/he

might argue that what they are engaged in is in some way different from the approach of those who do not privilege ontology before epistemology.

In seeking to avoid a prescriptive approach to methodology, thereby avoiding the critique levelled at logical positivists, Giddens is susceptible to the criticism that he has not moved beyond an 'anything goes' approach (Feyerabend, 1993) and is therefore complicit in what Stones (1996:20) calls 'defeatist postmodernism'.

Therefore, when we examine a classic account of social research, such as Giddens' (1984), we find that although it is ontologically bold, it remains methodologically cautious, as Giddens chooses to avoid spelling out what he infers would be an unnecessary and prescriptive set of methodological guidelines. Rather, one is left with the feeling that Giddens' structuration theory might act as the conscience of the researcher. Whilst persuasive, his ontology appears 'arrived at', rather than 'worked out', or as Stones (1996:32) describes it '(a) common-sensical method of constructing an ontology on the basis of selective critique'. Consequently, it is worth looking at a further 'realist' approach to the same problem.

Bhaskar and Critical Realism

One of the most influential attempts to elucidate a complex and sophisticated ontology, and that from which the term 'critical realism' is derived, is Roy Bhaskar's (1979) work. Bhaskar's (1979, 1986, 1989) realist ontology is premised on a response to the Kantian question - how is science possible? Or, as Collier reframed it - how are experiments

possible? (1994:31) Outhwaite summarised the Bhaskarian reply as follows:

> '.. for science to be possible or intelligible, the world must be made up of
>
> real things and structures'(Outhwaite, 1987:31).

Bhaskar argues that the conjunctions observed in a laboratory, which occur because of careful manipulation by scientists, do so due to the intrinsic properties of the objects involved. Consequently, we must presume the continued existence of such properties outside the laboratory, whether or not they are ever demonstrated. The 'open systems' of the social and natural world are what Bhaskar is concerned with, and he has sought to illuminate the complexity and contingency of simple acts in order to demonstrate the empiricist fallacy of presuming that regular conjunctions are the result of simple causal chains. This led Bhaskar to develop his model of the 'stratification of reality', which as Stones observes, has a 'three-fold ontological distinction' (1996:29).

The distinction is between:

(1) The real mechanism - an object's inherent powers;

(2) the actual event - the dormancy or actualisation of those powers; and

(3) the empirical event - that aspect of the event which is observed.

The ontological implications of this 'stratification of reality' undermine theories that place a different, normally inferior ontological status on causal mechanisms. Whilst mechanisms are not experienced and do not occur as events, they are nonetheless the

basis of the causal criteria we routinely apply to reality, as Collier notes:

> '*within* the level of the Actual we are employing causal criteria all the
> time, and would never get out of the Empirical if we did not: when we
> find the garden muddy in the morning, we assume a real rainstorm,
> though we slept through it; a murder victim implies a murderer, even
> though one might never be identified' (1994:44).

Less sophisticated ontologies ignore causal mechanisms, preferring only those things that are a possible object of experience, thus drastically flattening out what might be 'known'. To summarise then, the domain of the real (that which is inclusive of the multiplicity of hidden causal mechanisms) is greater than or equal to the domain of the actual (what occurs), which in turn is greater than or equal to the domain of the empirical (that which can be observed) (Collier, 1994:45). In open systems there occur a multitude of events that are jointly co-produced by a multiplicity of mechanisms, so that whilst it is possible to arrive at partial closure in the natural sciences, thereby demonstrably exhibiting a causal mechanism, this is not the case in the social sciences. Theoretically, however, because of the 'stratification of reality' and the existence of causal mechanisms, events in principle *are* explicable. Stones has taken this principle as a methodological benchmark, which, whilst evidently unachievable, serves 'as a point of reference by which we can judge how far our accounts fall short of the rich reality of events' (1996:7). Methodologically, then, this principle obliges:

'…the answering of a research question with utterly exhaustive detail;

absolutely everything relevant to a question in terms of, for example,

hermeneutics and contiguity or power or material resources, must be

included in order for an account to be exhaustive and closed to any further

extension.' (1996:7).

Although utopian, this ideal allows us to ponder the implications of a critical realist

ontology for the research process of engaging with social movements.

