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About *Interface*

Interface: a journal for and about social movements is a peer-reviewed journal of practitioner research produced by movement participants and engaged academics. *Interface* is globally organised in a series of different regional collectives, and is produced as a multilingual journal. Peer-reviewed articles have been subject to double-blind review by one researcher and one movement practitioner.

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***Interface**: a journal for and about social movements*
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Editorial

Heike Schaumberg and Levi Gahman[1]

War, famine and genocide, but that's not the whole story...

The long shadow of genocide

2025 opened and ended in the shadow of ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people. The concept of ''ceasefire" has come to mean ''temporarily less fire', and the US – Zionist alliance – the Israeli occupation and its global arbiters - envisages the conclusion of this genocide not to be the guilty to stand trial in The Hague or a Nuremberg trial equivalent, but instead ethnic cleansing of Gaza and the West Bank to make way for perversely profitable reconstruction and real estate projects. There is no guarantee that this is where the violent appropriation of land and people will end, and Israeli attacks on Lebanon and Syria are suggestive in this regard.

2026 began with a major violation of international law and incursions by a super-power. Trump's US administration decided to bomb Venezuelan territory and kidnap its elected president, Nicolás Maduro to stand trial in the US for alleged drug trafficking charges. The real crime seems to be rather that Venezuela, under Hugo Chavez, had nationalised its own oil resources to use the revenue for its national agenda and provided substantial economic support to Cuba, which has been blockaded by the US for decades. It is ironic that the 'land of freedom', the United States of America's capitalist class, as the most vociferous proponent of the free market is the world's single largest issuer of economic and trade sanctions (blockades) in sheer contradiction to both concepts. But of course, it should not go amiss that Trump announced he will take over the running of Venezuela in the meantime and sell its oil, while standing right next to the master-chief of genocide, Netanyahu, who smugly smirked. The remaining leaders of the "West" responded ignominiously at best. The message is clear: if the US administration can do this to Venezuela, then they can do this to any Latin American country and elsewhere. But they forget that it also opens the floodgates to retaliation and increasingly dressing the US-China competition over natural resources in Latin America, for example, in warrior clothes. It is buttressed by Milei bragging on the first day of this year that he was building a Far-Right front to "stand up to socialism", by which he means any form of social responsibility by the authorities and capital, to which 10 countries in the region had already signed up, all subordinated to their supreme chief: Donald Trump.

Bomb-shelled lay before us the remnants of inclusionary and diversity oriented policies, fiercely trampled upon by UK's current Labour PM, Starmer, whose fear-mongering about becoming an "island of strangers" attack on immigrants was called out by The Guardian as echoing the racist Enoch Powell's 1960 "rivers of

[1] Our gratitude to Laurence Cox for his valuable comments and corrections on a draft of this editorial.

blood" speech in parliament. Just as it immediately served then the political legitimization for Fascist groups such as the British National Front (NF), today it empowers the Far Right's efforts to build its base, electorally and ideologically made to look presentable by the Reform Party, through racist mobilisations against immigrants. The Reform Party is bolstered also by the decimation of the Tories, whose place Starmer's disfigured Labour Party has since taken. The Far Right feeds off the resulting despair and hopelessness that characterises years of austerity and the dismantling of social and political rights of the working-class. And just as it was then, in 1970s Britain, successfully pushed back not by government or state institutions but by a broad anti-Nazi social movement, it is currently being fought in much the same way, local communities led by the country's Left who created *Rock against Racism* and the *Anti-Nazi League,* combining clear-cut anti-fascist politics with cultural intervention 'from below'.

As the Starmer-led government clumsily stumbles through the existing minefields of systemic crisis and opts for the easy, anti-immigrant route, this growing death toll has been eclipsed from the headlines by Zionism's genocide but is yet another consequential marker of this bloodthirsty era: migrants swallowed up by the sea. Last year, 46,843 people reached the Canaries on the increasingly perilous Atlantic route, up from 39,910 in 2023. According to a recent report from the Caminando Fronteras migration NGO, at least 10,457 people died or disappeared while trying to reach Spain by sea from 1 January to 5 December 2024.

The large pro-Palestinian movements around the world at last succeeded in pulling the mask of victimhood off the Zionist colonial project and have made strides ahead crucially with the general strike in Italy on 3 October this year, forcing the right-wing Meloni government hands to send war ships in support of the Global Sumud Flotilla seeking to break the Israeli siege on Gaza by sea. The European establishment is getting cold feet with Netanyahu's ethnic cleansing, and many of Israel's allies, including France, the UK and Canada among others were forced to recognize the Palestine state. Following the fiercely violent police repressions of pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Germany, the country's pro-Israeli Chancelor Friedrich Merz now criticizes the Israeli army's actions in Palestine as no longer justifiable. Yet, they silently watch on as Israel continues to bomb Gazans despite the 'peace deal' and supposed 'ceasefire' for which Trump eagerly wants to take credit and absurdly thinks he should gain the Nobel peace prize. But more preposterous even was the Nobel Peace Prize committee's response. Did its esteemed members stand up to Trump's irrational pressure and give it to genuine peace activists, individually or collectively? Many potential contenders come to mind: from a young courageous and consistent Greta Thunberg, or Francesca Albanese, 'the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967' for articulating a clear UN peace position, or indeed the Irish MEP, Clare Daly, for her persistent hard work in the European Parliament to lobby effectively for peace, or any of the heroic press workers and journalists reporting from Gaza and Palestine, who in most cases would receive the honour posthumously; more than 240 of these professionals have been killed by the Israeli occupation, many of whom were

targeted both as individuals and specifically as members of this profession. Instead, the Nobel Peace Prize was handed to María Corina Machado, Venezuela's opposition leader who works tirelessly to bring down a democratically elected government there, with a little help from her friends in the White House. The farce has surely reached its zenith.

The 'good citizen's' wars and genocide

The 'good citizen' is hailed by the current wave of extreme right-wing governments as the objects of their desire for legitimization. The ideal of 'the good citizen' has historically penetrated right-wing discourse, which seeks to drive a wedge between the law abiding, apparently non-deviant from norm and accepting of their condition and subordination hard working men and women, from the trouble-makers, the rebels, the trade union and social movement activists, the 'outsiders', the 'downtrodden' whose shabby condition the 'good citizen' shuns for fear of social contamination and being reminded that ''the good citizen'' is not, after all, an innate genetic quality but an unreliable social and political construct.

After the defeat of fascist rule in Germany there were those ''good citizens'' who claimed lack of knowledge of the extermination mostly of Jews, but also Roma and Sinti, disabled people, and anyone who didn't put their head down during the Nazi onslaught on the working-class and on progressive thought. In post-war reckoning, few believed those living within the vicinity of the concentration camps when they insisted that they didn't know how to interpret the smoke and stench of burning corpses descending onto the villages from the gas chambers. Then, the silent complicity was difficult to prove.

In today's world of visual and textual interconnectedness, however, there is no such doubt. For two years, everyone has witnessed directly the genocide committed against the Palestinian people as it was streamed live on social media by courageous media and volunteer emergency workers from or present in Palestine who became key targets of Zionist bombs and terror. One would have to claim to be physically blind, illiterate and deaf all at once to tune out the bombs falling on Palestine, to unsee the horrifying mutilation of a people's existential right to exist and build its future on this planet and their ancestral lands they have cultivated for centuries. The ecological obliteration, which the environmental journalist George Monbiot calls 'holocide', is the eradication of any potential Palestinian sustenance from the land.

When the Vietnam war was televised into the ''good citizens''' living rooms in the US in the 1960s, the first war to be witnessed directly at long distance, it had a traumatic impact on subsequent national political processes, eventually contributing to President Nixon's downfall triggered by the Watergate scandal. Today, we are not yet able to contemplate the long-term political impacts of this genocide against the Palestine people for the future of a much more integrated world than it was then. However, one effect that does already crystallize is the normalisation of such brutality, rendering less visible other massacres and wars

(from Sudan to the Democratic Republic of Congo among a growing number of cases) as wars and terror increasingly erupt from capitalism's nervous system.

In Argentina, the 'good citizen' is invoked by Milei and his party, La Libertad Avanza (LLA), as having long suffered at the hands of the state, taxation, regulation of capital and financial activities, inclusive politics, territorial communal and environmental protection, labour rights, price regulation among many such alleged ills that limit ever so slightly profiteering. The libertarian 'chainsaw'' aims to dismantle the public sector, with the exception of the armed forces, the police and all those that further the concentration of power in the presidency. Similar efforts are under way to a greater or lesser degree in the US and elsewhere. Milei's rant against Woke in his Davos address earlier this year made clear an ideological attack on anything deemed to be on the Left, including Social Democracy. Milei, before taking over the presidency, had dedicated a book to criticizing Keynesianism as laying the foundations for theft by the state in favour of the delinquents, his favourite opposition to the ''good citizen''. Those designated as ''delinquents'', however, might well believe themselves to be hard-working and generally law abiding ''good citizens'' and until they find out differently, faced with social democracy's failure to meet its promise of inclusion and equity, Milei speaks to them.

Nevertheless, a spectacularly failing economy and two severe corruption scandals directly implicating the Milei family have resulted in a harsh bashing of the LLA in the provincial legislative elections held in the country's most populous province, Buenos Aires in September this year. In response, and as he has done throughout his presidency, Milei went begging to Donald Trump. The result: in an extraordinary move by the White House, Trump blackmailed the Argentine electorate offering a $40 billion bailout of the economy but only if Milei was to win the legislative elections six weeks later, leaving Argentineans to wonder what would happen if he didn't win. Nevertheless, as so often, this was not the whole story, taking on board that over 30% of the electorate did not vote in that election on 26 October, the highest rate of abstention for mid-term elections since 2001, albeit the nature of the abstention then felt more like collective defiance, whereas today seems to be more a case of alienation and powerlessness that underpins abstention This surprising turn-around victory for Milei is not as solid as it might seem.

The government lost its vetoes on the budgeting of the universities and the Garrahan hospital, one of Latin America's most important children's hospital, where striking staff won a 61% increase in their basic wage despite Trump's intervention. Defensive mobilisations in the streets against government attacks on the public good and social, political and human rights are ongoing. The Argentine case highlights the limitations for far-Right governments to become hegemonic in today's world. Nevertheless, the costs of their duration will be far-reaching in terms of depressed wages, an ever-increasing gap in purchasing power, and the undermining of social, political and human rights. Wealth disparity within countries has skyrocketed. These elite ''good citizens'' don't offer

any solutions to resolving poverty as mainstream media outlets want us to believe, instead they generate it.

Justifying the unjustifiable doesn't come cheap

How are the atrocities justified? The emergence of Far Right capitalist leadership, infused by technological dominance and manipulation, employs the well-funded "art" of deception by projection and denial as a tool for achieving and sustaining legitimacy. It is how Netanyahu justifies one of humanities' worst genocides since records began by claiming those seeking to defend their people from invasion and occupation are genocidals and terrorists despite the death count's spectacular failure to attest to such an eye-for-an-eye fable.

Similarly, this is how Argentina's extremist right-wing government officials, like Vice President Villaruel wanted (against powerful resistance) to overturn the pages of human rights' achievements by insisting that the military torturers who stood trial were the real victims of left-wing guerrilla warfare, again without the numbers adding up, unless we begin to believe that those in power are weaker than those who are dominated by those in power. Examples of such claims are numerous and could become a collected works of fiction. They turn Hegel's theory of the unity of opposition on its head and with it, any notion of common sense.

But in a world where vast sectors of society are alienated from their own agency, deprived of access to power, subject to fake news and rumours that pervert the facts, whose consistent experience is that of exploitation and being taken advantage of, it seems like a herculean effort to interrogate such distortions, never mind challenge them on a regular basis, when most energy is increasingly expanded in everyday strategies of survival at the expense of a broader horizon of alternatives. But that does not mean that these regimes of oppression will indefinitely endure without facing a challenge to their crippling short-sightedness and unsustainability. The key question is not "if" they fall, but "when" and "how".

The end of neoliberal capitalism: appearances and real tendencies

Mamdani's election, among others, in the US and the emergence of Left electoral alternatives in Britain and in France for example, shine a light onto a more hopeful horizon. They are the product of the intermittent surges in important popular struggles: uprisings in Argentina and Bolivia 2001, followed by collective governance in Porto Alegre and the rise of the *Sem Terra* movement in Brazil, an aurora of popular defiance in Greece, the Gezi Square in Turkey, the 'Arab Spring', the M15 in Spain, the Gilets Jaunes and the rise of *La France Insoumise (LFI)* in France , advances by global women's movements, among others. More recently, the reaction (Far Right challenges in many parts of the world, authoritarian turns, attacks on a broad range of rights and progressive thought) confronts, in a tug of war fashion, more social movement challenges and working-class re-organisation from the bottom up, examples of which include India's huge farm law protests and anti-CAA movement (against the explicit discrimination

regarding Citizenship Amendment Act 2019), the Sri Lankan uprising, two waves of Hong Kong protests, two waves of the Movement for Black Lives Matter, #EndSARS, the Myanmar resistance, Rojava, the uprising in Madagascar among many others smaller and larger movements. Examples are the current mass protests in Mendoza (northern Argentina) in defence of the water reserves and the 'Glacier Law' which Milei wants to flexibilise to benefit extractivist capital. Indigenous communities, frequently women led, are often at the forefront of today's multitudinal struggles opposing extractivist capital across Latin America

Esteemed readers of *Interface*: we are reaching the conclusion of the crisis of the neoliberal era and it doesn't look pretty. Increasingly more countries are dragged into the wars of the twenty-first century. The ''never again'' slogan *appears* to not have made it past the twentieth century, pushing humanity to an abyss of evil and catastrophe worse than what went before it. It is not just a repeat of earlier times; there are new ingredients in this explosive stew and hence, despite appearances, this chapter has not yet been written. Some of these ingredients include weapons of mass destruction, the robotification of the front lines of military aggression, and the accelerating climate crisis among others. Wars, genocide, poverty: none of these ills are inevitable as such, but they are intrinsic to capitalism. The main oppositional force to capitalist competition is the cooperation and the solidarity of the working class. It is noteworthy that despite the attacks on it, its traditional organ of class-based organisation, the trade unions, have failed to set the agenda, and it is uprising and popular cross-section social and political movements that are trying to fill that space. It does not mean that trade unions are absent or obsolete: their historical task is to rekindle their rank-and-file combative organisation apt to defend their members' interests in the world today. Social movements are showing the way and growing strike waves in various European countries, especially Italy in solidarity with the Palestinian people, the coordinated industrial action by air traffic control staff across major European borders, the Bharat Bandh general strike involving millions of workers from diverse productive and service sectors in India in July this year, to strikes by university employees, junior doctors and more recently, transport and public service sector strikes in Britain to ongoing labour conflicts in South Korea and Amazon warehouse workers in the US among others, indicate an awakening. These struggles drive the push for new political articulations.

In an anticipated response to these pressures, Trump's trade war is about disciplining his own capitalist class to return to the United States and reignite the local production line: his election promise. Immigrants are scapegoated. Industrial and manufacturing capitalists had shifted their business to Asia in droves at the end of the Cold War when triumphant Western capitalisms sought to appropriate much cheaper labour to nurture the rise in profitability of the 1990s, scattering the Global North with industrial wastelands and their structurally unemployed communities, only in part absorbed by the growing service sector. Yes, this is the juncture of contradictions where social movements forge a way out of this grim hole, and in today's world, these social movements have no options but to directly oppose capital.

