

"ACTION=LIFE": What Toronto AIDS activists can teach us about mobilizing for essential services

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Abstract

In this essay, we consider how the methods of Toronto-based AIDS activists from the 1980s and 1990s can inform contemporary struggles related to essential services during and after the pandemic. AIDS activists are known for queer, creative and bold interventions. The research methods informing their activism are also worth learning from. Here we look behind the scenes at how activists shifted public attitudes towards AIDS by reframing it as an outcome of political decisions, rather than a natural condition. We trace the work of the late political activist ethnographer George W. Smith whose approach inspired social movement activists in the 1980s and 1990s and has incredible resonance/relevance now. His work helps us to appreciate how COVID-related deaths are not natural, but can be linked to decisions of governments. Further, through attending to "life work" and identifying political and institutional barriers to living, we can support political organizing during the pandemic.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS activism, political activist ethnography, essential services, pandemic, life work, Canada

Over the past year, the inadequacy of Canada's public infrastructure and social services has become apparent. Many have called attention to the shortcomings of public programs related to unemployment, child care, long-term care and social housing, while also advocating for major investments in public forms of care, and for equitable responses that put the care economy at the centre of policy-making (Armstrong et al. 2021; Peck 2021).

In building from this emergent wave of activism, we can learn from the strategies and tactics of past movements. Some have already noted the legacy of AIDS activism in informing how movements can make demands for essential services and public sector supports during the pandemic or to speak back against government inaction (Kinsman 2020; Shotwell 2020; Schulman 2021). Drawing on research we conducted with Alexis Shotwell and Gary Kinsman as part of the AIDS Activist History Project (Hurl and Klostermann 2019; Klostermann 2019), we would like to share what we have learned from the work of the late political activist ethnographer George W. Smith.

A long-time gay liberation activist, Smith was a key organizer with the activist group AIDS ACTION NOW! in Toronto through the late 1980s until 1994, when he died of an HIV-related illness. He was known for challenging the police

repression of gay men during the bathhouse raids in Toronto in the early 1980s and for demanding support and treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS. He was also a novel social theorist who worked with Dorothy E. Smith (no relation) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and contributed to embodied, social justice driven research (Choudry 2015; Hussey 2012; Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006; Shotwell 2016).

"To summarize his work," Smith's long-time partner and fellow activist, Sean Hosein (2014), notes, "it was about giving people the ability to see how they were being oppressed and to use that information to subvert the agents and agencies of oppression."

Smith's activism and thinking is notable in changing the frame through which AIDS was approached at the time. In the late 1980s, public policies treated AIDS as a death sentence. Care was approached in a palliative format and people living with AIDS were framed as "victims" under the assumption that they would ultimately die from the condition. Against this view, activists in Toronto worked to expose how death from HIV/AIDS was in fact an outcome of political decisions – the product of a political and economic milieu in which governments, medical experts failed to provide people with necessary support. As one AIDS ACTION NOW! flyer from the time notes: "Many of the barriers to proper care for people living with HIV infection are political not scientific."

Along these lines, AIDS ACTION NOW! challenged the political barriers to living with HIV/AIDS. They were successful in organizing around a range of issues, including access to drugs, medical services, sexual education and contraceptives, but also providing social support when people lost their jobs, helping people find doctors and navigate complex bureaucratic protocols in order to attain access to social programs. They recognized how people could encounter a range of different challenges depending on their distinctive location, and were central in mobilizing support for marginalized groups, including prisoners, sex workers, and drug users.

How did these activists organize and confront barriers to living? There are three points that are central to Smith's approach that can inform social organizing today:

1) From speculation to investigation

For Smith, AIDS activism wasn't just about getting loud, making noise or coming up with slogans. He challenged what he called a "speculative" orientation to social activism that attributed "agency to concepts such as 'homophobia' or ... 'red tape'" (Smith, 1990, p. 634). The central target, for Smith, should not be the homophobia of individual police officers or the slow response of governments.

Instead, he adopted a self-described "materialist" approach. This involved identifying places where people encountered obstacles in getting what they

needed to survive, charting the practices through which social services were delivered, and documenting how they were institutionally orchestrated. The aim of activists was to examine how society is put together in order to identify targets for activism and change.

2) Centring life work

Smith took the everyday work that people do to survive as his starting place. Beginning from what he called "life work," he documented the everyday activities that people engaged in to get what they needed in order to live.

Through interviews and social solidarity work, Smith built connections with people living with HIV and documented their challenges accessing drugs, long term disability support or employment insurance. As part of the 'Hooking Up' project with Eric Mykhalovskiy, Smith conducted interviews with people living with HIV/AIDS, tracking the everyday work of individuals to sustain themselves. Their goal was to learn about the embodied situated work that people do, as a way to learn about how social services and institutional processes shape people's lives.

But life work is not just undertaken by individuals. It also includes the work we do collectively to live differently. From this perspective, a central aim of social movements is to extend the capacity of people to live through collectively identifying and confronting barriers to living. As the AIDS ACTION NOW! slogan goes: "ACTION=LIFE."

3) Documents and demonstrations

Smith understood research and activism as existing in a symbiotic relationship:

On the one hand, research informed activism. By speaking with people living with HIV, activists got a sense of the obstacles that they experienced in getting what they needed to survive. This provided activists with targets that they could mobilize around.

On the other hand, activism was understood as a form of research or knowledge production. Smith's active engagement with public agencies through ongoing political confrontations generated further knowledge about these institutions, opening new doors to political organizing. We generate knowledge through social movement activism – learning from the response.

These ideas can help us to understand and organize in the current context.

AIDS activists' work helps us to grasp that COVID-related deaths are not natural. They are socially organized and based on the policy-decisions of governments. When a government refrains from rolling out social assistance to the unemployed, destroys homeless camps, refuses to relocate prisoners, or fails

to ensure the adequate provision of care for people in nursing homes, they are directly contributing to increasing death rates.

As we’ve learned from activists, tracking the work that people do to survive during the pandemic can provide a fitting starting place for mobilization. From accessing medical or social services or to ensuring safe working conditions or adequate levels of care, attending to our everyday work and considering how it is socially organized can inform actions.

By recognizing the symbiotic relationship between research and activism, we can use political mobilizations as opportunities to learn about how things are organized. Pushing governments to disclose information on their practices can open up new targets for organizing. Making a complaint about working conditions can further reveal how the institution ‘works’ (Ahmed 2021; see also Fernandes 2020).

“SILENCE=DEATH” and “ACTION=LIFE” are two expressions from the work of AIDS activists working in the late 1980s and 1990s. Learning from their efforts can spur political action aimed at understanding and transforming conditions of life. We can start where we are, get with the group, and both identify and confront barriers to living. It’s well worth asking: What work do we do? How is it organized? And how can it be otherwise?

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