Wondering while wandering:
living between academia and activism

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Abstract

This paper critically presents a reflexive account of the meaning of activism and its more personal implications as faced by the engaged researcher wishing to act as both an activist and an academic. The main purpose here is to offer a sincere set of observations on the research experiences undertaken as an activist academic in the hope that they might be helpful in some way to other scholars –especially younger academics– wishing to engage in similar studies.

Keywords: solidarity action research, activism, militant methods, social movements, emotions, political engagement.

Introduction

This article presents a set of reflections rooted in my personal involvement during the fieldwork for my doctorate. The investigation engaged with those social movements actively challenging the belief "there is no alternative" to capitalism (TINA), whilst creating workable alternatives in solidarity with marginalized people in the Global South, specifically the Zapatista (EZLN / FZLN) indigenous communities of Southern Mexico, through the practice of solidarity trade[1] (Pecorelli, 2014). The attention particularly focused on Ya Basta-Milano, a member of the Italian Ya Basta network and a member of the European solidarity Zapatista network that articulates autonomous political practices of solidarity at the local and global levels.

Ya Basta was founded in 1996 when a group of Italian activists, together with thousands of people from all over the world, gathered in Chiapas to take part in a global meeting called by the Zapatista movement, the first International Meeting for Humanity and against Neoliberalism. The Italian delegates decided to found an association named Ya Basta as an answer to the Zapatistas' request to the Europeans present in the global meeting to 'start a revolution' in the

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[1] The research concentrated on the potential importance as well as the limitations of solidarity trade as an emerging form of constructive resistance. The study adopts the example of the European Zapatista solidarity network (Redprozapa) to examine the nature of organizations involved in radical political practices. One organization – Ya Basta-Milano – was focussed on to examine in detail the operation of, and challenges faced by, an autonomous political group that engages in solidarity trade, being the hub for Italian Zapatista coffee distribution.

power centres of the international markets and capitalist system. Since 1998, Ya Basta has maintained direct relations with Chiapas, organizing and collaborating on different political projects in solidarity with the ideas promoted by the FZLN. This political actor is based in different cities; Ya Basta-Milano is based in the Casaloca social centre[2].

Occupied in October 2003 by a group of activists from the political association of Ya Basta-Milano and renamed Casaloca, this social centre is in the post industrial Bicocca[3] area and initially aimed to respond to the emerging need for more lively social spaces in the city of Milan. This represents an embodiment of an autonomous space within which a number of alternative projects have bloomed within the city of Milan since the Nineties. Since then, it has been proposing a tangible alternative for sociability inspired by the desire for freedom, collectivism, self-organization and solidarity. A number of projects (Students' Inn, a self managed kitchen, free legal support desk for migrants, Cafè Rebelde Zapatista for instance) have invested resources to provide services run on alternative political principles (horizontality, financial self-reliance, solidarity, etc) and providing an ongoing and creative attempt in the everyday journey of constructive resistance. Casaloca has attracted activists, sympathizers and local citizens to form a politically committed group whose activities are oriented towards the needs of the wider society despite and beyond the capitalist framework. Although it cannot be considered a big reality in terms of

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[2] A social centre represents a space where radical ideas become real alternatives for others; today's 'centri sociali' embody a recall of the past due to an historical resonance with the 1970s when the first generation of social centres was born (Montagna, 2006; Mudu, 2004). In those years, groups of young people all around Italy took part in the squatting of public spaces and empty buildings as a self managed solution to address the profound changes taking place within industrial society and as an answer to the crisis of consensus experienced by political parties who were no longer capable of representing the emerging political and social needs (Ruggiero, 2000: 176). Although each 'centro sociale' has a distinctive origin, character and focus, being linked to the particular historical period of its founding and to a specific local context and ideological currents, in terms of practical orientation, the main topics generally animating the Italian social centres include: globalization, solidarity with Chiapas, Palestine, the Kurds, the Basques, the Roma population, legal assistance for migrants, minority rights, anti-fascism, anti-racism, workers' rights, environmental and animal rights but also the legalization of marijuana, free copyright and independent media (Montagna, 2006; Mudu, 2004). These are the most widely-discussed issues, which are translated into political action (campaigns, demonstrations, public talks) or cultural events (concerts, shows, movie nights, benefit dinners) within the centres. A systematic analysis of activities carried out in Italian social centres is provided by Mudu (2004).