Kenya's #RejectFinanceBill2024 uprising illuminated the structural violence of neoliberal austerity and its entanglement with authoritarian state repression. The bill, drafted under IMF pressure, sought to expand taxation on basic commodities in order to service debt accrued through elite accumulation and global financial dictates. Youth organisers translated its technical language into accessible terms, politicising the act of reading and exposing the bill as an instrument of recolonisation through debt. This process generated a consciousness that linked everyday hardship to the demands of global capital. Online mobilisation merged with mutual aid, which ensured that demonstrators had food, water, and medical support while facing state violence. Police repression was ferocious: live rounds fired into crowds, mass arrests, and dozens upon dozens of deaths. The storming of parliament was clearly an expression of class antagonism in a society squeezed between external creditors and a comprador elite. The partial retreat of the state did not resolve the contradictions; it merely bought time. The future of this movement depends on whether youth insurgency can converge with organised labour, informal-sector associations, and neighbourhood committees to build structures resilient enough to endure repression and wage a protracted struggle against neoliberal domination.

Similarly, Nepal's wave of Gen Z youth-led protests exposes the hollow character of its republican order and the unfinished work of dismantling oligarchic patronage. The attempted ban on TikTok and other platforms revealed the political class's fear of digitally networked mobilisation. Young protesters recognised the ban as a strategy to choke dissent, linking it to decades of graft in which state resources were siphoned into party–business networks. Tens of thousands filled the streets, reframing "anti-corruption" from a technocratic slogan into a structural critique of class rule. The demand was not for cleaner management but for the dismantling of cartels that treat state power as a vehicle of private enrichment. The state responded with curfews, arrests, and smear campaigns, demonstrating its authoritarian reflex when challenged from below. The revolt marks a generational rupture with the settlement that replaced monarchy with parliamentary oligarchy while leaving intact systems of accumulation. Its long-term trajectory arguably depends on whether the righteous indignation of the youth connect with peasant struggles and labour movements to build organisations capable of contesting the entrenched elite. Otherwise, the energy risks being absorbed into surface reforms that preserve the dominance of *comprador* capitalism.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the persistence of warfare demonstrates the logic of imperial accumulation by dispossession. The M23 rebellion, openly backed by Rwanda, serves as a proxy mechanism that fragments Congolese sovereignty while ensuring uninterrupted flows of cobalt, coltan, and other strategic minerals to Western and Chinese markets. War functions here not as breakdown but as governance, structuring labour regimes, displacing populations, and facilitating the penetration of global capital. The systematic uprooting of rural communities clears the way for resource corridors under armed protection, thereby commodifying land and labour for export. Villages are razed, farmland appropriated, and miners forced into hyper-precarious work

under the supervision of militias. Yet within this devastation, popular organisations continue to resist. Women's associations sustain food production, cooperatives regulate access to markets, and churches provide both relief and political education. These practices preserve life by forming emergent alternatives to the extractive state and its international patrons. Western policy discourse frames Congo as a humanitarian tragedy, yet this masks the continuity of colonial plunder now pursued under the sign of humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping.

Sudan's civil war reveals the brutal mechanics of counter-revolution and the militarisation of famine as an instrument of social control. The Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, heirs to colonial militarised governance, target the remnants of the 2018–19 uprising by encircling entire cities and weaponising scarcity. In El-Fasher, humanitarian corridors have been blocked for months, transforming hunger into a political weapon aimed at dismantling neighbourhood committees. Epidemics surge as hospitals are bombed and sanitation infrastructure is destroyed. Such practices of annihilation represent a deliberate strategy to break the back of revolutionary Sudan. International mediators stage diplomatic theatre while maintaining arms transfers and geopolitical alliances that perpetuate the violence. Yet amid this devastation, neighbourhood committees persist. They operate clandestine kitchens, underground health clinics, and systems of information exchange that refuse to surrender the terrain of everyday life to the state or paramilitaries. These infrastructures of care embody the survival of emancipatory politics under siege and sustain possibilities of dual power even when confronted with starvation and terror.

The Philippines offers a textbook case of authoritarian governance as the backbone of corruption. Revelations of vast kickbacks in flood-control projects exposed how the state transforms (not so) "natural" disasters into opportunities for accumulation. Contracts were deliberately inflated, infrastructure was left dangerously weak, and profits were shared across legislators, contractors, and military actors. Communities devastated by typhoons faced a violent one-two punch defined by ecological destruction and elite profiteering. Protesters named the system for what it is: a politico-contractor bloc that converts disaster into profit. Demonstrations connected these revelations to broader demands for wage justice, housing rights, and climate resilience. State repression was swift, with arrests and intimidation deployed to protect the interests of ruling elites. Yet the exposure of these networks has politicised corruption as a structural class relation rather than an administrative aberration. The protests echo an anti-imperialist politics that links climate justice with the dismantling of authoritarian capitalism across the islands.

On the front of geopolitics across West and South Asia, Saudi Arabia's defence pact with Pakistan illustrates the regionalisation of authoritarian security regimes. For decades both states depended on U.S. militarism, yet they are now consolidating their own counter-revolutionary bloc. The agreement deepens arms transfers, intelligence sharing, and surveillance technologies, which ensures

that labour movements, democratic uprisings, and dissident voices face a coordinated system of repression. Amidst the headlines, what is being left out is the sobering fact that migrant workers across the Gulf will continue to experience intensified exploitation under the arrangement. Their political activity is being further criminalised while their livelihoods become more deeply bound to coercive regimes. Popular uprisings in South Asia face a strengthened wall of state violence equipped with Gulf finance and military technology. For movements resisting exploitation, this pact demonstrates that authoritarianism no longer functions in isolation but as part of transnational alliances. Effective resistance must therefore be internationalist, building solidarities among workers and activists that match the geographic reach of authoritarian power. See below our call for papers for our next Special Issue on this topic.

At the same time, the Guyana—Venezuela dispute over Essequibo has transformed the Caribbean into a site of renewed imperial contestation. ExxonMobil's oil discoveries placed Guyana at the centre of U.S. strategy, with Washington deploying its military and diplomatic machinery to guarantee extraction. This intervention pits neighbouring states against one another, deepens militarisation across the region, and heightens the risk of proxy conflict. At the same time, the discovery locks Guyana into a petro-economy that reproduces dependency and accelerates ecological devastation. Indigenous communities and grassroots organisations resist by defending land rights, challenging oil contracts, and linking extractivism to colonial domination. Left movements across the region recall the history of Caribbean federation and the need for unity against external control. Essequibo thus stands as both a territorial conflict and a struggle over the region's future. The choice is stark: remain subordinated to imperial oil capital or reclaim sovereignty through collective, anti-imperialist resistance.

Markedly, Palestine remains the clearest demonstration of colonial domination and global complicity. European governments have extended symbolic recognition to a Palestinian state while continuing to arm, finance, and defend the Israeli apartheid regime as it wages genocide in Gaza and ethnic cleansing across the West Bank. Recognition without sanctions and material divestment functions as a mask for complicity and legitimises the very structures of colonial occupation it claims to oppose. Palestinians persist in organising survival under siege: schools operate in tents, farmers return to scorched fields, and mutual aid networks deliver food and medicine under bombardment. These practices embody a politics of steadfastness that refuses erasure. International solidarity from below advances through student encampments, trade union port blockades, the freedom and *sumud* flotillas, and protective presence in villages under threat, even as activists face repression for standing with Palestine. Indeed, the struggle for Palestinian liberation exposes the bankruptcy of liberal diplomacy and the humanitarianism industrial complex, not to mention affirms that self-determination will not be granted by states but forged by struggling from below and solidarities rooted in unity and resistance.

Across these diverse geographies, the lasting legacies of empire continue to echo with remarkable consistency. Debt, famine, militarisation, and ecological collapse are deployed as tools of governance, while authoritarian states enforce an ongoing imperial world order through censorship, surveillance, and naked violence. Corruption is revealed not as a deviation but as the organising principle of the ruling class, binding capital, racist dehumanisation, gender-based violence, and coercion into a unified system. Critical analysis makes plain that these dynamics reproduce colonial relations in updated form by preserving a world economy premised on plunder and repression.

Yet growing and increasingly inter-connected movements across the Global South and North continue refuse to accept this fate. They are building infrastructures of care, consolidating grassroots organisations that endure beyond moments of spectacle, and weaving solidarities across borders in defiance of the powers that be. From Nairobi to Kinshasa, Khartoum to Kathmandu, Manila to Riyadh, Gaza to Georgetown, the pattern is one of counter-power rooted in daily life and prepared for rupture. Liberation is no longer a deferred aspiration but an immediate necessity being demanded by movements who refuse to remain subjects of empire and who are prepared to transform the conditions of history itself.

The US – China-competition reduces social democracy to rubble

Trump's announcements that he wants to seize Greenland and the Panama Canal and his dismissal of the national border with Canada as an imaginary line could have been interpreted as a declaration of war, and that would have been the case had this been announced by heads of state in North Korea, Venezuela, Russia or perhaps even China. In response, somewhat pathetically, the existing European leaders wavered between dismissing Trump as a theatrical act and scrambling to peddle up to him to "negotiate" allegedly genuine US security interests. All of this occurred even before he officially had stepped back into the White House. Reality has forced him to backtrack slightly on his trade war as the US economy looks increasingly shaky and alternatives to US dollar dominance are now being actively sought, but the trade war hasn't gone away as arguably he was able to re-write some more favourable terms of international exchange: but will it lead to an economic recovery? With the threat of the AI bubble and the housing market in the US bursting, there aren't many signs to believe that.

Trump's peaceful record in international politics from his first term in office that underpinned his "'Make America great again' by avoiding conflicts threatens to turn dangerously violent in his second term, untamed by an establishment of representative democracy in shatters. Nevertheless, it was the previous governments in office, including the Democrats and their duplicity and culpability in genocide of the Palestine people that paved the way for the unabashed Israeli ethnic cleansing of Gaza and its growing threats to the entire region, with Trump envisioning redevelopment complete with Trump towers in a Gaza and without Palestinians.

For now, irrespective of the names of the presidents in power, capitalism is edging closer to a Third World War in a nip and tuck way driven by the US – China competition for global dominance. Bit by bit, conflicts erupt across the Middle East, the African continent, countries in Latin America are facing US pressure and even the threat of direct military intervention, East Asia is holding its breath confronted with the threats and pressures of a powerful China reclaiming the region as its unquestionable sphere of influence, while war between NATO-backed Ukraine and Russia heats up the arms race and entices appetite for war amongst government leaders in Europe, especially in Britain. So where do the social movements today fit into this picture? What are their historical legacy and prospects? These are the questions that our journal is dedicated to exploring through committed and critical research.

The new polarising processes shaping up reveal the fragility of representative democracy, its institutions and the social, human and economic rights that had been won by the working-class since its emergence. What will decisively shape the Trump administration will be the agency of the working class in its broadest forms to generate social movements with a vision for the future. When humanity is in its darkest hour, such vision might seem impossible, but at the same time it turns indispensable. Arguably, Mamdani's electoral success is in part the consequence of the local communities that have responded so powerfully to the authoritarian crack-down on immigration giving rise to large in many US cities, and we all have seen footage of citizens' interventions against ICE abductions on the streets. The growing pro-Palestine protests mobilised sections of US based Jewish communities against genocide. It is this agency on both counts that ensured Mamdani's electoral success and that frightens Trump into lowering his tone for now.

Argentina also reveals general tendencies. For much of the twentieth century Peronism was a Latin American equivalent of Social Democracy par excellence, articulating a ''Third position'' in the Cold War era based on 'social justice', while relinquishing anti-capitalist alternatives to the status of an unlikely dream. Left-wing and working-class demands to enact that social justice met with deadly military coups. Extreme conditions nurture extreme outcomes.

In the midst of the 1990s' failing neoliberal adjustment policies backed by the IMF and other multilateral financial institutions, unprecedented mass social movements of the unemployed began to challenge austerity, rapidly expanding employment flexibilization and unemployment. Workers from across productive and service sector rubrics in the SME sector (Small and Medium Enterprise), often owed months and in some cases years of wages, took over their companies when faced with asset stripping and bankruptcy declared by their greedy owners. Uniquely, these workers, usually after lengthy occupations of the company premisses, created a political and productive movement of workers' cooperatives that achieved the legal expropriation of the enterprises into the workers' hands. Most of them are still operating today as enclaves of workers' defiance and are educators to the working-class in the actual sense of the word. They championed popular education schools, *Bachilleratos Populares,* targeting young adults to

return to complete their secondary schooling and developing novel pedagogies in the process. They are supported by others, such as teachers, university students and staff. The workers opened the companies to the society that had helped them to resist police evictions and to re-start production under workers' control. Thus, the workers' cooperative is not just a productive but also a social and politically significant entity. It is important to stress that despite the long, democratically elected duration of the progressive Kirchner governments (2003-2007; 2007-11; 2011-1015), the workers' demand for the universal application of the expropriation law across all provinces was never granted. Today, with the financial strangulation of the Small and Medium Enterprise sector in particular, these workers' cooperatives are facing very harsh conditions of survival.

Not surprisingly then, today's right-wing capitalist counter-offensive in Argentina is obsessed with re-affirming the dominance of private property. But these workers' movements have done their historical task and sown the seeds for a future post-capitalist society, one that is based on the socialisation of production where collective and direct democratic decision-making is the central building block for the society as whole, organised not "from above" but collectively "from below". Sprouted from the actual lived conditions under austerity capitalism, that perspective has already proven in praxis to be a lot more sustainable than anything the capitalist elites can muster. More importantly, we no longer lack the vocabulary to describe key economic organising principles for a future post-capitalist society.

The editors apologize for this unusually long editorial. It is a reflection both of recent interruptions in publications of *Interface* due to volunteer staff turnover and re-making it fit for purpose, and also of the multitude of massive changes, shifts and movements that crystallize from the deepening crisis of capitalism, only some of which we were able to capture here as a contribution to debate and food for thought.

This issue

The items in this issue attest to diverse aspects of the actualities and tendencies already highlighted above. Firstly, however, readers will find our most recent call for papers, *Transnational repression and social movements*, which explores the ways in which transnational repression has become a defining challenge of global activism. The special issue invites empirical, theoretical, and practical contributions on how authoritarian and liberal regimes deploy cross-border repression, how movements adapt and resist, and how media, digital technologies, and global power shifts reshape contemporary repression.

Burcu Binburga's *The struggle for 'life': anti-mining mobilization in Turkey* shows how, faced with the growing erosion of representative democracy, social environmental movements opposing mining in Artvin in Turkey are responding with deepening democracy within their movements.

Gino Canella, in *Contested terrain and the distribution of social movements*, explores the how social movements navigate and adapt to the new contexts of political and class conflicts that articulate in communications and online media.

Madeline Lord, in *Transforming the statist domination of society: Radical democracy in Mexico and Kurdistan*, draws from interviews and archival research to compare *Cherán* (Mexico) and *Mexmûr* (Kurdistan). The paper illustrates how radically democratic societies are transforming statist domination through women's liberation, ecology, and stateless self-government. Despite divergent paths, both places reveal the emergence of a communal subject as the key agent of democratic transformation.

In *Spontaneity during moments of the whirlwind: Airport protest to President Trump's original Muslim ban*, Thomas Piñeros Shields explains how apparently spontaneous mobilisations combine rapid improvisation with pre-existing organisational routines and established principles. The case demonstrates how *Movimiento Cosecha* quickly decided to act and leverage a crowd to gain legitimacy with police, politicians, lawyers and media, which underscores how organisational capacity underpins seemingly "spontaneous" protests.

David Purucker, in *Reviving the mass organization for social movements? The meaning of membership in the Democratic Socialists of America,* traces the history of ups and downs of the mass membership party and what the author argues to be its reinvention in new, more democratic clothes.