However, like Giddens, Bhaskar refrains from discussion of research techniques that

would concur with his ontology, leaving us to look to elsewhere for methodological

guidelines for engagement in the co-production of knowledge with social movement

actors. Here I turn to the study of collective action as outlined by Alberto Melucci (1989,

1996a, 1996b), which I would argue is consistent with the disposition towards ontology,

epistemology and methodology outlined above.

Melucci: reconstructing the complexity of collective action

Alberto Melucci first introduced the term 'new social movements' into sociological

literature in 1977 (later to be translated into English: Melucci, 1980, 1981). It is a term

which, although problematic (Melucci, 1995:107-119), has come to be enormously

influential in research on collective action, thereby establishing Melucci as a prominent

figure in the sociology of social movements, a theorist whose work:

> '…recast existing theoretical approaches under a new focus and thus has raised innovative concepts and frameworks to explain contemporary social movements' (Bartholomew and Mayer, 1992:141).

There are a number of reasons for situating Melucci's work within the debate about the epistemological and methodological consequences of an ontology drawn from structuration theory and critical realism. The rapid growth in collective action around issues of race, gender, disability, age, peace and the environment led Melucci to a rejection of inherited analytical frameworks. Social movements became indicative of what Melucci termed 'frontier land' (1992), the open space which reveals the contingency of any existing order. This is the marginal space, the space revealed by analysis of structure and agency, and is therefore uniquely implicated in both Giddens' (1984) discussion of structuration theory and Bhaskar's (1989) critical realism. As Melucci observed:

> 'this field of sociological research is like a gymnasium for students who wish to take on the challenge of investigating the relationship between social systems and actors' (1992:239).

Melucci (1988) begins his critique of existing analytical frameworks by criticising their limited ontology. Traditional structural-functionalist perspectives (Smelser, 1962), he argues, represented collective action as a response to a perceived disorder. Alternatively, Marxists were apt to conceive collective action as an expression of the objective

conditions arising from a capitalist mode of production, which also lent meaning to the action. Melucci (1988:335), however, rejects both perspectives as suffering from the same 'epistemological misunderstanding'. Their error, he argues, is the treatment of a collective phenomenon as a '*unitary empirical datum'* (1988: 330 original emphasis):

'The occurrence of certain concomitant individual behaviours forms a unitary *gestalt* that is transferred from the phenomenological to the conceptual level and acquires ontological consistency: The collective reality exists as a thing' (1988:330).

The two 'traditional' models, therefore, have a series of ontological building blocks from which to theorise. The causal factors - motivations, anxieties, debate, communication, discussion and negotiation - which are central to the maintenance of any collective identity, and more particularly any collective action, are already lost. The ontologies of the Marxist and the functionalist are drastically flattened, as Bartholomew and Meyer (1992:142) point out when citing Melucci (1989): 'The result is a view of social movements marching through history "towards a destiny of liberation, or as crowds in the grip of suggestion"'. This criticism of the flattening of ontology to the empirical through a teleological perspective, or what Melucci referred to as the 'myopia of the visible' (1988:337) is of course reminiscent of the critique Bhaskar (1979, 1989) mounted against positivism; such a flattened ontology is unable to elucidate causal factors in any other than the most reductionist terms.

Melucci also suggests that the significance of the term 'new social movement' has become its contribution to the same reductionist conceptions of collective action. The argument as to whether something is 'new' or not is of course a relative one that Melucci originally deployed to demonstrate the weakness of the existing theoretical standpoints. Defender and protagonist alike make the same epistemological error when referring to the 'new social movements' in debates as to whether or not they are new. Invariably, the debate is grounded in an understanding of a movement as a unified empirical object and thus:

> 'they fail to recognize that collective action always consists of various components (analytical levels, types of relationship, orientations and meanings)' (Melucci, 1995:110).