[3] This part of the city in the northern periphery represented the very first Italian industrial area. It used to house the Pirelli, Breda and Falck factories, considered to be among the biggest firms in Italian industry since the 1970s. During the 1980s, the old industrial structures were gradually dismantled and in more recent times replaced by the Bicocca university campus, residential buildings, business centres and large shopping malls (as shown in Figure 1.2) as part of Pirelli's 'Progetto Bicocca' to revitalize its properties. This plan covered an area of 960,000 m[2] and represented the largest urban regeneration intervention in Italy at the time (www.it.pirelli.com).

members taking part in the collective, it is a well known group in Milan and in Italy, thanks to different projects it has been running since 2003.

The following sections discusses a few issues based on the assumption that if, as activist academics, we commit ourselves to a form of research that aims to challenge an unfair economic, social and political order, we should be aware that this type of research process may unpredictably challenge ourselves too. (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Bello, 2008; Bobel, 2007; Pickerill, 2008). Before illustrating my journey within the realm of activism outside the ivory tower, I want to openly express my profound respect, gratitude and affection for those people who have welcomed me in Casaloca, and who are still working hard in Ya Basta, trying to make this world a better place. Even if the following pages may sound critical or negative to some readers, there is no intention of harming either the association I have been studying or the people with whom I shared an important chapter of my life. The whole study is the fruit of my personal experience; it depends on my sensitivity and political sympathy and I take full responsibility for it.

My personal interest in politics and activism is probably rooted in the history of my family, but it was during my secondary school days that I experienced a sort of epiphany when I first came across and felt attracted to political activism. One day in 1991 a large demonstration was organized against the first Iraq war in Milan. The school I attended was in the area of the city where this type of gathering and marches usually started from. I remember sitting at a table near the window and looking sideways at the big crowd in the street chanting and shouting slogans. Most of the participants looked like students about my age, and I guess the romanticized idea of the young mythic revolutionary figure played quite a role in my teenage sensibility (especially considering that the school was only attended by girls!). At the point when the demonstrators were beginning to move, I heard the headmistress' voice announcing over the school PA system a moment of prayer for peace in the world. I had (and still have) nothing against praying but as a teenager I felt much more drawn to taking part in the march than to sitting down and praying for peace (!)

My university years corresponded with the time of the Zapatistas' uprising in the Global South and the anti-globalization movement's first steps in the Global North. More significantly, for my activism experience, they coincided with the emergence of social centres, which started to prosper in each part of Italy, giving life to Durkheim's "collective effervescence" and passionate politics. After taking a couple of courses in geography and a journey around Chiapas, I realized which side I wanted to be on and I became radicalized. Social justice for me was no longer still just a word but became a real practice. So, from that point on, I began to take part in schooling initiatives for migrants and disaffected children, alternative shopping groups, eco village projects, Critical Mass nights, conscious consumption and fair trade groups and anti–war collective gatherings. I started attending a libertarian social centre in Milan and I participated in a range of demonstrations - including the three days of the anti G8 summit in Genoa in 2001, which represented a turning point for the Italian movement - as well as

the G8 in Gleneagles in 2005 where I met a number of other activist academics from Spain, the UK and the US. In the case of Genoa, for a few days that "inner periphery of politics" became the core in the eyes of international public opinion: 400,000 people were marching in the streets proclaiming that another world was possible, as naïve as that may have sounded under the attacks of the police. The violent re-education of 'Politics' with a capital P, as understood by Mouffe (2005), did not succeed for most of the people who took part to the anti summit; many of us were physically injured and most of us were psychologically shocked. Many participants reported that following the days spent in Genoa the noise of the helicopters and police sirens remained in their ears for weeks. As a result of the brutal repression of the G8 demonstrations in Genoa by the Italian police, my generation went back to their universities and collectives with the hard reality that "the political" was no longer a romantic idea.