Taura Taylor, in *Daughters of the comb: exploring consciousness-raising, anchored consciousness, and micro-resistance in the natural hair movement,* explores how the natural hair movement constitutes a form of micro-resistance, and which arguably contribute to a broader generalization of a consciousness of resistance of the oppressed.

In a similar vein regarding subtleties in social movement building and impacts on the larger fields of political articulations of resistance and struggle, *A quiet revolution — transcending and transforming political engagement in the transition movement for community climate resilience* by Anna Willow explores forms of climate action that negotiate contemporary organizational and ideological complexities by opening up novel spaces for activism and action.

The issue concludes with Alexander Brown's review of Sabu Kohso's *Radiation and Revolution*.

About the issue editors

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Convocatoria
Represión transnacional y movimientos sociales.

En un mundo altamente interconectado, los movimientos políticos se han vuelto omnipresentes [ubicuos]. Las/os activistas de los movimientos, en particular en regímenes autoritarios, han buscado refugio en estados más liberales. Sin embargo, el declive en el liberalismo y las innovaciones en las respuestas a rivales opositores locales por el estado más allá de sus fronteras geográficas, requiere una atención seria.

Freedom House [La Casa de la Libertad] define la Represión Transnacional (RT) como los gobiernos que llegan más allá de sus fronteras para silenciar la disidencia entre diásporas y exilios a través de métodos como el asesinato, deportaciones ilegales, secuestros, amenazas digitales, abuso de Interpol e intimidación a las familias. La RT practicada por regímenes autoritarios en Oriente Medio está profusamente documentada. Las/os activistas de Falun Gong en países occidentales enfrentan coerción de parte del estado Chino a través de amenazas a miembros de sus familias en China continental. De modo similar, activistas de los movimientos de Jalistán y Beluchistán que residen en América del Norte han sido objeto de campañas de asesinato supuestamente orquestadas por agentes estatales Indios y Paquistaníes.

Mientras la RT está a menudo asociada con gobiernos autoritarios, las democracias liberales también han jugado un rol, a través de la colaboración directa con regímenes represivos (e. g. notificaciones rojas de INTERPOL), o indirectamente a través de iniciativas como la Guerra contra el Terrorismo. Con el aumento del autoritarismo en países como Israel, India y los Estados Unidos, es fundamental examinar cómo las democracias tradicionalmente consideradas defensoras de los Derechos Humanos están implicadas en estas prácticas. La RT, al proyectar control político interno hacia espacios internacionales (Lewis, 2015), plantea cuestiones urgentes sobre su impacto en los activismos globales y en las respuestas de las/os activistas. Las/os activistas en solidaridad con Palestina enfrentan acoso, deportaciones, detenciones arbitrarias, especialmente en EE.UU. y Alemania. Las/os trabajadores de la información en el "*global fact-checking movement*" (movimiento global de verificación de datos) (Graves, 2018) son también perseguidas/os de modos que desafían la relevancia de las fronteras nacionales. El caso del fundador de WikiLeaks Julian Assange, del periodista del Washington Post Jamal Khashoggi y los sistemáticos y sin precedentes asesinatos de periodistas en la actual Guerra de Gaza (Turse, 2025) destacan aún más el alcance global y las consecuencias de un tipo diferente de represión a los movimientos.

Por qué esto es importante.

El número de Mayo de 2011 de Interface se enfocó en la "represión de los movimientos", pero la escala y complejidad de las prácticas represivas con

consecuencias globales sugiere volver a revisar este tema. Mientras la represión a disidentes, exiliadas/os y emigradas/os de Estados autoritarios está bien documentada, el fenómeno de la represión transnacional representa un desafío distinto y en constante evolución. Implica tipos distintos de regímenes que emplean tecnologías cada vez más sofisticadas para extender sus alcances más allá de sus fronteras. Estos repertorios represivos transnacionales ameritan nuevas formulaciones teóricas. Por ejemplo, Earl y Braithwaite (2022) proponen un "marco estratificado" de represión de movimientos sociales que pueda dar cuenta de los efectos ascendentes y descendentes de la represión política; cómo la represión sistemática de poblaciones enteras impacta significativamente en protestas específicas, y cómo movimientos específicos se vuelven fundamentales en la promoción de regímenes transnacionales de Derechos Humanos y el compromiso de los estados con los Derechos Civiles. Tal formulación plantea un cambio, aunque no necesariamente, de explicaciones comunes basadas en la elección racional para la represión de los movimientos, hacia una interpretación Foucaltiana del poder más amplia y comprensiva.

El rol de la censura de los medios y de los flujos globales de información en la represión transnacional (RT) requiere de un examen particular. En la era digital, los regímenes explotan el ciberespacio para suprimir la solidaridad transnacional, en particular a través de la vigilancia y el acoso online, como en el #MilkTeaAlliance de Tailandia, Hong Kong y Taiwán. El Big Data (y las grandes empresas tecnológicas) está directamente implicado en la censura, la vigilancia y la supresión de activistas, como lo demuestra el caso de la aprobación de Facebook de anuncios que promueven el asesinato de activistas pro-Palestinos (Intercept, 21 de noviembre de 2023). Se entiende que ciertas protestas son políticamente convenientes y los estudiosos de los medios de comunicación suelen demostrarlo a través de cuestiones relacionadas con la representación de las noticias, la supresión, y la cooptación de los eventos políticos (ver Gamson, 2004; Cottle, 2008; Tufekci, 2014). Pero se conoce menos respecto de los resultados, y en particular de las consecuencias particulares para los movimientos sociales que genera esta atención mediática selectiva. Esto requiere nuevas maneras de pensar en la represión de los medios, el activismo transnacional y el activismo en las periferias.

El fin de la guerra fría y la emergencia de un orden multipolar vienen acompañados de movimientos y formaciones populistas que a menudo trascienden las dicotomías ideológicas rígidas. En este campo, Moss et al (2022) destacan la especial atención que debe prestarse a la forma en que los contextos de los países de acogida, las alianzas bilaterales y los acuerdos regionales de seguridad moldean los contornos de la represión transnacional. También se requiere una mayor comprensión sobre las motivaciones tras la represión, más allá de la disuasión calculada hacia las nociones de furia, venganza, injusticia percibida o incluso como una performance (Earl and Braithwaite, 2022).

Algunas preguntas clave que abordará este número

Este número busca examinar las formas, causas y consecuencias de la represión transnacional (RT) a través de distintos regímenes y cómo las/os activistas resisten o se adaptan para redefinir la legitimidad y la resiliencia de sus movimientos. Invita a la reflexión sobre cómo los repertorios de contestación responden a la vigilancia digital, a los ciberataques y al control de la información, y bajo qué condiciones tienen éxito o fracasan. Se invita a las/os autoras/es a considerar cómo los movimientos pueden basarse en estrategias globales de resistencia en medio de una censura y represión que está en constante cambio. Invitamos a contribuir con análisis empíricamente fundados, históricos, teóricos, estudios de caso y exploraciones regionales, reportes, opiniones, entrevistas relevantes, contribuciones centradas en repertorios de represión transnacional y cualquier material significativo de cualquier parte del mundo. También se reciben herramientas, guías prácticas, tutoriales y repositorios que promuevan el intercambio de información abierta y la verificación de datos. Pueden abordar preguntas como las siguientes, aunque no es necesario limitarse a ellas:

1. Cómo las comunidades activistas que son objetivo de la RT reconfiguran sus activismos, alianzas, y prácticas de seguridad en respuesta a la ella? Cómo las/os activistas de los movimientos se protegen, resisten y se adaptan a los agentes represivos procedentes del extranjero, y cómo se vinculan con activistas locales?
2. Cómo las dinámicas Sur-Sur complejizan la dicotomía estándar autoritario-liberal en la represión de los movimientos? Cómo explicar la RT al interior de hegemonías regionales?
3. Requerimos nuevos enfoques teóricos o metodológicos para examinar la represión, en particular la RT? Es necesario repensar el significado de la RT dadas sus manifestaciones diversas, interdisciplinarias y transversales? Qué integraciones conceptuales [son necesarias, y cómo se implican en la teoría de los movimientos sociales?
4. De qué maneras las democracias liberales son cómplices en la represión de los movimientos -a través de mecanismos pasivos (e.g. exportación de tecnologías de vigilancia, el compartir datos con Estados hostiles) o cómplices activos (e.g. deportaciones, notificaciones rojas de Interpol)? Cuáles son las dimensiones emocionales, afectivas y performativas de la represión más allá de la disuasión estratégica -e.g. venganza, humillación, o afirmaciones de soberanía?
5. Cómo los sistemas legales, la cooperación en inteligencia y los acuerdos bilaterales sobre la seguridad de los países anfitriones permiten o resisten las prácticas de RT? Cómo los marcos legales -tales como las leyes internacionales de Derechos Humanos, las leyes de asilo, o los tratados de extradición- constriñen o facilitan el alcance de los estados represivos?

6. De qué manera las diversas dimensiones de la RT se expresan y analizan en clave interseccional y de género? Algunas formas de movimientos o algunos actoras/es de movimientos, se encuentran bajo un mayor riesgo de represión?
7. Hasta qué punto las plataformas de medios globales funcionan como espacios tanto de exposición como de supresión en las campañas de RT? Qué lecciones pueden extraer los movimientos de las experiencias de las víctimas de RT en relación con la precaución frente a los medios, su cobertura y su representación?
8. ¿De qué manera la cobertura mediática, o la falta de ella, de los movimientos en las periferias por parte de las sociedades del centro, impacta su legitimidad y éxito? ¿Cuál es la naturaleza discursiva, simbólica y representacional de este impacto para las/os activistas, sus acciones y sus objetivos? ¿Cómo pueden los movimientos responder a estas *intervenciones de los medios* en su práctica? ¿Existe un potencial de resultados sustantivos a partir del activismo performativo?
9. Cómo puede la represión digital, incluyendo el ciberacoso y la censura mediante algoritmos, restructurar los flujos de información global y las ecologías de los activismos? Cuáles son las maneras en que las/os activistas se pueden proteger de la censura y la vigilancia en la entorno digital?
10. Existen buenas prácticas, iniciativas promovidas/lideradas por los movimientos y/o por comunidades, para la verificación de datos y la búsqueda de la verdad, especialmente en el entorno digital? Cuáles son los límites y éticas del periodismo, de la verificación de datos, o del trabajo de denuncia, bajo una vigilancia y amenaza transnacional sostenida?

Información sobre el envío de contribuciones y fechas importantes

Todas las contribuciones deben enviarse a los editores regionales correspondientes que figuran en nuestro sitio web. La fecha límite para el envío inicial de contribuciones para este número, que se publicará en octubre/noviembre de 2026, es el 30 de marzo de 2026. Animamos a los autores a que envíen un resumen de entre 250 y 500 palabras para ayudarnos a generar un diálogo coherente entre las distintas contribuciones de este número. En el caso de contribuciones académicas no estándar (entrevistas, archivos de audio, kits de herramientas, escritos literarios, notas sobre movimientos sociales y activistas, etc.), le recomendamos que nos proporcione una breve descripción del contenido y la forma de su envío. Esto no es obligatorio para que su envío sea aceptado, pero también le ayudará a prepararlo.

Envíos anónimos:

Para apoyar a las/os investigadoras/es en riesgo de represión, estamos dispuestos a publicar artículos con un seudónimo cuando sea necesario. Hemos creado una dirección segura de ProtonMail para los envíos, interface_submissions@proton.me , donde puede indicarnos tanto su nombre oficial como el que desea que aparezca en la publicación. De este modo, podremos confirmar la autenticidad de su autoría del artículo si la represión disminuye o si se traslada a otro país, etc.

La fecha límite para el envío inicial de contribuciones para este número, que se publicará en octubre/noviembre de 2026, es el 30 de marzo de 2026.

Consulte las directrices para colaboradoras/es http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/guidelines-for-contributors/, para obtener más indicaciones sobre el contenido y el estilo.

Las plantillas para las propuestas están disponibles en línea a través de la página de directrices: http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/guidelines-for-contributors/, y deben utilizarse para garantizar un formato correcto. Interface es una iniciativa totalmente voluntaria, sin los recursos de las revistas comerciales, por lo que tenemos que encargarnos nosotras/os mismas/os de todo el diseño y la maquetación. La única forma de hacerlo es pedir a las/os autoras/es que utilicen estas plantillas al preparar sus envíos. Aceptamos material en bengalí, bosnio/croata/serbio, búlgaro, checo, danés, neerlandés, inglés, farsi, francés, alemán, hindi, italiano, noruego, polaco, rumano, eslovaco y español.

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Call for papers

Transnational repression and social movements

What is the issue about?

In a highly interconnected world political movements have become ubiquitous. Movement activists, particularly in authoritarian regimes, have sought refuge in more liberal states. However, a decline in liberalism and innovations in response to local oppositional challengers by the state beyond its geographical borders requires serious attention.

Freedom House defines Transnational Repression (TR) as governments reaching across borders to silence dissent among diasporas and exiles through methods such as assassinations, illegal deportations, abductions, digital threats, Interpol abuse, and family intimidation. TR practices by authoritarian regimes in the Middle East are well documented. Falun Gong activists in Western countries face coercion from the Chinese state through threats to family members in Mainland China. Similarly, activists from the Khalistan and Balochistan movements residing in North America have been targeted in assassination campaigns allegedly orchestrated by Indian and Pakistani state agents.

While TR is often associated with authoritarian governments, liberal democracies have also played a role, through direct collaboration with repressive regimes (e.g., INTERPOL red notices) or indirectly via initiatives like the War on Terror. With authoritarianism rising in countries such as Israel, India, and the United States, it is critical to examine how democracies traditionally seen as champions of human rights are implicated in these practices. Because TR projects domestic political control into international spaces (Lewis, 2015), it raises urgent questions about its impact on global activism and the responses of activists. Palestine solidarity activists face harassment, deportation, and arbitrary detention, particularly in the U.S. and Germany. Information workers in the "global fact-checking movement" (Graves, 2018) are also pursued in ways that challenge the relevance of national borders. The case of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the systematic and unprecedented assassinations of journalists in the ongoing Gaza War (Turse, 2025) further highlight the global reach and consequences of a different kind of movement repression.

Why is it important?

The May 2011 issue of *Interface* focused on "movement repression," but the scale and complexity of repressive practices with global consequences suggest revisiting this topic. While repression of dissidents, exiles, and émigrés from authoritarian states is well documented, the phenomenon of *transnational repression* represents a distinct and ever evolving challenge. It involves diverse regime types employing increasingly sophisticated technologies to extend their reach beyond borders. These transnational repressive repertoires warrant fresh theoretical formulations. For instance, Earl and Braithwaite (2022) argue for a "layered framework" of social movement repression that can account for up-stream and down-stream effects of political repression; how systematic

repression of entire populations significantly impacts specific protests, and how specific movements become pivotal in pushing transnational human rights regimes and the state's commitment to civil rights. Such a formulation shifts, although not necessarily, from a common rational-choice explainers for movement repression to a pervasive Foucauldian account of power.

The role of media censorship and global information flows in transnational repression (TR) requires particular examination. In the digital age, regimes exploit cyberspace to suppress transnational solidarity, particularly through online surveillance and harassment, as in the #MilkTeaAlliance in Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Big tech is directly implicated in censorship, surveillance and suppression of activists as the case of Facebook approval of ads promoting assassination of Pro-Palestine activists (Intercept, 21st November 2023) demonstrates. It is understood that certain protests are politically convenient and media scholars have typically demonstrated this through questions of news representation, suppression and cooptation of political events (see Gamson 2004; Cottle 2008; Tufekci 2014). But less is understood about the outcomes, and in particular consequences for social movements, of selective media spotlight. This requires new ways of thinking of media repression, transnational activism and activism in the peripheries.

