

Movement practice(s): how do we “do” social movements?

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How do we “do” social movements? And how can we do them better? Do you mean the same thing by “better” that I do? When we talk about “we”, do we have the same people in mind? Do we agree that what we are doing is a social movement – and do we mean the same thing when we say that?

In one way or another, questions like this are an inescapable part of organising, particularly when we set up new projects, reflect after a setback or strategize for the longer term. Whenever new people become involved or different networks and groups come together in new formations, communities, places or spaces; whenever our traditional ways of doing things aren't working, or we endeavour to imagine taking them further; whenever new resources and opportunities open up, or new intra-movement dynamics begin to emerge, we are prompted to think about our practice as movement participants, or the various practices and aspects of activism that we engage in (Ganz 2000, Krinsky 2008). While the overall shape of social movements has remained consistent over the past few hundred years, within the larger framework there is struggle (Tilly 2008).

Put one way, social movements are inherently contested: their boundaries, identities, languages, frames, theories, issues, philosophies, purposes, strategies, goals, tactics, allies, participants and so on, are always to some degree the subject of arguments – in fact it is often these kinds of complex, internal struggles that define different behavioural tendencies, factions, parties, and coalitions within a movement (Conway 2004).

Put another way, most of us are not born knowing how to be involved in social movements in effective ways (and being strongly socialised into a movement culture can at times be a disadvantage as well as a strength). Movements are dynamic, conflictual learning spaces, where different organising cultures and political memories, different social, perceptual, or emotional experiences and personal histories, different narratives, beliefs, and ways of thinking and talking bump up against each other in the backstage work that goes into making what – for a while, in a particular time and place – comes to be “just how we do it”.

***Interface* and movement practice/s**

Interface came partly out of the recognition of this situation, seeking to bring together some of the many different ways in which social movements have learned to operate and to think about what they are doing. Thus we have recognised different political traditions and forms of activist theorising, as well as different academic disciplines and approaches, as representing different ways

of talking about what it is that we do in movements, but also in some ways representing different kinds of activity. What some socialists may call class struggle, some anarchists may consider convergence. Some feminists may use the language of intersectionality, while others talk about transformative politics. Similarly, different social movements and organisations have different traditions of practice as well as different languages for discussing that practice; the same is true for different regions of the world. Even the definition of ‘violence’ or ‘non-violence’ varies from one context to another.

Our commitment to dialogue across these various barriers has both a practical and an intellectual dimension. The time and energy required to engage in critical reflection is usually limited in movement practice; and the pressures of everyday oppression and exploitation, the conflict with our external opponents, and our own internal tensions, all mean that it is quite an achievement to sustain spaces for this kind of practical dialogue – whether training workshops, theoretical discussions, strategic arguments or refining tactics. Given this, “learning from each other’s struggles” has much to recommend it: intellectually, we can understand (and develop) our own practice far better when we can stand outside it and imagine doing something else. This not only benefits the current and next generation of movement practitioners, but contributes to the richness, diversity, and accessibility of research and writing within and beyond the university.

Hence *Interface* has sought to bridge the gap between theories and practice; to publish critical perspectives; and to nurture a healthy exchange of diverse ideas for the benefit of activists and academics alike, working in different movements and contexts around the world. Importantly, the journal continues to make space for the (often undervalued) wisdom that comes from the lived experiences of activists across time and space. This special issue of *Interface* puts a spotlight on some of the more practical challenges and opportunities in translating different understandings of ‘how we do activism’ today. It explores, furthermore, some of the consequences at personal, institutional, and movement levels, especially through the eyes of activists.

Thinking movement practice(s)

In focussing on movement practice(s) in this issue, we might distinguish between practices and practice. Practices are the specific things that we do – how we make decisions online, how we consult with wider communities, how we organise an event, how we describe ourselves, how we handle confrontation, how we support each other, how we respond to the media, and so forth. Some would call this repertoire, or action, or tactics. In contrast, our *practice* would be the larger picture within which we do all of this: what it is we think we are up to in the wider scheme of things, why we do the specific things that we do. Sometimes this is called ideology, or praxis, or strategy.

How we arrive at particular practices, or a particular kind of practice, is - if not quite a mystery - then certainly a complex, multidimensional, and at times highly creative process of “movement learning and knowledge production”. We can at times act as though we are taking a particular tool, or orientation, “off the rack” - from our own movement’s history and culture, from a particular training or skill-share, from our reading and so on - but there are many different ways to “do” something as seemingly singular as taking minutes, using consensus decision-making, practicing prisoner solidarity or seeing the personal as political.