Then, some years later, as an activist learning to become a scholar, I aimed to use my PhD experience to contribute to the ongoing debate about activist-research, inspired by Graeber's words, working with and for social movements to "[...] offer the ideas back not as prescriptions but as contributions, as gifts" (2004: 12). My involvement in the activist realm has followed different phases and has encompassed different positions that I had never questioned in depth until I began my doctoral research. I wandered and wondered shifting between two worlds: academia and activism. My methodological approach was distilled from a mixture of further reading and reflection and my personal experiences of conducting the research, which eventually led me to the idea of solidarity action research.

My first dilemma regarded the choice of a suitable method to collect nuanced data for the investigation and will be outlined in the first section. The second and the third parts of this piece discuss the positionality of fitting a double role, reporting some aspects of living inside the activism world and inside the university world. The last part honestly exposes and tries to rethink the position of activist researcher in the light of the hierarchy of emotions and personal sustainability.

Struggling with methods

At the beginning of the period of fieldwork in Ya Basta-Milano, I felt quite disorientated with regard to my dual role as both an activist and a researcher. Firstly because in the realm of qualitative methodology it took a while to find the appropriate set of methods that could include the two sides of my role. Secondly, because as argued in the next pages I was not fully aware of my activist identity.

Initially, I worked hard to be accepted by the group I was investigating. I first devoted particular attention to following all the procedures listed in participant observation guidelines in order to have a solid methodology. However, during this period of establishing my relationship with the group that I was studying,

putting my time and skills at the service of the association, carrying out whatever duties I thought might be useful (from translating documents to cleaning), I felt a subtle doubt gradually insinuate itself. Do I want to write about the change or be part of it? Is participant observation all about a tape recorder and a fieldwork diary? Shall I turn to action research instead and produce knowledge on a little explored topic while solving problems (which in my situation meant obtaining a PhD and helping to keep the space tidy while keeping an eye on the Zapatista Solidarity Network)? In summary, I was unsatisfied with my more traditional-academic methodological preparation. I was either fully engaging with the process or I would have been just an onlooker. On the other hand, involvement was a fascinating methodological issue and the morally decent thing to do but, at least in the way that I understood it then, it required an amount of time and energies that I did not know how to measure. At a later point, on re-examining my field notes from this period, I realized that I had probably experienced a sort of schizophrenic attitude where I was trying to be everywhere and at any time just in case some situation of key importance to my research might happen.

Moreover, I also began to perceive a sort of isolation about my experience. When I was in Casaloca, I thought of myself as an academic wishing to become a full participant in the work of Ya Basta. On the other hand, when I was at the university, I felt more like an activist hoping to be perceived as an academic and worried about openly showing my activist side. Nevertheless, I was trying to use my privileged access to knowledge in the academy to give visibility to and somehow maximize the impacts of a 'constructive resistance' (Routledge, 1996) that was largely just experienced in the activism context. At this point of the research, I felt the urge to explore other similar research experiences and investigations and, after having reviewed all the different levels of participant observation and action research, I finally discovered the idea of critical ethnography and a more politically committed form of action research known as solidarity action research (SAR).

Critical ethnography produces knowledge that is not limited to academic material to be taught and published. It also produces concrete strategies for supporting and developing the phenomenon under investigation (Juris, 2007). The researcher in this case works with the group being studied and also writes about the group, shifting his-her hybrid position of activist-academic between the "time of solidarity" and the "time of writing" (Routledge, 1996: 402). Building on this, the task of the researcher is to build a bridge between academia and activism through a democratic dialogue in a 'third space' of critical engagement "where neither site, role, nor representation holds sway, where one continually subverts the other" (Routledge 1996: 400). Within the panorama of ethnographic approaches, critical ethnography may provide some appropriate tools for collecting data and working for social change. If in my mind it had always been clear for whom the research was for, thanks to critical ethnography's idea of the role of the engaged scholar, it became clearer to me where my place should be as an activist academic.