The end of the Cold War and the emergence of a multipolar order is accompanied by movements and populist formations that often lie outside neat ideological binaries. In this area Moss et al. (2022) highlight specific attention to be paid on how host country contexts, bilateral alliances, and regional security arrangements shape the contours of transnational repression. Greater understanding is also required on the motivations behind repression beyond calculated deterrence to notions of fury, revenge, perceived injustice or even as a performance (Earl and Braithwaite, 2022).

Some key questions the issue will address

This issue seeks to examine the forms, causes, and consequences of transnational repression (TR) across regimes, and how activists resist or adapt to reshape the legitimacy and resilience of their movements. It invites reflection on how repertoires of contention respond to digital surveillance, cyberattacks, and information control, and under what conditions they succeed or fail. Contributors are encouraged to consider how movements can draw from global strategies of resistance amid evolving censorship and repression. We invite in-depth empirical, historical and theoretical analyses, case studies and regional explorations, reports, opinion pieces, relevant interviews and other significant material, short contributions centred on transnational repressive repertoires from around the world. We also welcome toolkits, cheat sheets, tutorials and

repositories that promote open source information sharing and fact-checking. They can address questions that are not limited to the following:

1. How do targeted activist communities reconfigure their activism, alliances, and security practices in response to TR? How do movement activists protect, resist and adapt to challengers from abroad, and in liaison with local partners?

2. How do South-South dynamics complicate the standard authoritarian-liberal binary in movement repression? How to explain TR within regional hegemonies or security communities?

3. Do we require new theoretical or methodological approaches to examine repression, in particular TR? Is there a need to rethink the meaning of TR given its diverse, interdisciplinary and cross cutting manifestations? What conceptual integration would that entail with social movement theory?

4. In what ways are liberal democracies complicit in repressing movements—through passive mechanisms (e.g., surveillance technology exports, data sharing with hostile states) or active complicity (e.g., deportations, red notices)? What are the emotional, affective, and performative dimensions of repression beyond strategic deterrence—e.g., revenge, humiliation, or sovereign assertion?

5. How do host country legal systems, intelligence cooperation, and bilateral security arrangements enable or resist TR practices? How do legal frameworks—such as international human rights law, asylum law, or extradition treaties—constrain or facilitate the reach of repressive states?

6. How are the various dimensions of TR intersectional and gendered? Are some forms of movements and movement actors under heightened risk of repression?

7. To what extent do global media platforms act as both sites of exposure and instruments of suppression in TR campaigns? What lessons can movements draw from the experience of TR victims with regards to media awareness, media coverage and representation?

8. How does media coverage, or lack thereof, movements in the peripheries by societies in the core impact their legitimacy and success? What is the discursive, symbolic, and representational nature of this impact for activists, their actions and targets? How can movements respond to these reflexive interventions in their practice? Is there a potential for substantive outcomes from performative activism?

9. How does digital repression, including cyber harassment and algorithmic censorship, restructure global information flows and activist ecologies? What are some of the ways activists can protect themselves from censorship and surveillance in the digital realm?

10. Are there best practices, movement and/or community-led initiatives, for fact-checking and truth seeking, specially in the digital realm? What are the

ethics and limits of journalistic, fact-checking, or whistleblowing labor under sustained transnational surveillance and threat?

Submission information and important dates

All contributions should go to the appropriate regional editors listed on our website. The deadline for initial submissions to this issue, to be published in October/November 2026, is 30 March 2026. We encourage authors to submit a 250 to 500-word abstract to help us engender a coherent conversation between the various contributions to this issue. For non-standard academic contributions (interviews, audio-files, toolkits, literary writings, social movement and activist notes, etc), we recommend you provide us with a short description of the content and form of your submission. This is not mandatory for your submission to be accepted, but it will also help you prepare your submission.

Anonymous submissions:

To support researchers at risk of repression, we are happy to publish articles with a pseudonym where necessary. We have set up a secure ProtonMail address for submissions, interface_submissions@proton.me , where you can let us know both your official name and the one you want to publish under. We can then confirm the authenticity of your claim as author of the article, if repression eases or if you move to another country etc. To submit your work securely, please create your own ProtonMail account and use it to send your submission to our email address. When creating your account, do not provide a recovery email or phone number – select "skip" if asked. Set strong passwords and enable two-factor authentication for added protection.

Timeline and deadlines:

- Abstracts and descriptions of submissions: 30 January 2026
- Deadline for all submissions: 30 March 2026
- Review and production process until publication: October/November 2026

Please see the guidelines for contributors (http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/guidelines-for-contributors/) for more indications on content and style. Submission templates are available online via the guidelines page (http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/guidelines-for-contributors/) and should be used to ensure correct formatting. *Interface* is a completely voluntary effort, without the resources of commercial journals, so we have to do all the layout and typesetting ourselves. The only way we can manage this is to ask authors to use these templates when preparing submissions. We can accept material in Bengali, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Bulgarian, Czech, Danish,

Dutch, English, Farsi, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Romanian, Slovak and Spanish.

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The struggle for "life": Anti-mining mobilization in Turkey

Burcu Binbuga

Abstract

In recent years, people across the globe unite against the neoliberal agenda of relentless commodification of commons. In the different parts of the world, from the Global South to Western Europe, people are united around the aim of protecting living spaces in an ecologically encompassing way against the rent`-seeking policies of neoliberalism, including Turkey. Many different ecological movements have been rising that oppose the enclosure of commons and extensive environmental degradation despite the repressive practices of the government party in Turkey. The anti-mining movement in Artvin, in the Northeast part of Turkey, is one of the long-lasting environmental movements in Turkey. The movement achieved an extensive mobilization of the local population comprising a cross-section of different ages, genders, class and political opinions to defend the local ecosystem, which is part of the wider Black Sea and Caucasus ecosystem, against the government-supported mining project. This study examines the environmental conflicts in Turkey by looking at dynamics of mobilization with a particular focus on Artvin.

Keywords: anti-mining mobilization, environmental movements, neoliberalism, mining, Turkey

Introduction

Global investment flows in mining have surged since the 1980s in countries around the world. The neoliberal transformation of economic policies, which entailed opening resources to private and international companies, has significantly influenced the mining industry. During the 1980s and 1990s, developing countries embraced neoliberal reforms that enabled investors to bypass national regulations, thereby accelerating the expansion of multinational mining capital (Özkaynak & Rodriguez-Labajos, 2017). This transformation has also had a direct impact on mining policies in Turkey. Before the 1980s, the Turkish state had control over and coordinated the mining sector, predominantly conducting activities through state institutions (Uncu, 2012). Part of Turkey's neoliberal agenda since the 1980s has been to encourage foreign investment, especially in gold mining, as a strategy for attracting capital to fuel economic growth and societal welfare (Çoban, 2004). One significant area affected by these changes is Artvin, a city in the northeastern corner of Turkey, bordering Georgia and situated near the Çoruh River.

The attempt to construct gold and copper mines in Artvin dated back to the end of 1980. However, thanks to the opposition of local people and lawsuits against

mining, these attempts have failed until the rule of the current government party, the Justice, and Development Party (AKP). In 2012, the Ministry of Energy and Natural Sources announced new 1344 mining licenses, and 325 of them are located in Cerattepe, Artvin. This has been the turning point for the mining activities in the region. Today the city is full of mining licenses. Through this study, my aim is to present the long-lasting environmental activism in Turkey, even if the government violently repressed their struggle.

As the inertia prevails over almost all oppositional movements due to heavy political oppression of the government, environmental movements have mushroomed in different localities to protect the living spaces, livelihood, water, water resources, forests, and environmental commons[1] in Turkey. Surprisingly, they also find themselves a space to manoeuvre even in the localities where AKP gets high vote rates (Binbuga, 2020). Many different ecological movements that oppose the enclosure of commons and extensive environmental degradation have been rising. These resistances are booming against the government's ecologically destructive projects. The anti-mining movement in Artvin is Turkey's longest-running environmental movement, with ups and downs. The struggle has seen the most dynamic phase in terms of the extensive mobilization of local people against the attempts of a Turkish mining company, Cengiz Company, to open a mine in collaboration with the ruling party in 2015. To prevent the mining company from reaching the mining site in the city, a 245-day watch was started by the collective participation of local people, NGOs, unions, political parties, and other associations in the city. This watch was repressed by the violence of security forces. Then, mining companies started to operate since that time. This peaceful protest was met with violence from security forces, and subsequently, the mining company commenced operations. While the movement's current phase is less active, it still offers valuable insights into the potential of environmental activism to challenge neoliberal authoritarian regimes like Turkey's. For this purpose, this study discusses the actors (social basis) and organizational structure of the movement as well as the motivations behind their actions.

The empirical basis of this research is based on the fieldwork conducted in Artvin between June and September 2017. During this period, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 27 activists and actively participated in their

[1] Following David Harvey's (2012) conceptualization of the commons, I use the term 'commons' to describe a form of social relations and social practices that are collectively produced and non-commodified, existing relatively independently from market relations. Specifically, when discussing nature as the common, I'm referring to nature not merely as a collection of individual trees, animals, and other entities, but rather as a collective set of social relations. This conceptualization views nature as belonging to no single individual but simultaneously to everyone. It is accessible and usable by all, enriched and sustained by collective emotions and experiences. In this framework, nature is understood not just as a physical entity but as a communal resource imbued with shared value and significance.

meetings, forums, demonstrations, and press releases. All interviewees have been anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

Artvin

Artvin on the map of Turkey, available from https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/86809

Artvin is located in the north-eastern corner of Turkey, on the border with Georgia, near the Çoruh River. According to the statistics of the Eastern Black Sea Development Agency, the population of the city is approximately 170,000. Artvin's primary income sources are agriculture (including tea, hazelnuts, kiwis, and olives), farming, beekeeping, and mining. Agriculture in the province is dominated by small family farms that rely entirely on human labour and are not mechanise[2]. The city is Turkey's leading producer of honey[3].

Artvin has a distinct ecosystem surrounded by high mountains and forests with national parks, including Borçka Valley National Park, Karagöl Sahara National Park, and Hatilla Valley National Park. 59 percent of the city is forests, 8 percent is agricultural lands, and 13 percent is meadow and lea. The town consists of 1900 plant species, including 200 epidemic ones[4].

Cerattepe is the region's name in Kafkasör Plateau, located just above the city center of Artvin. It is the region where conflicting mining activities are located. Cerattepe region has a unique ecosystem of fauna and flora, the only extension of the Caucasian ecosystem in Turkey, hosting the migration routes of migratory birds and many endemic species. This region is just 8km away from the city center

[2] https://www.doka.org.tr/bolgemiz_Artvin-EN.html

[3] https://www.doka.org.tr/bolgemiz_Artvin-EN.html

[4] http://yesilartvindernegi.org/artvin-ili-cerattepe-ve-genya-dagi-ormanlarinda-planlanan-madencilik-faaliyetlerinin-dogal-kaynaklar-uzerine-etkileri-hakkinda-rapor/

of Artvin, and its environment has rich and abundant vegetation and clean and fresh air. It also provides the sources of water supply for the town. The region bears the most significant old growth forest, the forests with great age without considerable destruction and having unique ecological features in Europe and Middle Asia[5]. It is also rich in reserves of gold and copper, as well as zinc and similar mines[6]. However, it is risky in terms of geographical conditions. The area consists of volcanic sedimentary rocks and presents a high risk of landslides[7]. Ecologically destructive projects in Artvin are not limited to mining. Over one hundred hydroelectric power plants were constructed above Çoruh River. Due to the construction of hydroelectric power plants and dams, the region's ecosystem has been irreversibly damaged, and many people have been displaced through compulsory expropriation.

Social basis of the movement

The social basis of the anti-mining movement in Artvin is a diverse coalition encompassing both organized and unorganized sections of society, led by the Green Artvin Association (YAD) under the slogan 'No to the mine in Cerattepe'. Green Artvin Association was established in 1995 to inform people about the effects of mining and to unite people against mining. It became the platform that united the broad sections, organized and non-organized parts of the society opposing the mining, namely locals, unions, political parties, chambers, cooperatives, associations, Artvin bar, and NGOs in the city. YAD has a formalized institutional structure with its president and vice presidents; however, it is much more appropriate to regard YAD as a network that can get in touch with all sections of the oppositional sections of Artvin. Although it does not maintain personal contact with every individual, its network, facilitated through local authorities and neighborhood connections, effectively reaches all those opposed to the mining project. Pre-existing interpersonal networks and trust relationships have been instrumental in engaging different parts of society.

Women have been at the forefront of the movement. For example, after the police attack on 15 February 2016 that ended the watch in Cerattepe, women organized a march to check the situation of the mine site on 17 February 2016, which was suppressed again very violently by the police. During my fieldwork, I observed women playing an active role in disseminating information about YAD's press releases and meetings, and visiting shops, houses, and coffeehouses in the city. Despite variations in gender, age, class, and political beliefs, the movement has successfully united locals around the anti-mining discourse, with slogans such as

[5] http://yesilartvindernegi.org/artvin-ili-cerattepe-ve-genya-dagi-ormanlarinda-planlanan-madencilik-faaliyetlerinin-dogal-kaynaklar-uzerine-etkileri-hakkinda-rapor/

[6] http://www.mta.gov.tr/v3.0/sayfalar/bilgi-merkezi/maden_potansiyel_2010/Artvin_Madenler.pdf

[7] http://yesilartvindernegi.org/artvin-ili-cerattepe-ve-genya-dagi-ormanlarinda-planlanan-madencilik-faaliyetlerinin-dogal-kaynaklar-uzerine-etkileri-hakkinda-rapor/

'Killer company, leave Artvin,' 'We won't surrender Cerattepe,' 'Cerattepe cannot be overrun, Artvin's people cannot be defeated,' and 'What's above ground is more precious than what's below.' These slogans reflect a collective identity among activists who view themselves as Artvin locals defending their living space, city, nature, and environment against the mining company.

Artvin's unique social dynamics have also facilitated the movement's collective identity. For instance, the city transcends extreme social divides. As numerous interviewees indicated, significant class disparities are not prevalent in Artvin's city center, which is primarily inhabited by civil servants and artisans. Even though political preferences may differ, kinship ties and close acquaintanceships mitigate potential polarization or hostility between various political groups. This phenomenon was exemplified when a member of the leftist Freedom and Democracy Party (ÖDP) introduced me to the former leader of the right-wing nationalist Grey Wolves. Such interpersonal bonds at the local level have been crucial in fostering a collective identity, a key element in the formation and success of a movement (Rootes, 2004; Benford, 2004). The movement's focus on 'living space' has unified people across social classes and political affiliations, creating a hegemonic discourse centered around defending life in the local community's eyes. This approach has enabled the formation of a 'resistance identity,' as described by Castells (2010), which constructs collective resistance against oppression and defines the boundaries of the struggle.

The identification of the 'other' is also a key aspect of building a collective identity. In this case, the mining company, particularly its owner 'Cengiz', has been positioned as the concrete adversary. This negative identification is critical to the movement's identity construction. Daily conversations and interviews frequently referenced the company's attempts to 'conquer Artvin from the inside', referring to efforts by Cengiz Company to collaborate with locals. For instance, the establishment of the 'Our Artvin Association' by mining proponents and the government was seen as an attempt to sway local opinion in favor of mining. The mining company attempted to convince people that the mining in the region would benefit the city and region. The company also indicated that mining would provide employment opportunities in the city. Although the company promoted mining to provide employment and boost local welfare, the movement countered this narrative by emphasizing the intrinsic value of nature over profit.