Melucci's emphasis upon causal mechanisms, interaction of praxis and structure, and the continuing construction and reconstruction of a movement, whose contingency is framed by such processes, accords with the ontological perspectives of both Giddens and Bhaskar. In the following extract, which bears citing at length, Melucci indicates with precision the epistemological implications of an ontology which sits easily with both Giddens' (1984) structuration theory and Bhaskar's (1989) critical realism:

> 'Collective action should thus be considered as the result of purposes, resources and limits: as a purposive orientation constructed by means of social relationships within a system of opportunities and constraints. It therefore cannot be viewed as the simple effect of structural preconditions

or the expression of values and beliefs. Individuals acting together construct their action by means of organized investments: that is, they define in cognitive, affective and relational terms the field of possibilities and limits which they perceive, while at the same time activating their relationships so as to give sense to their being together and the goals that they pursue' (Melucci, 1995:111).

Melucci acknowledges the explicit relation between his ontology and that articulated by Giddens, citing Giddens (1984) as a necessary brake upon a radical constructivism which it is impossible to sustain when one recognises that: 'Action is an interactive, constructive process within a field of possibilities and limitations recognised by actors' (1992:254). Given the ontological parallels between Melucci and what has been characterised here as a realist ontology, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that the epistemological consequences of Melucci's ontology lead to his advocating a methodological framework which he believes is consistent with his philosophical insight:

'It is not only necessary to develop new techniques, but also to make ever more explicit, as part of the research process itself, the social relations and options which are the basis for the practices adopted and that make it possible' (1992: 256).

This journey from ontology through epistemology to methodology accords with that advocated by Stones (1996:19), whose emphasis upon the 'social agent's frames of

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meaning' and the context-dependency of those meanings parallels Melucci's (1992a:256) 'situational epistemology', both emphasise the importance of mediations, and both seek to uncover the mechanisms by which social phenomena are produced. In this sense it is clear that Melucci adheres to Stones' concept of a 'sophisticated realism' - 'whose acknowledgement of a rich and complex ontology is accompanied and matched by the adoption of a finely grained set of reflexive guidelines' (Stones, 1996:232). This leads us to consideration of how this is enacted and where we might look for evidence of this in practice. It might also be unsurprising that such examples often occur outside the academy.

The practice of knowledge production.

> 'What we must recognize is that actors themselves can make sense out of what they are doing, autonomously of any evangelical or manipulative interventions of the researcher. And in the disenchanted world of consummate systemic processes where epistemological privileges have been divested together with everything hereditary and natural, all meaning is judged not by the correctness of its content but by the processes of its creation.' (Melucci, 1996b: 389).

This article argues that one of the central ethical issues in researching social movements is a failure to make explicit the ontological and epistemological premises that underpin social movement research. This I suggest can lead to positions where movements are

overly determined as 'unitary empirical datum' (Melucci, 1996:330) or alternatively they are interpreted largely within their own frames of reference and without challenge, whereas attempts at co-production require more substantial discussion on the foundations of knowledge claims, which inevitably requires reflection on the ontologies and epistemologies of all parties. Put simply, the contention of the paper is that the social and political ontologies and epistemological practices of contemporary social movements should be taken seriously if one is to act ethically in relation to these movements.

Social movements have long been bearers of knowledge about forms of oppression and injustice, expressing political claims, identifying social and economic grievances and bringing new or neglected issues to public prominence. They have been in the forefront of debates about how social divisions including gender, race, sexuality, age and religion, structure society and reproduce power structures including prevailing norms and values, as well as debates about the possibilities of agency in social change processes. They have also been prominent in highlighting the social and environmental implications of the application of new sciences and technologies from manufacturing processes to nuclear fission (http://www.clamshell-tvs.org/), genetically modified organisms (http://www.saynotogmos.org/) to cloning and nanotechnology (http://www.daa.org.uk/index.php?page=left-bioethics). Social movements produce knowledge that is often challenging to those in power or which might be difficult for a society to confront – levels of sexual abuse, the treatment of the mentally ill (http://madpride.org.uk/index.php), the stigmatisation of those with HIV/AIDs etc. However, rarely are social movements explicitly recognised as producers of knowledge,

despite their influence in shaping various academic disciplines including womens'
studies, peace studies, adult and popular education, black and post-colonial studies, queer
studies etc. These disciplines have been richly innovative in both their approaches to, and
work with movements, and yet for the most part social movements are still considered as
objects of knowledge for researchers and academics, rather than as knowledge producers
in their own right.