On the other hand, I was still (naively) looking for programmatic directions as to how to proceed methodologically in the investigation but this approach did not fully provide them. So I went back to the literature around the discipline I was affiliated to –activist geography– but the discussion had been very general in nature and very little of it had been focused directly upon research methodologies. Despite many good intentions, academic literature has provided few direct examples about how to engage in activist research, probably because the term has so many meanings and represents an open process whose borders appear blurred and which is only united by the fact that it is traditionally understood to produce knowledge for activist ends. According to Shukaitis and Graeber (2007:9), activist research "[…] begins from the understanding of experiences and relations generated through organizing as both a method of political action and as a form of knowledge". Similarly, Mitchell et al. (2008) seem to agree that there is no blue print in being engaged with social movements. Furthermore, as Brydon-Miller et al. argue "we are forced to follow the problems wherever they take us and the best among us learn the theories, methods, and processes we need along the way" (2003: 21) and mess is part of the commitment to social change.

After reading this, I confess to feeling relieved. So, full of renewed motivation that I was on the right path, I accepted this torturous process, definable as "the beauty of chaos" approach (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003: 21), as a necessary part of my study. At the end of my research I was able to develop a synthesis of participatory action research, militant ethnography and activist research which I named solidarity action research (SAR) and was conceived as an evolving methodological approach that is committed to social and political transformation to build a bridge between academia and activism through a democratic dialogue in a "third space" of critical engagement (Routledge, 1996). This is intended as being "for" and "from" social movements (not just "about" social movements) so that the researcher works explicitly "with" and "for" civil society, taking part in the change rather than observing it.

Being an activist or doing activism?

After having managed quite successfully – at least from my supervisors' perspective – a rather chaotic approach to activist methodology, there were still a few dilemmas looking for answers. These issues comprised a more individual sphere and were rooted in the complexity of emotionally coping with two overlapping, complex, nuanced worlds: activism and academia. The term 'activism' means many different things to different people (Burbach, 2001) and it is somehow overused, elusive. The social movement literature argues that it is to be connected to personal and collective emotions as hope, joy, anger. It "comes from the heart" (Cope, 2008: 80), "it is something we owe to our fellow human beings" (Bello, 2008: 91), it is a way to say something about ones moral self and often it is awakened by the question "if not you then who?" (Pickerill, 2008: 133).

As anticipated in the introduction, it was during the years of my studies for a degree in political science in Italy that I became politicized and gradually more radicalized. Taking part in political activities, activism was a desire for action rooted in a sense of injustice, a sort of emotional trepidation rooted in anger, hope and joy, to overcome the fact of feeling powerless when facing the world. In my university years, I became actively involved in a number of social and political initiatives, although despite my increasing involvement I remained rather reluctant to define myself as an activist. Even if I was doing lots of activism, I did not consider myself as 'super active', as my efforts were sustained enough to deserve the label. These issues surfaced again when I started to attend a political environment, a libertarian collective in Milan.

My idea of activism at that time was shaped by a stereotype that Bobel describes as 'living the issue' with relentless dedication, anchored to "core values of rigour and humility" (2007: 147). Perhaps, it can be best illustrated via a conversation with some friends, remembering the time we used to attend the squat together, one argued: "We weren't really activists! We were just comrades. Those who were always there (in the social centre) were activists, those who always talk to the police, to the institutions". Interestingly, this underlines a significant point confirming the tension between 'doing activism' and 'being activist' (Bobel, 2007). The 'comrades' who just shared political ideas and projects within the social centre 'did activism' but did not do enough of it to gain the label of activist *tout court,* in other words they practiced a less than perfect activism. In this perspective, while the former played a role of being sympathetic and supporting the cause, the second were personally and publicly involved and whilst all were considered comrades, the latter group were perceived as being more active than the other members.