At times we find ourselves creating practice and practices in a slow collaborative process of situated learning, articulating our “tacit knowledge”; at other times we are very conscious of the difficulties we face and the choices involved, and discussion and theory are at a premium. At other times, still, events move so fast and new people are mobilising so quickly, that it is perhaps only in retrospect that we realise how creative we have been. Our decision-making around all of this can reflect the unintended effects of practical responses, the unconscious momentum of internal inequalities or unspoken assumptions, highly-formalised procedures that mask the real choices being made or moments of high drama.

All of this is particularly hard to manage when movements change: when hitherto-unpoliticised people take to the streets, when movements and communities that have previously ignored each other start to work together and try to speak across boundaries, when we start to create new kinds of facts on the ground, or the goalposts shift and we find ourselves in situations we never expected.

If any practice can be seen as grounded in and expressing a “we”, a “community of practice”, that “we” can be a small and closely-knit “beloved community” or a broadly “imagined community” whether based on nation, class, gender, sexuality or otherwise. It can exist primarily face-to-face or online, be grounded in the shared conditions and relationships of everyday life or in a common ethical commitment. We may have the opportunity to meet outside of the struggle, refine our practices and reflect on practice, or these may only exist in unusual moments and fall into latency the rest of the time.

Problematizing “practice” and “practices”, then, is another form of learning: looking more closely at what it is we do, how we do it, why we have come to do it that way, and whether it is in fact having the effects we intended for it. If in the heat of action we often have to rely unreflectively on the grammar and vocabulary of our particular practice/s, the reverse is true in less intense situations, where there is everything to be gained by slowing down and considering what we are up to and how we are going about it.

In this issue

For this special issue, we asked activists and scholars to reflect on the theme of “how we do activism” and for pieces addressing one or more of the following:

- What actually makes for good activism? How do activists evaluate strategy?
- What are the challenges (or benefits) of putting various understandings of “good activism” into practice and translating these strategies into tactics, coordination and communication plans, at organisational and movement levels?
- How have organisations and movements integrated personal experience, reflective practice, theory and research (or not), in day-to-day operations, training, recruitment, and evaluation procedures? What have been the outcomes and broader implications of such integration?
- How do activists effectively balance competing demands at personal, organisational, or movement levels? How useful are existing resources and support networks, and where are the gaps?
- Other questions relevant to the theme of “practice” and how it intersects with diverse issues, movements and approaches.

The articles we accepted on this theme move the conversation forward.

The Gezi Park protests in Turkey saw a flourishing and cross-pollination of movement practices. We have three pieces which all engage with the innovative art and performance practices used during the Gezi Revolts, suggesting that certain events might foster climates of innovation and spaces where power, resistance, and direct democracy might be articulated in new ways.

Balca Arda’s action note discusses “the politics of apolitics”, arguing that there is not only a crisis of representative democracy but also a crisis in oppositional politics, which needs to re-imagine its own forms of sociality. Ece Canlı and Fatma Umul’s article discusses the reclaiming of public space in the protests by women and LGBT individuals who have suffered oppression through gendered bodies and asks how this can shape future politics. Silvia Ilonka Wolf’s article on the Istanbulian nonhuman animal rights movement explores how cross-movement networking and ‘cosmopolitan activists’ can help mitigate what might otherwise manifest as tensions or inconsistencies between progressive grassroots groups.

Social media, in particular, have opened up new spaces for new types of practices. Kathleen Rogers and Willow Scobie illustrate how Inuit activists reframe the high-profile Canadian anti-seal hunt ‘selfies’ campaign with ‘Sealfies’ as an expression of indigenous sovereignty and identity. Stewart Jackson and Peter Chen’s event analysis of March Australia (organised entirely through social media, including Facebook) shows how effective these new platforms can be in mobilising mass grassroots action (even among older participants) and facilitating ‘swarming’.

E.T.C. Dee and Galvao DeBelle reveal how repression of political squatters in London and Barcelona is typically reinforced through negative stereotypes and discourses in mainstream news media - but also how activists sidestep these discourses, create new ones and at times win the battle for public opinion.

New 'hologram' technologies have also offered a new venue for dissent for Spanish activists fighting the government's new repressive "Gag Law" on dissent, as an interview with researcher Cristina Flesher Fominaya explains. Alberto Arribas Lozano's essay rethinks the weeks and months following Spain's extraordinary M15 protests (2011), which as he observes "marked a before and an after" in relation to movements in Spain, and demand new ways of practicing collective agency.