This began to change during the final decades of the 20th and the first decade of the 21st
Century, during a wave of social movement mobilisation focussed on resistance to the
globalisation of neo-liberal capitalism and the promotion of 'social justice' (Notes from
Nowhere, 2003). It can be argued that these movements were prescient in identifying
issues that would subsequently move to the centre of mainstream political debate and
were amongst the first to offer a cogent critique of the inequity and structural limitations
of the global financial system that had been emerging from the late 1980s (Danaher and
Burbach, 2000, Houtart & Polet, 2001). It has also been argued that the reflexive
practices of social movement activism during this period, from the Zapatista inspired
encuentros (Holloway & Pelaez, 1998) to the dialogical and deliberative spaces of the
World Social Forum (Sen, Anand, Escobar & Waterman 2004), represented a qualitative
shift in the methodology of global social movements. This is important because meaning
making and knowledge production subsequently became key activities of these
movements (Cox and Fominaya, 2009).

This wave of mobilisation produced a generation of academic-activists and activist-researchers who have sought to challenge the epistemological premises of orthodox social movement studies. Including theoretically and methodologically operationalising long established critiques of positivist and Cartesian epistemologies, by blurring the boundaries between the subject and object of knowledge and pursuing practices of co-producing knowledge with, rather than on movements (Conway, 2004, Casas-Cortés, Osterweil & Powell, 2008, Cox and Fominaya, 2009). This milieu has produced some fascinating work on the specificities of local and indigenous knowledges and their implications for understanding the 'global' (Escobar, 1998, 2009), as well as a variety of attempts to develop 'knowledge-practices' (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil & Powell, 2008) that bridge academic and movement domains (Notes from Nowhere, 2003, Sen, Anand, Escobar & Waterman 2004, Collectivo Situaciones, 2005, Graeber & Shukaitis, 2007, Turbulence Collective, 2010).

The compound term 'knowledge-practice' has much in common with the older but closely allied concept of cognitive-practice (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991) and it reflects theorisations of social movements as knowledge producers, rather than merely as objects of knowledge for social movement scholars. The use of the compound term 'knowledge-practice' (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil & Powell, 2008) is also used to indicate where activism is understood as productive of critical subjectivities whose situated and contextual knowledge is prioritised in its own right. The danger being here, of course, is that this simply becomes a 'relativist' or 'anything goes' approach, where valorizing the contextual undermines any claims to the wider value or application of the knowledge

being produced.

So what methodological insights are to be derived from the complex and 'realist' ontology outlined above and how might these reflect the many situated 'truths' discovered by social movement experimentation with new forms of social and political life. Qualitative engagement through participatory methodologies ranging from participatory action research (Frier, 1982, Chambers, 1983) to visual and cartographic methodologies (Counter Cartographies Collective: http://www.countercartographies.org/) to autoethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997, Ellis, 2008) and autoethnographic activism (BRE, 2007) offer insights in to a practice of co-production that are sensitive to a situated epistemology. Consequently I continue to argue that developing this bricolage of approaches is akin to '…an ethical attempt to humanize activist and academic practice – to consider human bodies, desires, endurance, affects, quirks – to create an new activist and intellectual ethic'. One that is 'based on the idea that self-making and ethics are at the core of any effective and radical political project.' (Osterweil and Chesters, 2007: 254).

However, such methods are often described as invoking a set of 'dangers' prescribed by the academy because they constitute a tendency towards 'surrender' or 'becoming' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:115). So, whilst mainstream ethnography warns of the need to critically evaluate the role of the researcher towards the researched, and assert the need to suspend judgement upon the supposed reality of appearances, there remains a firmly held belief in the need to maintain a critical distance between researcher and researched (Evans, 1992:200-01). This also involves establishing clear boundaries as to

what constitutes the research context, which Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:112) assert requires the ethnographer to be 'intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness; and, in overt participant observation, socially he or she will usually be poised between stranger and friend'. This leads them to suggest that ethnographers 'must strenuously avoid "feeling at home"' (1995:115) and that the researcher must remain a 'marginal native' (1995:112 citing Freilich, 1970).