The label 'activist' often leads some of these individuals to be perceived by others as those in charge of everything, those you can rely on for practical and political questions, whose opinions sometimes may even or often (depending on the collective) carry more weight than the others' during an assembly because they are more politically experienced and outspoken. This aspect can be enforced by a specific radical lifestyle, activist ghettos, an activist culture that in many cases helps "cementing the very fragmentation between activists and others" (Barr and Drury, 2009:257) as if being an activist would confer the right to know better, and do better than those who though equally unhappy with the existing order have not fully embraced activism, or do not share activist methods. Through tireless commitment, full dedication, selfless sacrifice and public exposure, some group members may approach the personification of the 'mythic revolutionary hero' detached from the mundanity of everyday reality (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2009).

During the last phase of my research in Milan, I finally experienced full involvement in Casaloca, putting everything into living the cause; my world was all there in the squat, focused on social centre activities and needs. But while those considered 'super active' members were aware of the cost of their dedication and often lamented their physical fatigue juggling with other

mundane duties such as a job, my position was privileged. In a critical perspective this period was self referential. My political ego was finally satisfied, I finally felt to merit the activist label while I was somehow legitimated to spend most of my time in Casaloca by the fact that I had an academic task: collecting data for the research. In methodological terms, by the last phase of the fieldwork in Casaloca, I probably experienced "the collapse between boundaries of the researcher and the researched" (Kitchin and Hubbard, 1999: 15) and somehow touched levels of the activist 'perfect standard' (Bobel, 2007).

My daily routine was beaten by political activities in terms of time and energy – a sometimes 7 days a week, tiring, thrilling, joyful job where my individual priorities were aligned with the cause and the research. I had become one of those who could always be there, my political identity was fused with the collective identity of the group I was researching; perhaps in their eyes but surely for my ego, I had become a 'good activist' at least for a while. However, soon the period devoted to doing research on the ground expired and my position of activist-academic had to be rethought pondering the "time of solidarity" and the "time of writing" (Routledge, 1996: 402).

So if my dilemmas faced in choosing the right method were resolved, the tension between the time spent sharing activism with the Ya Basta members and the time required for writing for academic priorities (Routledge, 1996) highlighted other difficulties that led to a further renegotiation of my position as activist. Going back to university meant abandoning daily political actions, becoming less physically present in terms of the availability of energy and time to devote to Casaloca. If I was to complete my research, I had to limit my involvement in last minute scheduled meetings or those endless and draining debates that would have interfered with my daily work. In reality, by that point, I was more often in front of my laptop writing about my colleagues than working side by side in the squat. Nevertheless, this situation underlined an uncompromising division of my role. For this reason, I felt guilty and in a way 'disloyal' to the members of Casaloca. How could I fuse my academic duties and a fully activist role? Would I end up as "those who can't, just teach" (Pickerill, 2010: 133)? Aware that my full time engagement at Ya Basta-Milano had created some expectations, I was afraid that returning to the ivory tower would have been perceived as abandonment. Back then, I had not fully negotiated my identity as activist, but with hindsight I can affirm that Cortese's study (2015) on "good" and "bad" activists would have helped to make sense of further nuances of the "activist" construction.