In summary, the movement's actors are the local people of Artvin, who are directly affected by the mining activities and projects in the region. The movement's heterogeneous social base includes individuals of various ages, genders, political affiliations, and classes, from teachers and civil servants to artisans, farmers, beekeepers, union members, and people with diverse political leanings. This broad participation aligns with the views of della Porta and Piazza (2008), who argue that community-based collective identities often transcend cleavages of class, gender, ethnicity, or religion.

Organizational characteristics of the movement

The anti-mining movement in Artvin is organized as a flexible network characterized by horizontal, participatory, and non-hierarchical structures. Neşe Karahan is the leading name as the president of YAD. However, it should be stressed that she is not regarded as "the leader" of the movement. She is perceived more as a spokesperson than a formal leader, embodying the movement's preference for horizontal grassroots representation over hierarchical leadership.

A common rhetoric among environmental movements is the notion of being 'above politics.' This was repeatedly emphasized during the fieldwork, as the movement's broad social mobilization is attributed to its stance above institutional politics. This approach is essential, as maintaining such a broad coalition requires independence from any political party, facilitating the participation of people with diverse political orientations, as observed in Artvin.

To indicate this nonpartisan characteristic of the movement, many interviewees give the example of watches organized and led by the leftist and rightist organizations together. One member of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), an extreme right party, stated this aspect that "We were nervous when we met up with *Halkevleri* (leftist organization*)*, but we came together in troubled times. For example, we had trouble, but we stay together in police intervention". When I saw the watch list for Cerattepe in YAD, I was impressed by the diversity of groups, in terms of not only different political parties but different parts of the society, such as unions, women, peasants, families, neighborhoods, football fans, and artisans. Melek (27/W) explained the diversity and collectivity of the movement with reference to the watches; "We kept 24-hour watch; sometimes with our family, sometimes with organizations. Sometimes we keep watch with MHP supporters, the left-wing people keep watch along with the right-wing people".

It is important to note that activists refer to the discourse of "being above politics" to show that they are not part of the partisan struggles among contending political parties. It is crucial to note that this discourse is not peculiar to the anti-mining movement in Artvin; instead, it is common among environmental movements that put a distance from institutional politics based on the struggle for political power between political parties.

Another essential characteristic of the movement is transparency and accountability. It was stressed that every participant in the movement is a volunteer, and none is paid; therefore, YAD is constituted by voluntary people instead of professionals. All meetings of YAD are open to the public. It was emphasized that all sections of society are encouraged to participate in the discussions. The decisions are taken in these public meetings by consensus through deliberation, persuasion and common sense, which represent a collective and democratic decision-making process. For example, in the fieldwork, a French journalist visited YAD, and at the end of the interview, he asked about the plans of YAD under the prevailing state of emergency. They replied that we would hold a public meeting and act according to the decisions taken in the meeting. The terms "cooperation", "collective reasoning", "shared decision making", and

"creating common sense" are commonly used to describe the decision-making process by interviewees.

Castell connects communication technologies and organizational characteristics of the movement that the more interactive communication is, the less hierarchical is the organization, and the more participatory is the movement. (2012, p.15). In the case of the anti-mining movement in Artvin, it is plausible to suggest that there is interactive communication between activists. During the interviews, they frequently stated that they use social media such as Facebook or Twitter to announce events and share the news. They have a communication network through YAD, which has a message system that was created during watches. According to interviewees, thanks to this message system, people could mobilize at any time of day to prevent intervention to Cerattepe. They also indicated that they have a WhatsApp group that enables interactive and effective communication between actors. In this respect, the movement uses the communication technologies that make "networked movements" possible.

Anti-mining movement in Artvin shares the common organizational structure with new social movements such as horizontality, rejecting leadership, heterogeneous social base, using communication technologies, collective and participatory decision-making, and transparency and accessibility (della Porta, 2015; Castells, 2012; Hardt & Negri, 2005). It is a grassroots environmental movement rejecting the hierarchical way of organization and leadership. In this respect, the organizational structure of the anti-mine movement overlaps with Rootes's definition of the environmental movement as "a loose, noninstitutionalized network, of informal interactions that may include, as well as individuals and groups who have no organizational affiliation, organizations of varying degrees of formality, that are engaged in collective action motivated by shared identity or concern about environmental issues" (2004, p. 610). The movement uses communication technologies, which is a unique characteristic of network movements. Transparency and accessibility, key features of social movements, are also noticeable characteristics of the anti-mining movement. The movement also complies with the description of grassroots movements combining voluntary participation and a heterogonous social basis that rely on shared concerns in specific issues instead of a strong ideological attachment (Diani & della Porta, 2006, p. 149).

The motivations of actors

The question of why people participate in social movements, in other words, what are the underlying motivations of the actors to participate in social movements, has attracted scholars' attention working on social movements for a long time. During the interviews, I aimed to understand why people participated in the protests against mining and opposed mining activities in Artvin.

Long-running opposition against mining has created an awareness among local people in Artvin, especially thanks to the activities carried out by YAD. During the field study in Artvin, I realized that many people are aware of the effects of

the mine from a scientific viewpoint, because they have listened to many academics and engineers about the impacts of the mine in the region. The interviewees repeatedly noted environmental risks associated with the mine.

When asked about the potential effects of mine, almost all interviewees referred to the mine's long-term possible effects on the city. The most apparent effect of the mine seems that it is going to destroy the Artvin city center, which would make life in Artvin unbearable because the mine site in Cerattepe is located above and on top of the city. The most obvious danger of the mine to the town is the landslide risk. Artvin is constructed between the mountains with a highly steep wooded slope. Consequently, the destruction of the forests in this area would increase the landslide risk in Artvin city center, as expressed by many interviewees. In this respect, "to defend the city where we live" is one of the common discourses among the activists. The discourse on the defense of the city enables actors from different and opposing political identities to act together. A member of the *Grey Wolves,* an extreme far-right organization, Utku (23/M) stated, "The only hesitation that our friends have is that we don't compromise with the left; however, we are struggling for Artvin. The struggle that we were engaged was only for Artvin". He added, "I am participating in this struggle to save Artvin. Artvin will get worse. The next generation will not enjoy living Artvin. We were born here, and we want to stay here". One of the main themes among interviewees was that mining activities would force local people to migrate from their city, and it was claimed that their resistance was for the sake of continuing to stay and live in Artvin, as Utku pointed out. Ayten (66/W) explained why she opposes as:

> The mine will directly affect our life, it will restrict our life space. It will contaminate our water, and lead to landslides when trees are cut. Our homes are in a landslide site. When mine is extracted, we have to migrate, but there is nowhere to go. We want to continue living here. You cannot find this nature in another place, we don't pay for the water, we drink tap water.

As Ayten pointed out, leaving Artvin and migrating to other places was evaluated as one of the most serious long-term consequences of the mine. Selma (63/W) explained why she opposed the mine in a similar way: "The mine means the disappearance of Artvin. If Artvin disappears, we lose. We are used to live here; we cannot live somewhere else; how we can get used to after this age". Many interviewees indicated that migration would lead to the disappearance of the identity of being from Artvin)", which is referred to being "rootlessness". During the interviews, I tried to understand the meaning of "from Artvin" or living in Artvin for local people; in other words, why they insist living in this city. During the field study, I met with many people who are happy to live in Artvin. Some of them had the opportunity to live in another city but chose to live in Artvin. I realized that people have connections with the city in many various ways. Most people feel strong emotional connections with the city, and their defense of their city also means resisting the loss of emotional ties to their city. The 26 years -old

Ali explained his emotional tie with the city in the following way:

> There we have a moral responsibility in the first place. I cannot resign myself to the destruction of the lands where I was born and grew up. Therefore, it is very precious to me. We would definitely oppose it if it were somewhere else, too, but you have a different perspective when it comes to your own homeland. We cannot resign ourselves to the destruction of the city where we were born and grew up, home to our memories and ancestors, the lands of our grandfathers and grandmothers. That's why I am against the mines.

For local people living in Artvin, the mobilization against mine is also regarded as the defense of those values represented by their city, like solidarity, friendship, trust, social ties, the culture of mutual cooperation, and ties with the ancestors. Because Artvin is a small city, many people get to know each other. Hence, people could form close personal connections with each other, and living in Artvin enables bonds of solidarity, trust, and support between people. This creates a solidarity culture in the city. Defining the city as "socialist Artvin in capitalist Turkey", Melek (27/W) explained this culture:

> We establish our own communes, and we support each other when necessary. That is to say, here we can create an off-the-system life for ourselves and, therefore, we cannot sacrifice. Besides, as Artvin is a city identified with its culture, here we can actualize ourselves off the system. There is not too much class discrimination here, and as we are natives with our own lands and capable of sustaining a life isolated from the state and the system, no alternative location or financial means would satisfy us. Assuming that all these lands have been expropriated, settling for a new life in somewhere else does not make sense to us. We would like to stay here and maintain our culture, grow our solidarity, and live together with our forests and animals.

Living in Artvin provides women with an environment without social pressures indicated by some female interviewees. Artvin has a social democrat background, and a conservative lifestyle does not dominate the city center. Forty-one years old, Sakine said, "I don't want to leave Artvin. I cannot live anywhere else, I cannot find such a safe environment outside, you cannot trust people, I have a life and friends here, I don't want to live nervously, I go home at noon here, we stay outside with women".

Significantly different from other parts of the Black Sea region, leftist organizations and political parties have survived in Artvin and have been influential in the politics in the city. Most leftist interviewees paid attention to this point. They indicated that they felt responsible for a leftist culture in the city inherited from the past, especially after the 12 September coup, which suppressed leftist movements and organizations in the country. Artvin was known as one of

the castles of the left before the military coup in 1980. The interviewees considered resistance to the mining company as their political and moral responsibility and also as something that represents the tradition, or the culture of resistance historically represented by the leftist activism in Artvin. As Ali (30/M) stated:

> We feel responsible, Artvin has a tradition of struggle, Artvin is not an ordinary city; Cerattepe and Genya are the mountains where people resisted the 12 September military coup. We can't let these lands be plundered by the capital, Cengiz company. We also have such a moral responsibility, and we have had a culture of resistance since the 1970s. We have to continue this legacy.

Many interviewees defined Artvin as a "paradise", a "life-affirming city", and a "beautiful city with its nature and people". Nature is an important complement to the city from the viewpoint of local people. When asked what Artvin meant, another respondent Emre (29/M), said "The most important feature is nature, rather than city. Nature comes to our mind when we think Artvin", whereas Derya (34/W) defined Artvin as "Our peak is the sky, Artvin means freedom for me, all forests are mine, this is my heaven". Because the city is mainly associated with its nature and natural beauty, the destruction of the city is equalized with the destruction of nature by the interviewees. It was commonly stated that mine would inevitably destroy the forests in Cerattepe and the national valleys near Cerattepe, and the city would turn into a desert after the destruction of the forests. Actually, the trees were already cut down at the mine site, which can be seen in the distance during my stay. In that respect, protecting nature is one of the underlying motivations of the actors stressed by many interviewees. Because the interviewees repeatedly emphasize the protection of nature, I intended to understand the meaning of nature for local people and how they connect with nature during the fieldwork. Nature has various means for people; it is mainly associated with life, living space, childhood, the homeland with good memories, and the place to relax, enjoy and have fun with family members or friends. Many interviewees stated that they don't go to the seaside for vacations. Instead, they prefer to go to Hatilla Valley for swimming and relaxation. The interviewees' statements on nature mainly concerned how they enjoy and relax in nature. Sakine (75/W) said that:

> We relax when we go to Cerattepe, it is the picnic, rest, and leisure area, we don't want to go to the sea in the holidays, going to the forest is much more relaxing for us. However, when this place is destroyed, we cannot find any place to go. These places will be dispossessed.

During the interviews and daily conversations, people became highly emotional when they talked about Cerattape and expressed the meaning of nature for themselves, as Sakine (75/W) put it:

> When the court expert came for the first time, we went to Cerattepe, but I didn't feel cold because I was in my nature. There were two or three children having three or four leaves; what happened to them now?

However, I should add that this is not romanticizing nature; instead, those people possess a material/practical relationship with nature, as Melek (27/W) stated:

> Like the offices and residences of people in metropolitan cities, we have our nature here in Artvin and the Black Sea region. When we go to the forest, we pick up our mastic, mushrooms, nuts, and cones. We meet a variety of our houses' needs with these forest products.

Therefore, the protection of nature relates to both emotional and material relationships of the people with nature from the viewpoint of the interviewees. The other aspect of nature is its identification with health and remedy. Older people commonly emphasize this aspect. For example, 93 an old woman named Esma stated how living in the green area helped her feel healthy and younger "The nature here is green, water is clean, the mountains have various kinds of medicine warehouse. The flowers in the mountains are medicine warehouses. The flowers in the mountains were used as medicine in the past. Our ancestors used to live in such a green area. I am 93 years old, and I owe it to this weather. I am coming here, and I can breathe. Thanks to this weather, I feel like I am 15 years old". Hasan (65/M) also explained how his wife recovered thanks to nature:

> Your aunt felt sick, I rented a house in the forests, and she recovered. People in Artvin prefer Kafkasör to go to sea. Longevity, strength…The weather I breathe is healthy. This is our life; we lived here and will die here.

The notion of "living space" was commonly used by interviewees when describing nature. Many interviewees interchangeably referred to nature, Cerattepe, forests, and living space in daily conversations and interviews. This concept refers to the close relationship with nature; nature as a living space refers to the place to live, breathe, and enjoy, as a space that supplies water and livelihood, and indicates the feeling of being part of nature. When I asked Sezen (50/W) "why this nature is so important for you," she impressively explained:

> We have no other place to breathe, no other sea but only this nature. We have

> nowhere to go; we all belong here, and it is our only living space. Cerattepe is not far from here. You will get to my place in ten minutes just below there. We eat, drink, and continue with our daily lives while they drain out our brains out there. It is our living space, and, therefore, we greatly care about it. It is not a place far away from here that we try to defend. We do not fight against the state and the people or something beneficial to all. All that we do is to protect our living space. This is my living space where I breathe, eat, and drink. This is where I live. I have no chance of surviving here without them. As I said, this is our living space. If it were a place far from the Artvin region, you could say "it is none of your business." But it is our mountain that they excavate. All our food and water come from there, our lands lie there, and our animals graze there. It is all the same for us; we have no other area but Kafkasör, Cerattepe, and Merzifon. We go to these places for leisure; we say, "let's go to Kafkasör."

The identification of Cerattepe with the living space was common among the interviewees, so the struggle for Cerattepe against mine is evaluated as the defense of living space. Umut (29/M) defined the anti-mine struggle as a struggle for existence to defend their living space, which is conceptualized as the homeland, feelings, and memories belonging to the past:

> We fight for our survival now. The corporation, the government, or the state attacks the living space where we were born and grew up, and they care only for money without any concerns for the people living there. They neglect not just the people but also the trees, animals, and cultural heritage. It means the destruction of the place where I was born and grew up, where I had my first contact with the people, the streets I walked down, and my early memories and feelings in my life.

In addition to the motivation of defense of living space, the defense of life is another common theme used by the activists to indicate their motivations behind mobilization. As one of the interviews (68/W) puts it; "This is a matter of existence or non-existence for Artvin. We are protecting our lives… This is a struggle for the life, rather than being a political struggle". Similarly, 75 years old Sakine (W) replies to the question "Why you are opposing mine in Artvin" by answering, "Firstly health. Wellness, greens, water, and life. One single word, life. I am opposing due to my life. Of course, I want to live a healthy life in old ages".

This is not only peculiar to the struggle in Cerattepe; ecology activists have defined themselves as "life defender" for a long time across the world and Turkey. Identifying nature with living space or life enables activists to refer to universal values, cutting across social, economic, and political differences. The theme of life defense in Artvin's case is applied to show this characteristic of the struggle. Conceptualizing struggle as a life defense or life space defense refers to the characteristics of the struggle above politics and enables people with different political views to act together.