However, these arguments appear deeply problematic in the light of the work of those concerning themselves with the practice of co-producing knowledge with social movements (Conway, 2004, Casas-Cortés, Osterweil & Powell, 2008, Cox and Fominaya, 2009). They also contrast with the potential of a critically reflexive and emancipatory research practice, such as that identified in feminist epistemologies (Harding, 1987, Lather, 1991, Stanley & Wise, 1993, Gibson-Graham, 2006), as well as those identified by anthropologists (Cohen, 1992, Escobar, 1995).

Melucci (1996b:393-397) has also been critical of the implicit assumptions of such an approach, which often remain unchallenged:

> 'Acknowledging both in ourselves as scientists and in the collective actors
> the limited rationality which characterizes social action, researchers can
> no longer apply the criteria of truth or morality defended *a priori*, outside
> of the relationship. Researchers must also participate in the uncertainty,
> testing the limits of their instruments and of their ethical values.'
> (1996b:395)

For Lather, it is acknowledgement of this uncertainty that characterises emancipatory feminist research practice: 'courage to think and act within an uncertain framework emerges as the hallmark of liberatory praxis in a time marked by the dissolution of authoritative foundations of knowledge' (1991:13).

A process of ethical research, then, considered from these perspectives, is an unfolding of obligations and limitations developing from the relational dimension of the interaction. This requires one's own position of power, security or vulnerability to be open to analysis and contest. The academy has no a priori reason or justification for making demands upon those it seeks knowledge of; indeed, if we are serious about countenancing an ethical research practice it is necessary to situate that practice within an explicit description of how the research is sustained and from where our sources our support are drawn.

There is often an implicit expectation amongst social activists that academics researching with social movements will intervene to offer resources and/or expertise during encounters with the state or the corporate sector and this is sometimes romantically presented by academics as risk-taking behaviour. However, such narratives do a disservice to the relational obligations of reciprocity derived from activist support for research processes, by providing access to information and resources that they have no prior obligation to give. Consequently, although engagement within supportive actions are associated in the academic literature with the risk of compromising the 'goal of producing knowledge' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:286), they are instead, invaluable articulations of the ethic of co-production, which recognizes the epistemological complexity of respecting movement ontologies. Hammersley and Atkinson's definition of ethnography would therefore appear at odds with the methods one might derive from a Meluccian approach to the study of movements:

'There must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual distance. For it is in the space created by this distance that the analytical work gets done' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:115).

I believe this artificial separation between analysis and action is merely a remnant of the hidden positivism that other ethnographers have warned against (Evans, 1992). Whilst Hammersley and Atkinson acknowledge the practical and emotional difficulties some ethnographers have had when 'leaving the field' (1996:121) and the frequent establishment of friendships which persist 'for a long time' (1996:122), they retain an explicit belief in the 'identity' of *the researcher* and consider other interventionary actions as either not constituting or even inhibiting the production of knowledge (1996:286). This has led to criticism of their role in excluding sources of 'Other' knowledge:

'Writers such as Hammersley (1995), exercise that exclusion by declaring feminist, anti-racist, critical and emancipatory 'truths' outside the norms of legitimate research. By a discourse of derision they are dismissed as prejudiced, ignorant and ideological. In doing so the threat to notions of knowledge and to sources of income, is diverted. We are not talking about different kinds of knowledge of equal status. Stanley (1990:5) describes how, within the 'academic mode of production' official and unofficial gatekeepers use myriad ways of controlling academic inputs and outputs. At the centre of these is a notion of scientism, grounded in Cartesian

dualisms as to who can be a knower and what can be known, and

concerned with producing knowledge through the observation of the real -

those objects which exist independently of our beliefs about them. It

explicitly excludes knowledge produced through alternative research

approaches.' (Humphries, 1997:4.6)

Melucci, however, attempts to hold these tensions in balance by acknowledging the

delimiting characteristics of the role of 'researcher', whilst accepting the multiple levels

of engagement that any person might have within the research context.

'The point at which the two (researcher and subject) can meet can only be

contractual in nature. There is nothing of the missionary about this, and

the contractual meeting allows no researcher expectations as to the

destinies of the actors. The researchers may be involved as individuals, as

citizens, as political militants, but not as specialists. As such, they have

the task of performing a professional role within knowledge producing

institutions. They are therefore the bearers of the ethical and political

responsibility for the production and allocation of cognitive resources; but

they do not have the right to orient the destinies of society as 'counsellors

of the Prince' or as ideologues of protest' (1996b:391).