Nevertheless, the contradictory question of "sitting at the desk trying to find the right words to describe the worlds these comrades are actively working to change" (Mitchell, 2008: 104) is an issue that other engaged scholars have acknowledged in working with and for social movements (Brown and Pickerill, 2009, Pickerill, 2008). Then, my concern ignored the fact that writing for political change in an academic context is part of the activist life of activist academics and is possibly another vivid way to work for the cause. It means taking activism outside those milieus that are understood as the only sites of

dissent, such as social centres, and transforming academic spaces into suitable areas for political awareness, critical reflection and the pursuit of social change. It is about giving voice and legitimacy to those radical phenomena otherwise stigmatized or neglected by mass media representations and to present them critically to a wider public. However, from a 'non academic-activist' point of view the fact of being paid to work for and with social movements may look like a sort of privilege; who would not like the idea of getting money for combining work and passion? Therefore, if the commonly voiced critique of the desk-bounded activist academic may sound unfair, on the other hand it is an understandable position for those activists who devote their spare time and energies to the political cause while bound to jobs which may be perceived as less rewarding.

What if I look like an activist?

Invited to lecture in the local university about my research, I faced the dilemma of how I should best present myself to my students given the political nature of the topics covered. My ambition was for my lecture to be heard and to avoid being stigmatized as 'a fanatic' or 'a dreaming anti-capitalist' especially after years in which protesters have been harshly described by the tabloid media as violent and dangerous, particularly since the marches against the G8 in Genoa. As Cortese (2015) suggests, the word activist can paint negative stereotypes in the minds of those outside of the movement, sounding arrogant and or irrational. As Maxey (1999: 2009) states, recounting his own experience as an activist during direct action campaigning in Great Britain, "the label activist was applied to me in ways that were not always comfortable".

What was the most effective tool for inspiring others to get involved in social change? For my personal and political story, 'those days in Genoa' to adopt a common activist expression, had (also) emotionally affected the way I presented myself both in an academic context and in private life. Similarly, to Maxey (1999) I was not comfortable with being constructed as an activist by people who had their own understanding of what this expression meant. Specifically, in the Italian case, this had been produced by a massive media campaign condemning the activists and the dissent while legitimizing police repression and brutality. For this reason, Genoa is still something that activists who took part in the counter summit would name carefully and would not share openly.

Consequently, in more formal contexts such as university lectures, workshops or conferences I tended to entrench myself in very formal clothes and use academic language with the idea of providing legitimacy to topics under discussion and possibly masking my activist side. Before lecturing, I worried about issues such as: "What if I am perceived as less credible or even 'dangerous' because of my political activity?", "Would the pearl earrings and white blouse be enough to disguise for a while my activist background?" Although these questions sound naive, I was struggling not to be be trapped in the stereotype of the one "who took part in the mess of those days during the G8

in Genoa," losing the opportunity to create a space for the students in which the conditions for critical analysis were guaranteed, a space to 'denounce' and 'announce' to use Freire's words (1973). Academia is often (although not always and everywhere) still a place in which opportunities for critical thinking, debate, encounters, diversity and free speech are possible (despite some general critiques of contemporary universities as exam-factories, problem-solving think tanks, feudal institutions or neoliberal puppets; e.g. Holloway, 2005; Burbach, 2001).

As a scholar, I aimed to support critical thought to favour the deconstruction of mainstream ideas and stereotypes; at the same time, as an activist, I wished to communicate that social change is possible. When lecturing, besides theoretically framing radical examples of social change experiences (such as the Zapatista uprising, social centre activities, the G8 anti-summits, fair trade etc.), whilst there were a small number of enthusiastic and sympathizing students, the majority usually had a resigned or skeptical attitude. Surprisingly, when it came to recounting my personal experiences of different radical projects the general atmosphere often changed, with the students becoming more attentive. Would it have been the same if I had turned up dressed in activist clothes such as a t-shirt with a Zapatista slogan on it? Most probably the academic dress was less threatening than the activist one, at least for me. Personally, a more formal dress provided a balance for integrating the activist role into the academic, almost transcending it when talking about delicate topics. This was particularly meaningful when teaching because in a way, my activist part was emotionally charged, shaped by the heart, while the academic side embodied the rational thought to frame and explain (Brown and Pickerill, 2009). In addition, as an activist academic I felt somehow responsible for voicing alternative political experiences in teaching contexts, promoting the deconstruction of stereotypes produced by mainstream media and making appear real and possible social change experiences and alternatives that are otherwise generally regarded as radical, utopian, crazy.