How activists organize mass actions is the topic of two 'practice notes'. Claire de la Lune draws on the reflections of activists in evaluating the experimental process through which several mass actions were organised for Reclaim the Power, which involves dividing participants into affinity groups; recommendations for strategic organising in future are also provided. In a similar vein, Chris Hermes and Ezra Nepon share their insights on the innovative (and successful) strategic campaign to raise funds for protests and legal defense in the context of the 2000 Republican National Convention, highlighting key messages for other organisers.

Christina Jerne's article explores the changes in anti-mafia activism in Italy from the nineteenth century up to the present day, identifying a shift from older models focussed on heroic acts of individual resistance to a contemporary mode of resistance centred around civil society organisations constructing an alternative market.

Focusing on LGBTQ organising, Daniel Cortese's study demonstrates that our understanding(s) of 'activism' (especially 'good' and 'bad' activism) are not static and monolithic, but inherently fluid and contested. Restricting definitions (in theory and practice) to the mythical 'perfect standard', moreover, risks neglecting important processes of identity and boundary construction that occur at the micro-level. Tommaso Gravante combines fieldwork with personal experience in commenting on anarchist practices (especially in Mexico and Italy), while emphasising the intellectual, heuristic, and emotive common ground with grassroots movements generally.

Another practice note, by Michael Loadenthal, elucidates some of the pedagogical and personal challenges encountered while broaching 'terrorism' at a prestigious North American institution. Finally, Heinz Nigg's beautifully-illustrated piece on refugees and undocumented migrants' 2014 "March for Freedom" from Strasbourg to Brussels documents the march's confrontational progress both on the ground and online, giving voice to participants and showing its political impact despite apparent weakness.

Each issue of *Interface* includes general (non-theme-related) pieces alongside the themed items. We start with two pieces on anti-austerity protest in Ireland where, despite media clichés, social movements are not absent. Mary Naughton's article on protest since the bailout documents this and shows that contrary to mainstream political science expectations, recent protests have not remained restricted to local and particularist concerns but have increasingly focussed on national and industrial issues arising from the costs of Ireland's "bailout" by the Troika. Rory Hearne's action note documents the massive movement against the imposition of water charges, including a level of non-payment and direct action which the state is struggling to deal with.

Selina Gallo-Cruz's piece discusses the US military's "School of the Americas" target of a long-running protest movement and accusations of involvement in torture and assassinations. She shows both the movement's impact in delegitimizing the institution and the institution's subsequent strategy for reinventing itself in a form intended to immunise it against protest.

This section is wrapped up by Eva Gondorová and Ulf Teichmann's report on the summer school "Social movements in global perspective". This ten-day event covered a very wide range of issues in social movement research; particularly worth noting are debates around the tension between Northern-dominated research and a global reality, and the encounter between historians and social scientists.

Finally, we have a bumper crop of reviews in this issue. Ana Cecilia Dinerstein reviews Cristina Flesher Fominaya and Laurence Cox's *Understanding European Movements: New Social Movements, Global Justice Struggles, Anti-Austerity Protest*. Gerard Gill reviews JP Clark's *The Impossible Community: Realizing Communitarian Anarchism*. Lika Rodin reviews Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve Lebaron's *Protest Inc.: The Corporatization of Activism*. Jamie Matthews reviews Alexandros Kioupkiolis and Giorgios Katsambekis' *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today: The Biopolitics of the Multitude versus the Hegemony of the People*. AT Kingsmith reviews Stefania Milan's *Social Movements and their Technologies: Wiring Social Change*. Niamh Mongey reviews Anna Schober's *The Cinema Makers: Public Life and the Exhibition of Difference in South-Eastern and Central Europe since the 1960s*. Finally Nils C. Kumkar reviews Donatella della Porta and Alice Mattoni's *Spreading Protest: Social Movements in Times of Crisis* and Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini's *They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy*.

The diversity and richness of the works reviewed testifies both to the diversity and richness of contemporary social movements and to the reviving and inspiring dialogues taking place between research, theory and action within movements, universities and a wide range of other spaces. Our practice and

practices as writers and activists, theorists and organisers, may compete at personal, institutional, and movement levels, but they enrich our understanding of what it is we are up to as we try to open up space for a better world to flourish.

New editors

Lastly, this issue we welcome three (!) new editors. In South Asia Radha d'Souza and Kasim Tirmizey have kindly agreed to join us and in Western Europe Eduardo Romanos. We look forward to working with them and to deepening our connections with movements and researchers in those regions.

References

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