Approaching nature as a heritage that should be passed on to future generations was another common rhetoric concerning nature. This is not only about material aspects of nature; of course, they refer to protecting the trees, but sometimes, this heritage refers to the sense that you live when you are in nature or emotions and experiences lived in nature, as Sırma (54/W) expressed that "Our fathers took us to picnic, we lived our happiest moments there. We ate food, played, enjoyed. I hope I can create such an environment for my grandchildren. I can share this environment and smell this air". As Sırma pointed out, the destruction of nature blocks future generations from enjoying nature, as previous generations did. This is often seen as the damage of the mine to the children and future generations, as Derya (34/W) stated: "I enjoyed this nature, and I became happy. The next generation should experience this". Women interviewees especially express this aspect. 65 years old Ayşe said that she is struggling for future generations and added that "Mine will destroy us, it will destroy the future of our children. We came and we are going, but it is awful for our children," while 54 years old Sırma indicated that:

> I have lived and passed half of the way; now my child is 27 years old; what is the sin of my grandchildren who have not been born yet? How can I explain this irresponsibility to my grandchildren in the future?

In this respect, protecting children and future generations and leaving nature as a heritage to children and future generations is another primary motivation of the actors to participate in the movement. Turning now to the impact of mining on nature, it is important to remember that nature includes natural water resources and animals. Interviewees often emphasized the effects of the mine on nature concerning natural water resources and animals. The mining activity directly affects water pollution in the region because tap water in Artvin comes from spring water in the mountains, which is very close to the mine site in Cerattepe. People do not buy bottled water, as is the case in big cities, and they get used to drinking tap water. Since mine began in Cerattepe, tap water pollution has already started. When I was in Artvin in the summer, I got sick and went to the hospital, and the doctor in the hospital told me that these medical cases were commonly encountered because of the pollution in tap water. In the interview with Neşe Karahan, she underlined the complaints of the villagers about the polluted spring water, which starts from the mine site and passes across mine villages, including beekeeping sites. The villagers informed YAD about the water pollution in the town near the mine site. They went to the village, took a sample of the water, and made a denunciation, Karahan stated. In the video taken during this investigation, it is seen how spring water is muddied[8]. In this video, the villager/beekeeper said that it is the first time that water has become dirty; even previous mining activities did not create such water pollution. In the video, the villagers' cultivated lands are seen, and it indicates that they have to irrigate their

[8] The relevant video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UkDabU1Its

lands with this water[9]. Moreover, one of the villagers asserted that because of the infusion of chemicals and oils into the spring water, butterflies, insects, ants, and bees will die if they drink this water[10].

In this regard, water pollution affects not only people but also animals. In the interviews, it was commonly stated that the world does not only belong to humans; animals are part of this nature. Sırma noted that the mine will harm not only humans but also animals living in nature: "I am not worried about only humans. I do not want animals to be hurt, the nature has a balance, and I do not want this balance to be destroyed". Through the destruction of forests where wild animals live and the pollution of water, mine will harm the animals. In the same video, the beekeeper adds that bees, the "source of our life, " drink this water and "our life totally depends on this water[11]. By this statement, he refers to the effects of the mine on the livelihoods. In July 2017, it was reported that 27 cows were poisoned. The owner of the poisoned cows related intoxication to the mining activity because the cows drank muddy spring water. He stated that cattle farming is their only means of livelihood[12]. Beekeeping is another necessary means of livelihood in the city. Hatilla Valley and Macahel region are known for honey produced locally. According to Artvin Governorship, in Artvin, 1 million 150 thousand tone honey is made in a year[13]. Beekeeper Mehmet (64/M) stated that bees are susceptible animals, therefore, they can die quickly because of the pollution in nature. Another beekeeper, Ayten (66/W) indicated that it will be the last year we produce qualified honey (in 2017) if the mining activity in Cerattepe continues. She added that if the mining activity continues, most of the bees will die, and the quality of the honey will decrease sharply because of the water pollution and pollution of the flowers that bees pollinate. Moreover, when the cyanide mixes in water, the honey we produce will be toxic, as she indicated. Therefore, they believe that mine will directly affect the means of production and livelihood.

Another primary motivation of the actors to participate in the movement is the adverse effects of the prior experience mining in the region and its lived impacts to nature and human health. Utku (23/M) expressed the potential impact of the mine on nature by stating that "Many trees will be cut; it will turn to Murgul or like the other place mine is extracted. It will be moorland, even a grass will not grow". Many interviewees referred to Murgul, one of the districts of Artvin, to exemplify the region where the effects of mining activities can be seen clearly. The statement of Sırma (54/W), "The people in Artvin did not learn mine from TV shows, they lived, people know from Murgul," indicated such an experience of the local people in the region. During the field study, many people said that Murgul

[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fHDvE3bl_Y

[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UkDabU1Its

[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UkDabU1Its

[12] https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/cerattepede-korkulan-oldu?page=5

[13] http://www.artvin.gov.tr/artvin-ormanlari-ballaniyor

was a lively, colorful, and green town before the mine operated, and it turned into a "ghost" town after the mine. They had relatives who died young because of occupational illness related to working in the mine. During the interview, I was very impressed by the statements of a 75-year-old mineworker woman, Sakine, who retired from the sales unit of a copper operation in Murgul. She lost her brother and father at an early age working in the mine because of an occupational illness. She recounted her living and working experience in Murgul in the following way:

> If a bird were to drink from the waters of the mine, that bird would die instantly. I witnessed it. Murgul River used to flow black. If a living creature were to drink from that water, that animal would perish…We could not go to the office with a pair of socks; it would be riddled. My heart is torn apart; I cried a lot in the morning. Murgul Copper Factory was established in 1950. I worked there for 16 years in the sales department. The people woke up, and they started to revolt. Because they had no single bunch of parsley as the SO2 gas from the mine burnt them completely, and now that region is a valley… A kind of vapor would arise when it melted. That was a colored vapor that burns your skin. My father used to work. He died at the age of 50. We had nothing, we had our jobs, but my father and brother lost their health. It affects your life one way or another. My friends died of cirrhosis, and all those days are like a dream now.

Another main reason articulated by interviewees pertains to political concerns. The struggle for Cerattepe is evaluated as hope and destiny for other ecology struggles in Artvin, the Black Sea region, and Turkey. As mentioned earlier, Cerattepe is only one of the mining sites; there are 325 mining licenses in Artvin, in addition to many hydroelectric power plants, dams, and stone quarry projects. People regarded Cerattepe as a symbol of the struggle against environmentally destructive projects in Artvin, and it is believed that giving up the struggle for Cerattepe means the loss of the struggle in all parts of Artvin.

The statement that "our nature will be destroyed for the sake of profit of Mehmet Cengiz" is stressed by many people during the field study. Against the discourse of the government and mine company that the mining will offer an employment opportunity for local people and contribute to the wealth of the city, people indicate that there is no benefit for the local people in Artvin, and they also stressed that even the state has no benefit from mining in the region. Many interviewees stated that the state would receive 2% of the profit. There was no general homogenous and uniform discourse on mining; some interviewees said they don't oppose mining, but they underlined that they are against mining in Cerattepe. All interviewees of different ages and political views agreed that the only one that benefits from mining in Cerattepe is Cengiz Company- the mining company. However, there is a consensus about what will be the case if the mine is extracted by the state, not a private company. Right-wing interviewees

indicated that Artvin could be sacrificed for the sake of the state- especially if the state has benefited from the mining. 65 years old ex-president of *Grey Wolves* Hasan argued that:

> If they were to say we remove Artvin completely, but we must extract this mine here, and the money will go to the treasury of the Republic of Turkey, then we would sacrifice. It would be for the benefit of the state, at least. Just think of Gallipoli, where we had 250 thousand martyrs, and there were people from Artvin among them. No worries if we are to save our state… All our efforts are for the Turkish nation and Turkey. If it were the Republic of Turkey that extracted this mine here and it would benefit our state, then we would sacrifice not only Artvin but ourselves as well. But it is not the case as they grant it to Mehmet Cengiz who swears to me and my family blatantly. So, what is in it for us?

In all interviews, the name of Mehmet Cengiz – the mining company owner- was pronounced. When asked why they are against mining in Cerattepe, most people indicate that they don't want their nature to be destroyed for the sake of the profit of Mehmet Cengiz. It is also important to note that this rhetoric is not peculiar to left-wing people. People of different ages and different political views made the same point without exception. For example, 75 years old conservative woman Sakine said that:

> We don't want to get poisoned for the sake of Mehmet Cengiz. For the profit of one person, even if it is for the profit of ten people, it doesn't make sense. They should not plunder my nature; I don't care about the profit. The water will come from Çekirge and I will drink water here. Why: for the profit of Cengiz. There is nothing else. I don't want this; they should leave nature alone; I am so sad.

During daily conservations, people often stated that the government discards citizens in Artvin and Artvin City for the welfare of Mehmet Cengiz. Sixty-three-year-old MHP supporter Selma said this opinion in the interview: "They ignore 30.000 people for one person: Mehmet Cengiz". Duygu (45/W) agreed with Selma by saying, "They will force people to leave their homes, why, just for Cengiz and his followers. They will ignore Artvin and the people in Artvin for the sake of two people". At this point, the interviewees repeatedly stressed the role of the government and its collaboration with the private company. By stating that local people are the actual owners of Artvin, Sırma (54/W) argued that:

> We are the owners of these lands in Artvin. We have protected all these lands and mountains for centuries. We have not cut down a single tree as we strictly

> implement the forestry laws here. However, someone else cuts them down and contaminates nature blatantly—no fines or punishments when it comes to the corporation. A choice must be made between the people and the corporation. You cannot govern a state like a corporation. You cannot make benefits available to certain people from the state sources.

In this respect, the ruling party's role in the mine project in Cerattepe is pointed out by many interviewees. This may be an anti-government stand rather than an anti-state. There is a dissent to government policies and collaboration of the government with the private company. However, this discontent does not direct the state. In this respect, the state and government do not correspond to the same unity from the viewpoint of the interviewees. The collaboration between the Cengiz construction company and the ruling party has been emphasized by many interviewees, and mining in Cerattepe was evaluated as a government project. All interviewees indicated that the government directly supported this project. The collaboration between the ruling party and Cengiz Company is also connected to the security forces' attack on 15 February 2016 to enable the company to carry its heavy equipment to the Cerattepe mine site. Many interviewees stated that state security forces, paid by citizens' taxes, worked for Cengiz company[14]. 64 years old, Mehmet expressed this aspect;

> Does the constabulary protect private companies? It does here. The constabulary came outside, but the constabulary did not protect the private sector. We are occupied by our state, soldiers, and police. The state revealed its nature. It was understood that the security forces served Cengiz.

During the interviews and daily conversations, people emotionally expressed how they felt disappointed and lost their trust and faith in the state when the police attacked. Another respondent, a 34 years-old teacher, Derya, explained that moment regarding the role of government and her disappointment:

> What is the role of the state; it should be between people and the company. However, they acted with the company, they opened a road for the company, and then the company's cars and containers went under our eyes. I was always afraid of this moment. I didn't want to see this moment. That is the ruling party's role; it took the people on to make one person rich. These people lost their trust in the state.

In the interviews, many activists drew attention to rising repression in recent

[14] In Cerattepe near to mine site, police soldiers were still waiting for mine site when I was in Artvin.

years. They explained how the Artvin governorship benefits from a state of emergency to repress political opposition in the city. After the 15 July coup attempt, the Artvin governorship has banned any public activities such as press statements, meetings, and demonstrations since July 2016, which was evaluated as a sign of collaboration between the government and Cengiz company by many interviewees. In the interview, Emre (29/M) equalized government, state, and private companies and stressed the cooperation concerning the bans of governorship:

> The government is directly included in this project. I think Cengiz's construction governs this process. The state is Mehmet Cengiz, the state in Artvin is Mehmet Cengiz, and the governor is Mehmet Cengiz because the governor obeys Mehmet Cengiz; he approves everything. It has been 1 year since 15 July. The state of emergency was extended 12 times in Artvin; there is a state of emergency in Turkey and a double state of emergency in Artvin. They don't intervene in other districts except for Artvin city center. There is no state, governor, or district governor; the state is Cengiz construction now, and what Cengiz says is the rule. That is to say, the state and the governor do not let the activities of the Green Arvin Association relate to Cerattepe. This means that they are the political partner of Cengiz Construction. The governor acts as a representative of Cengiz Construction rather than the representative of the state and the people.

The discourse "the governor of Artvin is Mehmet Cengiz" was stated by many interviewees during daily life and interviews. They stressed the close relationship between the company and the government. They mentioned that bureaucrats appointed by the government party were not working for the people but for private companies. The "secret" partnership between the leading figures of AKP and the company was also stressed by many interviewees. In addition to the idea that mining in Cerattepe was a project of the government party AKP, the role of personal interests was also emphasized. Ali (27/M) described this as; This is the project of the ruling party as a family and business partnership, the project that the ruling party directly supports. The state uses every means available since it is a matter of excessive surplus". By referring to the fact that the state does not derive a profit from mining, Başak (41/W) explained why the government insistently supports this project despite powerful local opposition:

> If the state does not profit, it will get a 2 percent share. Why does the state support this project? Cengiz is responsible for the project. Another ruling party does not stand behind this project. This insistence is due to the ruling party's profit; they will earn billions. The ruling party supports them. If it does not, the company will give up to now.

The government plays a role in supporting the mine project in Cerattepe in different ways. Interviewees underlined the part of the government by intervening in courts' decisions, changing regulations and EIA on mines by simplifying EIA procedures, and providing the mining company with the services of the municipality. The decision of EIA, a positive report by the local court, and approval of this decision by the Council of State are evaluated as the government's interference to support mining activity, as stated by Selma: "Actually, I don't believe in courts and justice. We won lawsuits 30 times. We cannot this time. The judges changed when we won lawsuits, they added fake documents, and they filled a new suit, and then this happened", while Ayten indicated that "The previous process was different, there was a judicial process. The company started its activities before the court decision. This is the role of the ruling party".

The government evaluated the municipality's role in providing infrastructure and human capital to support mining activity. The AKP won the last municipal elections after CHP's three terms in power. Many interviewees indicated negative reflections on this change. They explained how the municipality used every available means to help the mining company by providing equipment and workers and blazing trails or extensions of the roads. Melek (27/W) emphasized the role of the local government:

> The atmosphere in the city has changed through the changes in local government; we lost our most important support. We were very powerful in the period of Emin Özgün, our previous mayor. We could do whatever we wanted; he gave every kind of support in the demonstrations; we could organize demonstrations and express our demands. The struggle is much more than reading press releases; instead, it has material and moral aspects. It is difficult to achieve in the conditions that the atmosphere of the city is not on your side.

In this respect, the role of government through repression of the mobilization by a police attack on 16 February 2016, governor's ban, and mobilization of municipality resources for the mining company is evaluated as the role of the government in terms of supporting mining in Artvin. Neşe Karahan referred to the role of government in terms of protecting the private company through political and legal means as follows:

> State security forces swear to protect the homeland, country, and future of the country. Unfortunately, they work for a private company. Since February, the constabulary waited for the company at the mining site. The company has personal security, and the constabulary still waits to protect them. There are still prohibitions; Artvin's governor extended prohibitions automatically since 19 September. For whom these prohibitions are just for one company. To torture the people in Artvin, press releases are prohibited, demonstrations are prohibited, and everything is not permitted. In the meantime, many people

> have put on trails, including us. The company tried to place a charge, blaming me for being a German spy.