The personal lesson I learnt from this experience was that looking and talking formally and 'giving up' temporarily the activist part, at least aesthetically, may ease the process of turning the classroom into a space of hope. A 'shabby' outfit, a radical sentence on a red t-shirt does not transform an individual into an activist (nor does a tie or pearls transform them into an academic!) The questioning of the activist stereotype refers to mass media representations, usually carrying a negative impact in the eyes of less politicized people and in which the activist themselves may feel trapped if not aware of it. In considering this, activist academics could perhaps pay more attention to their activist role when teaching or presenting in non activist environments; otherwise there is a risk of missing out an opportunity to interact with others on uncommon ground (Chatterton, 2006).

Emotions and activism?

In the previous pages, the focus was on the process that led me to consider myself first as an activist and then as an activist-academic. In what follows, the discussion dwells upon how the activist researcher's position might be critically rethought in the light of the theoretical approach of Brown and Pickerill's (2009) call for creating a sustainable space for emotions in activism, and Wilkinson's (2009) concept of the present 'hierarchy of emotions' in autonomous politics. Social scientists have paid increasing attention to the role that emotions (such as hope, fear, joy, compassion, love, sorrow, anger, empathy, frustration and passion) play in motivating activism and mobilizing political action (Bosco, 2006; Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Cox, 2011; Juris, 2008; King, 2005; Pickerill, 2008; Pulido, 2003).

Emotions are present in every phase and every aspect of social movements, and movements identify which emotions are in their view the most important for politics (Goodwin et al. 2001). In Wilkinson's (2009) view, however, this approach to activism and emotions may create a sort of hierarchy where only some feelings seem appropriate for activism while others such as anger or frustration are out of place if not addressed to the cause, as though some feelings could be more political than others, more appropriate to activism. So far, most of the literature considering social movements and emotions tends to understand this relation as collectively shaped. Individual needs and desires are associated with the political collective identity, remaining untheorised in their more personal extent. Emotions such as anger, hope, and powerlessness (etc.) are a powerful force to pursue social change and forge collective action when they are channeled in a political frame.

However, if collective action is the result of an alignment between the activist's personal sphere and collective identity, how can we manage the more individual emotional part of living /working between activism and academia if still this interplay –as suggested by some scholars– (Bondi, 2005; Brown, 2007; Cox, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2008; Wilkinson, 2009) can be confusing in the way it is intended and practiced? As mentioned before, in Ya Basta-Milano as other groups sharing similar ideals the political aspect was often the first concern to which devotes time and energy. The attention of the collective is therefore always "out there beyond personal problems" (Barker et al., 2008), running after the future to create alternatives, keeping the space going in order to be politically visible. In spite of that, the ethic of care in creating a better world for all, in organizing 'the world how you want it to be' may not have included a more intimate personal sphere; individual needs and priorities were often taken for granted or relegated to the spare time.

In practice, when I was taking part in the Casaloca collective, it was comprised of individuals who shared the same political idea of the world but were also shaped by other priorities such as work, love relationships, family, money or health issues. When personal actions could not be aligned with collective actions, tensions and judgmental remarks sometimes arose. For instance

resentment and frustration would be experienced when someone was not available to stay until 4 o'clock in the morning to close the squat after a dancehall night, or available at hard working weekends to fix and clean the space. Emotional matters derived from personal frustration and guilt were whispered among comrades but only openly debated on rare occasions. This attitude may illustrate that these 'other' emotions are massively important, whether or not they are seen as being so by activists. This may also question whether "only certain feelings are productive for activism, while other emotions have less relevance in activist theory and practice" (Wilkinson, 2009: 39). In what I experienced, the personal emotional sphere was scarcely considered a possible resource for making the group feel more connected. Connection came from being comrades, sharing the same political perspective, and affective bonds and friendship was based on the shared political interest. But what happens when you cannot put all your time into the cause? Is the criticism 'you do not care enough' the only answer to such circumstances? How long would people remain committed if they felt no longer recognized as 'caring enough'?