This position exhibits a creditable acknowledgement of the inherent tensions in

maintaining and negotiating a coherent identity as a researcher (academic/activist) in a

dynamically shifting complex of social relationships; however, it could also be

prescriptive and limiting for those activist researchers whose situated epistemology is derived from outside the limitations of a professional role as a knowledge producer. This is also, of course, an ethical dilemma for those activist-academics within the University who, whilst accepting the ethical and political responsibility for the construction of knowledge within an academic context, retain lay knowledge as either local residents, citizens or activists. As well as experiencing the emotive and affective bonds with fellow activists, friends and neighbours, that inevitably shape their wishes for the outcome(s) of the event, action or campaign and the destinies of the actors involved.

Conclusion: Advocating a Meluccian methodology in the co-production of knowledge

Melucci, I would argue, through his adherence to what Stones (1996) terms 'sophisticated realism', made a significant advance in our understanding of how to research social movements and collective action, even if those insights have yet to be thoroughly understood and taken up. I have sought to demonstrate that Melucci's approach to social movement studies is in accordance with a complex and realist ontology, and that such an ontology obliges an epistemological position which in turn suggests a particular approach to research. Melucci, by explicitly addressing the question of how one might research social movements (1992, 1996b), has refused to duck the question so adeptly sidestepped by such as Giddens (1989).

Whilst accepting that Giddens' (1984) 'structuration theory' overcomes the structure/agency dualism which has bedevilled much of sociological inquiry since the nineteenth century, I would concur with Stones, who asserts that: 'Giddens' disinterest in epistemological matters and his loose and unsystematic attitude to methodology means that, in practice, he has few rules of sociological research' (1996:92). There appears in Giddens, I would suggest, a reluctance to engage with methodology because of the diversity and plurality of research problems and potentialities. If, then, we are to conclude that an 'anything goes' approach is fine as long as we are 'loosely sensitised' by structuration theory, its ontological significance seems to have been vastly over-rated. Melucci (1996b), on the other hand, is quite clear about the implications his ontology has for the research process. The dualistic tradition of 'density of structures versus mobility of actors' has indelibly marked the 'conceptual models and research practices in the field of collective action' (1996b:381-82). Therefore, it is imperative that new, suitably reflexive, and hermeneutically inspired research procedures are developed in order to be ontologically consistent. To do otherwise is to risk repeating traditional methodological assumptions that have by inference flattened out the bold ontological terrain we have already charted. Method cannot be separated from ontology, and ontology has epistemological consequences, as Melucci asserts towards the end of *Challenging Codes*:

> 'This is not a question of innovative techniques alone. It entails, as part of the very process of research, rendering ever more explicit the social relations and the options that provide the procedure with its basis and which make it possible. In other words, what is called for is, as it were, a

situational epistemology, which social research increasingly needs if it is

to break out of the illusion that it stands outside or above the circular

observer-actor game' (1996b:396).

Then perhaps, we may, through a systematically theorised methodology, get close enough

to the 'real' to argue, as Melucci does, that: 'a limited situated knowledge can become

"true" when it carries with it the awareness of its own limitations' (1996b:396). Indeed,

such 'truths' may well be the source of knowledge-practices that can begin to address the

convergence of complex crises in the early twentieth century.

During the course of this article I have argued that the widespread acknowledgment of

social movements as producers of knowledge is not matched by a commitment to social

movement research which takes seriously an ethical responsibility to respect the

ontological and epistemological frameworks of knowledge production that emerge in

social movements. I have further argued that in order to begin the task of co-producing

knowledge we must reflect upon the ontological and epistemological frameworks that

inform the academy's engagement with movement actors in knowledge production and I

have drawn attention to the importance of social movements as actors exploring the

possibilities and limitations of structure and agency. Underpinning this endeavour is the

normative presumption that social movements are interesting because they produce

knowledge of the possibilities and limitations of human societies, knowledge which the

social sciences needs to urgently engage with and contribute to, if more creative and

desirable means of attending to complex problems are to be developed.

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