As indicated the interviewees indicated their opposition to the mining regarding the discourse that the nature/ Cerattepe/ their living space is plundered by Cengiz company with the help of the government to make a profit-making. They did not apply the words of capitalism or neoliberalism. Still, they referred to the peculiar dimension of neoliberalism, such as the plunder of nature and living space for the private company's interests or "small and privileged groups." It is crucial to remember that the rapid ecological degradation that goes hand in hand with state-capital partnership is an inherent part of the historically specific accumulation process that defines capitalist society (Foster, 2002, p. 104); in other words, commodification and privatization of the nature and natural resources is an integral part of the contemporary capitalism (Harvey, 2004; Werlhof, 2007; Castree, 2010). Because neoliberalism recognizes nature only as a resource that must be exploited (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2001, p. 1117), and be transformed into commodity/ capital (Werlhof, 2007), neoliberalism involves enclosure, dispossession and commodification process of nature, natural resources, and commons.

By defining nature as a living space and defending living space as the common of the local community, the anti-mining movement in Artvin represents collective resistance against the commodification of commons, which is evaluated as one of the critical features of contemporary neo-liberal social movements (Klein, 2004; della Porta, 2015; Harvey, 2005). Defending the nature of their region as the common belonging to all is the common goal of activists, which brings together various people in Artvin. They conceptualize nature as their living space that should not be plundered by the private company because it belongs to everyone and belongs to the local people of Artvin. From the perspective of people living in Artvin, nature is about their past, experiences, and emotions; in other words, it is about people's social relations and social networks. Therefore, they resist privatization and commodification of what is essential to their life. This reminds us the argument of Klein that "The defense of their living spaces against the interest/profit of private company at the same time indicates the defense of the common, which is "the radical spirit of new social movements" (Klein, 2004) . While anti-neoliberal social movements defend commons as decommodifying what is essential to life (della Porta, 2015, p. 140), activists in Artvin defend Cerattepe as the environmental commons as an inseparable part of their life.

Conclusion

Neoliberalism harbors various societal conflicts. Far from being limited to the economic sphere, societal conflicts emerging from neoliberalism can also be observed in the political and social spheres. The environmental conflicts are no exception to such societal conflicts caused by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism goes

hand in hand with the enclosure of commons, including ecological commons such as land, water, and forests.

In recent years, people globally have united against the neoliberal agenda of relentless commodification of commons. In different parts of the world, from the Global South to Western Europe, people are united around the aim of protecting living spaces in an ecologically encompassing way against the rent-seeking policies of neoliberalism. Turkey is no exception in this respect. Although authoritarian policies repress oppositional movements, environmental movements continue to sustain in different localities.

The anti-mining struggle in Artvin has lasted almost 30 years with ups and downs. The movement is characterized by a heterogonous social basis due to the participation of people from different age, gender, political affiliations, and class. The movement's actors are local people of Artvin who are directly affected by mining in the region. This movement is composed of a broad coalition of local people exceeding political, ideological, and class differences with the slogan "no to mine" in Cerattepe. The movement creates a collective identity that activists define themselves as the local people of Artvin whose living space is threatened by the mining company and who defend their life, city, nature, and environment. The movement is organized as a flexible network in a horizontal, participatory, and non-hierarchical way.

Motivations of the actors to oppose the mining and participate in the movement display diversity; however, to defend the city and nature and to oppose the plunder of nature for the profit of private companies are the main motivations underlined by the interviewees. It was repeatedly argued that mining would destroy Artvin and turn it into a desert, forcing them to immigrate with the consequent loss of the city culture identified with social ties, solidarity, trust, and friendship. People have emotional and material attachments to nature. It mainly refers to where they grow up, live, relax, and enjoy. This is the reason why they call it "living space." Nature is about their past, experiences, and emotions; in other words, it is about people's social relations and social networks. Therefore, they resist privatization and commodification of what is essential to their life.

Even though activists do not explain their motivations by referring to words such as capitalism and neoliberalism, they mentioned specific characteristics of neoliberalism, such as plundering nature for the interest of the private company and private company-government partnership. Interviewees repeatedly noted that they oppose this project because it will lead to the plunder of their nature for the sake of the profit of one private company. The government's role was to support the private company by intervening in law, changing regulations and procedures, providing infrastructure through municipalities, and creating a repressive environment for the opposition in the city through governorship bans. The anti-mining movement in Artvin shows strong resistance to neoliberal authoritarianism that goes hand in hand with state and private company partnerships in the Turkish case. Although activists locate their struggle "above politics," they distance themselves from institutional politics and perform anti-neoliberal politics by protecting their nature, as the living space and the commons

belong to everyone instead of the private company, which gives important clues about the potential of environmental movements in terms of political and social opposition to contemporary neoliberalism.

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Contested terrain and the distribution of social movements

Gino Canella

Abstract

This article proposes the distribution of social movements: a framework for analyzing how activists are navigating contemporary information systems to claim symbolic and political power. Drawing on ethnographic research with U.S. movements from 2015 to 2022, the article examines three distribution tactics: protest, earned and owned media, and community meetings. The study foregrounds the conflictual nature of political communication and argues that three primary antagonisms occur during the distribution of movements: (1) hegemonic: activists contest how their issues are framed; (2) legitimize: activists demand status as political actors; and (3) affective: activists make legible the emotions of their movements. Technological and political-economic changes are modifying the spatial dynamics of our political and information systems—influencing not only movements' communication tactics, but altering the very terrain of politics.

Keywords: protest; social movements; antagonism; Black Lives Matter; labor; political terrain; social media

Introduction

Social movements have long used a diversity of communication tactics—organizing protests, publishing newsletters and hosting community meetings. In recent years, though, technological and political-economic changes have complicated things, altering how movements publicize their demands and discuss their issues (Barassi, 2013). To understand these changes, this article proposes *the distribution of social movements*: a framework for analyzing the online and offline methods that contemporary movements are using to communicate with supporters, publics and institutions. Distribution is viewed as a series of social and material processes that occur through four interconnected dimensions: spatiotemporal, technical-behavioral, emotional, and normative (Steensen, Ferrer-Conill, & Peters, 2020).

Mapping distribution across these four dimensions requires interrogating the internal logics, affordances, and constraints of online and offline spaces. Within digital spaces, movements are using various platforms to connect with global audiences, boost their visibility, promote their fundraising efforts, and bolster their coalitional capacity (Díaz & Cacheda, 2016; Mundt et al., 2018). The political economy of these sites, however, gives many activists pause (Fuchs, 2012). From collecting users' personal data to running on algorithms that prioritize outrage

and spectacle, digital spaces are often ineffective venues in which to conduct long-term organizing (Tufecki, 2018; Wolfson, 2014).

Physical spaces likewise present a contradiction. While protests and demonstrations interrupt the movement of people and goods and draw a lot of attention, this attention is often fleeting and uneven (Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod, 2007). Journalists cover protests, raising the movement's visibility and placing it on the public agenda, but this coverage often depicts protests as violent aberrations, devoid of context and detached from the underlying issues motivating the movement (Gamson, 1990; Gitlin, 1980; Koopmans, 2004).

This is especially true for labor movements and movements for racial justice. According to Martin (2019), coverage of labor issues shifted as the economics of the news industry collapsed. As newspaper circulations declined in the 1980s, Martin notes, publishers started pursuing middle class, suburban white readers. Labor coverage subsequently moved to the business section and workplace disputes were increasingly framed as disruptions for capital and inconveniences for consumers. Regarding movements for racial justice, researchers have found that news coverage marginalizes and delegitimizes movements against anti-Black racism more than movements for other issues, such as immigrants' rights, health, and the environment (Brown et al., 2019; Brown & Harlow, 2019).

Drawing on my work as an ethnographic filmmaker in the United States (U.S.) from 2015 to 2022, this article details how the movements I partnered with distributed their campaigns across various spaces and redrew the terrain of politics (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Caren, Andrews, & Lu, 2020). I argue that three primary antagonisms occur during the distribution of movements: (1) hegemonic: activists contest the framing of their issues; (2) legitimize: activists demand recognition as political actors; and (3) affective: activists make legible the emotions of their movements.

The article begins by reviewing literature on radical democracy, symbolic space, and networked society. I then discuss my methods and procedures, describing my filmmaking as militant ethnography. I argue that media production in partnership with movements provided me with opportunities to witness firsthand the affective dimension of distribution (Juris, 2007). I then offer the study's findings, organized by distribution tactic: protest, earned and owned media, and community meetings. The findings demonstrate how contemporary movements are leveraging numerous spaces simultaneously—using rallies, public meetings, posters, flyers, and multimedia—to antagonize publics and institutions, disrupt narratives about injustice, and alter the very terrain in which politics occurs.

Radical democracy, symbolic space, and networked society

Political analysts, journalists, and elected officials are expressing increasing alarm about the crises facing democracy.[1] Democracy is in peril, we hear, due to

[1] For reports from the nonprofit sector, see Freedom House (https://bit.ly/3Ni6b11) and Protect Democracy (https://bit.ly/3Nec1QH). For journalistic accounts, see the *New York Times*, "'A

rising authoritarianism, political polarization, and the erosion of civil discourse (Ercan & Gagnon, 2014). Rarely, however, do these discussions acknowledge the fact that democratic societies, by their nature, include adversarial and conflictual relations.

Political theorist Chantal Mouffe has argued that conflict is an indispensable feature of "radical democracy," noting that plurality, multiplicity, and struggle are "the *raison d'être of politics*" (1989, p. 41). While Mouffe acknowledges that "reciprocity and hostility" are inextricably linked (2005, p. 3), she makes a distinction between "antagonistic" and "agonistic" politics. Antagonistic politics occur between enemies, while agonistic politics occur among adversaries who operate according to a shared set of rules and within "a common symbolic space" (2005, p. 52). The agonistic form, Mouffe (1999) argues, emerges when existing power relations are transformed and a new hegemony is established.

Mouffe (2013) is primarily concerned with how radical politics counter the dominance of neoliberal capitalism. In contrast to scholars who theorize political change as *transformation* (Badiou, 2012; Hardt & Negri, 2012; Žižek, 2011) or as *reactivation* (Rancière, 1999; Wolin, 1996), Mouffe stresses the importance of institutions and understands political change as *democratic renewal* (see also: Tambakaki, 2017). Renewal, for Mouffe, requires radicalizing democracy from within and engaging with institutions to articulate a new common sense (2013, p. 65). Tilly also underscores the role of institutions, arguing that movements' claims become "contentious" once "governments become parties to the claims" (1997, p. 56). Conflict arises, he wrote, when those claims "bear on someone else's interests" (Tilly, 2008, p. 5).

To examine the conflictual nature of democracy, this article critiques two key aspects of Mouffe's agonistic framework: the first is the notion that a "new hegemony" can be established; the second is the idea that political adversaries operate within a "common symbolic space." Rather than viewing hegemony as something that is fixed or that can be won, I understand it as an ongoing process in which meanings are constantly defended, revised, and negotiated (Williams, 1977). Moreover, as technologies dramatically alter how information is read and distributed, we must reconsider how "symbolic space" is organized and contested (Asenbaum, 2018).

Building on the work of French sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1991), who theorized space as both a material field and a social practice, I recognize the hybridity of contemporary movements, examining the ways in which they use overlapping and multimodal communicative practices to dispute and expand symbolic spaces and redraw the political terrain (Boler and Nitsou 2014).

As movements contest their issues across numerous spaces, they engage in what Gramsci (1971) called the *war of position*: a period of political struggle in which movements disseminate their ideas and attempt to persuade the public.

Crisis Coming': The Twin Threats to American Democracy" (https://bit.ly/41e3lzK), and PBS's series "Democracy in Crisis" (https://bit.ly/3tazoUG). For scholarly literature, see Goodrich (2022).

Theorizing the war of position in the digital age, Castells (2011) argued that movements seek to gain a positional advantage by producing "mass self-communication." This is evident in the countless blogs, YouTube channels, and social media pages that activists and political actors publish. While these texts can spread individual members' stories and create "personal action frames" that animate supporters (Bennett & Segerberg 2012), Castells argued that, due to their horizontal nature and over-reliance on emotion, they are ineffective for movement building.

Dean (2009a) has similarly critiqued online activism, arguing that social media capture dissent and prioritize self-promotion over collective subjectivity. And because social media run on algorithms that curate information to match users' individual preferences and maximize engagement, they have contributed to the collapse of symbolic efficiency—a situation in which symbols and language mean everything and therefore nothing (Dean 2009b).

These dynamics are thus complicating the framing of social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000; Scheufele, 2009). Framing research has often focused on news coverage, analyzing the sources journalists rely on and the language they use when covering movements (Van Gorp, 2016). Carragee and Roefs (2004), however, urged scholars to move beyond framing as a storytelling device and to instead view it as a social and material process that occurs within the political economy of media.

By reviewing *the forms* of movements' claims (video, posters, speech) and *the spaces* in which they are expressed (in the streets, on social media, and interpersonally), this study analyzes how the political economy of media is affecting the war of position, redrawing the boundaries of symbolic and political terrain and placing democracy's antagonisms more clearly on display.

Method: activist filmmaking as militant ethnography

As a filmmaker and community-engaged researcher, I have created partnerships with numerous activist collectives and labor unions in the U.S. These partnerships have allowed me to study and participate in the distribution of social movements. This article draws on my experiences working with: Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Local 105 in Denver, Colorado; Black Lives Matter 5280, the Denver chapter of BLM; Black Lives Matter Boston; and the Massachusetts Nursing Association. Working with a variety of organizations—from trade unions to movements for racial justice—allowed me to examine the similarities and differences in their distribution tactics.

This study relies on 45 interviews with activists, organizers, and supporters of these groups; six community meetings I attended hosted by SEIU Local 105 and BLM5280; and a review of these groups' social media accounts. Studying these groups across online and offline spaces allowed me to observe how organizers are using analog and digital media to communicate with diverse publics across space and time (Nakamura, 2002). This method also allowed me to develop ethical partnerships with these groups and to test my initial assumptions about their

distribution strategies. I produced 12 documentary films in collaboration with these groups (ranging from 2 to 23 minutes in length). These films were published online in journalism outlets, shared on my and these groups' social media accounts, and viewed at community screenings. Publishing these films quickly online allowed these groups to promote their campaigns urgently and speak directly with their supporters. It also allowed me to gather feedback, build trust with my partners, and network with their members.

My filmmaking and research were informed by what Juris called "militant ethnography" (2007, p. 165). Rather than simply observing activism from a distance, militant ethnographers "become entangled with complex relations of power, and live the emotions associated with direct action organizing and activist networking" (p. 167). Militant ethnographers do not attempt to document and study movements as detached neutral observers; rather they critically reflect on their positionality to the groups they are working with and interrogate their responsibilities and commitments as scholars and social justice accomplices (Juris & Alex, 2013; Russell, 2015).

My positionality to the groups discussed here varied. I developed a close working relationship with SEIU Local 105, organizing a media workshop with the unions, co-producing a 23-minute documentary with the union's communication coordinator, and discussing regularly its campaigns and initiatives with members of the union's leadership. Due to my racial and gender identities, my partnerships with BLM5280 and BLM Boston are understood as an active supporter, rather than as a member. Finally, my partnership with the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) reflects a traditional researcher role: I documented the nurses' strike from the picket line, filming nurses outside the hospital and interviewing nurses and union organizers in the strike headquarters. I did not attend any organizing meetings hosted by the MNA. The contours of these partnerships affected the amount and quality of data I was able to gather. In situations where I had less access to core organizers and planning meetings, I relied more on the groups' public communication via social media, local journalism, and email newsletters.