In essence, keeping a distinction over what is political (and therefore more urgent) and what is not (and therefore unworthy?) may cause the perpetuation of a selection of emotions. In this perspective, some emotions were not given space because they were simply considered not just out of place but also as time wasting. As a matter of fact, time is often an issue for the radical realities considered to be significant for the cause. The amount of time physically devoted within the group may be seen as characterizing how much you politically care. As described before, Ya Basta-Milano has been self-managing a number of projects in Casaloca that require a considerable amount of energy and time especially considering the number of activists involved, as often lamented by its members but also considering the principles –self management and collectivism – around which these projects are run. Therefore discussion of more personal issues was frequently presented as not urgent and relevant. At the end of the day, when it takes ages just to decide what food will be served and who is going to buy the food for 80 people and then cook a whole Mexican for a fundraising, would discussions about emotions fit in?

Concluding remarks

My time spent collecting data as activist researcher in Casaloca turned out to be a 'work in progress', shaped by unpredictability, messiness and personal dilemmas and on the intersection between action and reflection, theory and practice, the political and the personal and between the individual and the collective. I developed SAR as a methodology to complete my fieldwork, to teach and to negotiate my double identity. However, most of the time, the easiest part of it (I admit) was in using academic space and resources (teaching, publishing etc.) to voice alternatives as real and sensible possibilities. I became aware that a certain degree of messiness and chaos is a normal aspect of the process of working with social movements and I dealt with a double role as activist and

academic (moving between the ivory tower and the barricades). Unfortunately I was not able to promote networks with other activist researchers to create political, psychological and academic support to share similar perspectives and avoid isolation and demoralization. In the activist field, I felt rather more 'unarmed' than in academia. As described in the previous pages, when the fieldwork period finished it was evident that the 'perfect standard' guiding my involvement in the social centre was no longer sustainable given my academic priorities. I could no longer base my whole life on activism *tout court*, at least in the way some Ya Basta-Milano members understood it.

This led to a need to renegotiate my role within Casaloca and in relation to its members, with whom I had affective bonds based on friendship and admiration. In my opinion, when I stopped my full-time presence in the autonomous space of Casaloca, my life was still absorbed in the same struggle to create feasible alternatives but in another context: academia. However, I felt my academic research may be perceived as more of a personal commitment with little political relevance for the association. Then, the attachment and respect I felt for Ya Basta-Milano members and for the shared political cause was unconsciously used by me to shut down a possible dialogue with them about my concern, fearing that it might undermine the balance of the collective or disrupt group harmony: as Wilkinson (2009:41) interestingly describes this attitude, a "dual emotional framework: consensus = good; conflict = bad".

This however, raises a new methodological question: did I take my analysis as far as I could? With the collective's members, I felt no urgent need to openly discuss the fact that much of the dilemmas and emotions I experienced for devoting my time to my life choices, such as writing my research, was also shared by other members for similar reasons. Moreover, to what degree can an activist academic doing solidarity action research stimulate changes? I was not sure what would have been the best way to initiate discussion, for instance over the 'perfect standard,' without appearing as the stereotypical figure of the intellectual who from the top of the ivory tower shows the way to those down on the barricades. Hence, would disrupting the apparent balance of the group have been effective for empowering it? On the other hand, those emotions I did not publicly discuss in the activist context (because they may have been stigmatized as not being politically framed), were problematized by scholars, finding at least a space for debate in academia. As argued by Cox (2012) individual sustainability in social movements is a complex topic; hopefully, the methodological and emotional reflexivity embraced here will produce a brick for building "sustaining spaces for emotions within activism" (Brown and Pickerill, 2009: 24), though I suspect there is still some way to go in this direction.

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