I had two primary goals in developing these partnerships: first, I wanted to contribute to these groups' communication and organizing efforts, and second, I wanted to provide concrete analyses about their distribution strategies (Sztandara, 2021; Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019). These partnerships offered me opportunities to observe, document, and contribute to these movements, and further understand how they are using various venues and multiple forms to reframe their issues and express their emotions (Papacharissi, 2016).

Finally, militant ethnography highlights the emotional and conflictual dimensions of distribution. Uribe and Rappaport (2011) argued that conflict and confrontation are necessary aspects of activist research, as they reveal the struggle over voice and power. Confrontation alters how we see the world: "It is in confrontation with people that both our knowledge and theirs will be validated, refined, and combined to produce concepts, methods, and procedures for activist

research (*investigación-acción*), ways of knowing and doing that are novel, creative, and, above all, transformative of reality" (pp. 28–29).

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed following a three-step method: (1) I conducted a close reading of the transcripts; (2) I did a second reading of the transcripts to uncover themes and patterns—in this case, the fight over hegemony, the demand for legitimacy, and the role of affect; (3) I conducted a third and final reading with these themes in mind (Emerson et al., 2011). Although the findings presented here are not generalizable to all movements, the study illuminates the complex and contradictory nature of distribution within networked society.

The distribution of movements

The movements I partnered with used three primary distribution tactics: protest, earned and owned media, and community meetings. Each tactic should not be viewed as separate or distinct, but rather as overlapping and complementary. Protests, for instance, are often filmed and shared online by journalists and activists, while public meetings provide organizers space to strategize about their campaigns and foster deeper relationships among their members and supporters. By using a variety of distribution tactics simultaneously across disparate spaces, these groups expanded the terrain of politics and demonstrated the antagonistic nature of meaning-making within networked society.

The streets as a distribution tactic

Protests disrupt how people move through space, and they alter the speed at which people and ideas spread (Harvey, 1989). Ron Ruggiero, president of SEIU Local 105, told me that protests "matters a lot" for the labor movement. "That's how progress gets made in this country," he said, "people coming together, making their voices heard." Denver city councilmember Paul Lopez, who has marched alongside service workers and spoken at Local 105's rallies, agreed. The labor movement's most iconic distribution tactic, he said, is "the picket line." It "create[s] a reflection. We create a surface people can see themselves in. And that's exactly why we do it. That's exactly why we've had the support we've had."[2] Creating reflections through public demonstration directs, or "choreographs" (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 4), public attention among seemingly dispersed publics. These actions serve to cohere fragmented publics and create opportunities for movements to identify their collective interests.

[2] I explained to participants that interviews served a dual purpose: they would be included in films published online and screened at community meetings and be included in research articles analyzing social movements. Participants provided verbal consent and were invited to review a draft of this article. Ruggiero interviewed by author, June 15, 2016; Lopez interviewed by author, July 19, 2017. Both interviews were conducted on camera for a documentary film.

Lopez and Ruggiero noted the labor movement's history of disrupting public spaces through protest, arguing that public assemblies both ground trade unions in the past and network workers in the present. Protests and picket lines bring people into direct contact with workers whose labor is often obscured, Lopez said. During a series of Justice 4 Janitors protests in 2016, Local 105 marched through downtown Denver's business district to make visible the workers who work in these building. During the march, passersby could not avoid the janitorial workers who clean the buildings overnight; the workers demanded recognition by chanting, dancing to a marching band, and waving signs and brooms.

Creating reflections, however, occasionally means confronting people who do not support the movement's claims. During a Local 105 protest on June 13, 2017, in which the union marched to demand improved healthcare coverage for service workers, a group of people on Denver's 16th Street Mall heckled to the protesters, "Get jobs!" Andy Jacob, political director of Local 105, responded, "We do." He told me later that comments like these are a major reason why unions need to be in the streets. He said the public viewed the Fight for $15 campaign unfavorably when SEIU helped to launch it in 2012; but, through a multimodal distribution strategy that combined public demonstrations, e-mail newsletters, and social media, the public over time came to view the demand favorably (Dunn, 2021).

Greg Douros, Local 105's chief of staff, told me that he is cautious about responding to detractors at protests. Often times, he said, their aim is to antagonize protesters, provoke a reaction, and film the altercation for social media. This spectacle fuels social media's cycle of outrage and furthers the narrative that protesters are violent and dangerous. Douros said that while the streets can be a space for sparking conversation, organizers must turn those sparks into dialogue through long-term organizing.

Lizeth Chacón, executive director of Colorado People's Alliance, an organization that has partnered with Local 105, said that protests create spaces for activists to refine their messaging. "Actions are a critical component for us to be able to win on the narrative fight," she said. Additionally, protests sustain a movement's passion. "We have to keep our community energized, and we have to keep pressure on our elected officials and the targets that we have."[3]

Organizers with BLM Boston affirmed this sentiment during its #SayHerName rally on July 4, 2020. In the midst of the racial justice uprisings following the murder of George Floyd, BLM Boston gathered to center and honor the work of Black women. Organizers highlighted the emotions of the moment by creating a festive and hopeful atmosphere—singing, dancing, and clapping to the beat of a drum. "Joy, alongside pain and suffering, is the way that our people have always

[3] Interview with author, August 30, 2017. Conducted on-camera for a documentary film.

survived," Karlene Griffiths Sekou, lead organizer with BLM Boston, said. "Joy is where we find our strength."[4]

I learned about the protest on BLM Boston's Facebook page. Organizers created an event listing for the march on Facebook, which included an email address for media inquires. I emailed the account two days prior to the rally to introduce myself and express my interest in filming the demonstration. Griffiths Sekou replied and shared information about the protest and how to contact her when I arrive. The short film I produced about the protest was published online by an alternative news weekly in Boston.[5]

Daunasia Yancey, the founder of BLM Boston, told me the protest was designed to create space for people to express their anger about the ongoing state violence being perpetrated against Black people. Organizers, however, were intentional about channeling people's anger into a productive critique of systemic inequality:

> We want to lift that anger, that rage, that comes out when we are frustrated with the constant state violence that plagues us… We protest out of love for each other and for ourselves. We want to center that because it is what will fuel us. Anger can burn you out. We want to be righteously angry, and we want to be holding each other in love. And we think that we can do both.[6]

In addition to lifting up the movement's emotions, BLM Boston also sought to disrupt the dominant framing of Independence Day. "Fourth of July is a false narrative," Griffiths Sekou said. "It's an imperialist, colonial narrative built on the back of stolen lands and on the backs of Indigenous peoples, built with extracted labor, from enslaved people from our ancestors. Independence Day was never independent for all of us." By marching through Boston on a holiday designed to celebrate the nation's "founding," activists challenged the symbolic efficiency of July 4th, challenging the pubic to ask: freedom and independence for whom?

Protest was one method through which BLM and trade unions reframed their issues, expressed their emotions, and built networks with their allies. Independent media and local news outlets were another important site.

[4] Interview with author, July 4, 2020. Conducted on-camera for short documentary about the protest.

[5] Available at: https://bit.ly/4080Ovs

[6] Interview with author, July 4, 2020. Conducted on-camera for short film about the protest.

Earned and owned media: local news and social media

News outlets can be ineffective venues for movements seeking to communicate with the public. Journalists "emphasize action rather than context" and often ignore the underlying motives animating activists (Jenkins, 1983, p. 546). As mentioned earlier, news outlets minimize Black activists' demands and protests for racial justice and report these movements as less important than other causes (Brown & Harlow, 2019; Mourão & Brown, 2022).

BLM5280 acknowledged this contradiction yet relied often on local news to distribute its campaigns. While petitioning to include the Office of the Independent Monitor—a panel to oversee police misconduct—into the Denver city charter, organizer Alex Landau spoke with local Fox affiliate KDVR-TV. Prior to the city council hearing on August 15, 2016, Landau stood on the steps of City Hall and explained to the reporter the importance of providing testimony at the hearing. Although he and BLM5280 could not control how the story was written, the interview gave him an opportunity to discuss the hearing with constituents who are likely outside the movement's core group of supporters and to frame the issue as law enforcement accountability.

In another instance, BLM5280 used local news, in concert with analog and digital media, to distribute its #ChangeTheNameStapleton campaign. The campaign, initially promoted with flyers placed on residents' cars and homes, was then expanded with updates shared on BLM5280's Facebook page, which raised the visibility of the campaign and earned BLM an appearance on a local radio show. The campaign sought to rename Stapleton, a neighborhood in the northwest section of Denver named for former Denver mayor Benjamin Stapleton who had known ties to the Ku Klux Klan.

Vince Bowen, a BLM5280 organizer, was interviewed by Colorado Public Radio journalist Andrea Dukakis. Dukakis began by asking, "Why make this campaign your first big initiative?" Bowen pushed back, saying, "Well, actually, what I would ask is why make this campaign the first big initiative in the media?" Dukakis then asked if BLM5280 launched the campaign to gain "media attention." Bowen replied:

> No. If you look at our flyer, we launched it to get folks activated. If you actually look at what the flyer says, it says: 'Did you know? Your neighborhood was named after Klansman #1128, Ben Stapleton.' And then on the back it says, 'Angry? Shocked? Then Act.' So, we're inviting people to start having a dialogue and talking about the implications of this because we think it is not a Black issue, it's not a white issue, it's an American issue. And we want everyone to be involved in doing the right thing and creating a community that lives up to the best that Denver has to offer. (quoted in Wolf, 2015)

Following this exchange, Bowen explained how the name Stapleton signifies the site of the former Stapleton International Airport, Denver's primary airport

from 1929 to 1995; however, Bowen said, it also symbolizes segregation and the historic intimidation of Black people. "[The name] represents a long legacy of racial exclusion, domestic terrorism, and lack of access to resources in pursuit of the full fruits of our democracy," Bowen told Dukakis in the interview. Bowen then explained that the campaign was designed to highlight three public policy areas affecting residents in the historically African American neighborhood of Park Hill, which borders Stapleton: (1) affordable housing; (2) access to healthy groceries, and (3) increased funding for public education. By drawing a link between the city's history of racial exclusion and the lack of material resources available to Black residents today, Bowen connected the dots between symbolic injustice and material inequities.

The interview reveals several things about BLM5280's distribution efforts. First, by challenging Dukakis's initial question about "media attention," Bowen rejected the host's framing and used the opportunity to discuss the unequal distribution of public resources. Second, BLM5280 used a combination of analog and digital media to provoke a reaction and gain attention for its campaign. This speaks to how organizers engaged with numerous constituents across a range of political terrains, both institutional and communal.

In another example, BLM5280 combined protest and local news to express support for Indigenous people protesting against the Dakota Access pipeline (DAPL) in Standing Rock, North Dakota. Locally, BLM5280 marched in Denver to support the Sioux Tribe's opposition to the pipeline. The October 8, 2016 protest was organized in part to oppose Columbus Day and the settler colonial logic behind the holiday. During the protest, BLM5280 organizers kept their distance from the center of the march, standing about 50 meters down the street and serving primarily in a supporting role. In this instance, BLM5280 used its name recognition and visibility to draw attention to the rally. Organizers told me later that environmental and racial justice are inextricably linked and that marching in the protest was an opportunity to collaborate with local activists and reframe hegemonic conceptions of land, racism, and citizenship.

BLM5280 continued its support for Indigenous rights the following month, traveling to Standing Rock in November 2016. Prior to the trip, BLM5280 solicited supplies and donations on its Facebook page—demonstrating how the group doesn't operate solely in the realm of ideas, but uses rhetoric and symbolic power to marshal material aid. Upon their return, organizers spoke with *Westword*, a Denver alt-weekly newspaper. Organizers explained how Indigenous land rights are connected to struggles for racial justice. "For us, the same law enforcement that's being employed to brutalize sovereign nations is simply an extension of the forces being used to brutalize and terrorize [Black] communities," a BLM5280 organizer said in the article. "We do not believe that the history of stolen lands is separated from the history of stolen labor, so while we're not centered in this fight, it is absolutely something we are proud to be a part of, because our histories are intertwined" (quoted in Walker, 2016, para. 11).

Through protest, crowdsourcing donations online, and local news outlets, BLM5280 bridged the ideological space between racial justice and Indigenous rights. BLM5280 organizers recognized that sharing material and symbolic resources was essential for building sustainable anti-capitalist and anti-colonial movements. While BLM's more sensational distribution tactics—shutting down bridges and disrupting politicians' speeches—antagonize publics and produce backlash, they generate publicity that the movement uses to challenge the status quo. As a BLM5280 organizer explained to the *Westword* journalist: "When we take the streets and disrupt traffic, when we disrupt conferences, and at that point, all of a sudden, people want to come to the table—if that's the order in which we need to move things, then we will continue to disrupt finances" (quoted in Walker, 2016, para. 47).

These campaigns—for the Independent Monitor, Stapleton, and Standing Rock—underscore the antagonistic and multi-sited nature of BLM5280's distribution strategy. Organizers navigated institutional and extra-institutional spaces to wage political struggle. In most instances, organizers did not engage with institutional actors (e.g., public officials and journalists) as adversaries who were operating according to a shared set of rules. Rather, they viewed them as impediments to their goals, opponents whose framings and rules needed to be rejected in order to redraw the symbolic and material terrain in which their issues existed.

SEIU Local 105 also used a combination of independent media and local news during its 2018 campaign at Denver International Airport: organizers discussed the campaign with Spanish-language news outlets in Colorado and created social media posts. On its Facebook page, Local 105 posted photos showing an airport worker being interviewed by Telemundo, with the caption:

> We're here at Denver International Airport today standing up and speaking out on behalf of airport security workers! They keep us all safe & deserve better wages & benefits. Right now, campaign coordinator Luis is talking to Telemundo Denver about the Airport Security Officers at DIA and their struggle for better wages and benefits. Sign our petition on behalf of airport workers: actionsprout.io/84C8F5 Learn more by following Airport Workers United. (SEIU Local 105, 2018)

Shortly after sharing the post, Local 105 livestreamed a video to its Facebook page showing workers marching through the airport (SEIU Local 105, 2018b). The video was captioned: "Every day, airport security workers keep us safe. It's past time to honor their request for fair pay and treatment! #StrongerTogether #PovertyDoesntFly." Independent media published on Facebook allowed Local 105 to publicize its campaign through a confrontational frame, something Telemundo and other local news outlets were unlikely to do. Video of workers confronting management to demand improved healthcare benefits with the

hashtag "#PovertyDoesntFly" showed how organizers exaggerated the spectacle of the action and leaned into the logic of social media.

I asked María Corral, Local 105's communications coordinator, how she navigates the contradictions of social media. She told me the union conducts workshops for its members to coach them on how to promote the union's campaigns and respond to negative comments. During one workshop, Corral said, members were met with a "Twitter storm" against the #Fightfor15, with numerous commenters attacking the campaign. Similar to the encounter with hecklers in the street, Corral encouraged members to exercise restraint. "Hopefully, if [social media] can promote the campaign that we're working on with our members and help boost the need for standards to equalize the inequity of incomes, then that's what we try to do," she said. Corral said Local 105 often leans on the "progressive community" in Denver to neutralize online hostility on the union's behalf. "[Our members] got on board and actually began balancing out the negative and the positive messages, which is awesome," she said.[7]

As movements use social media to reach diverse publics, combat negative or false framings of their issues, and organize supporters, they must also navigate increasingly consolidated and corporatized spaces. As wireless and broadband connectivity and online platforms are owned and managed by a few giant tech firms, activists must be aware of who has access to these spaces and how unaccountable private companies determine which expressions and viewpoints are permitted on their platforms. Movements for racial justice must be especially vigilant as Black activists are disproportionately subject to these platforms' surveillance mechanisms (Benjamin, 2019; Canella, 2018).

Despite these constraints, a union organizer in Denver who has partnered with Local 105 told me that mediating protest—through livestreaming videos and posting photos and news articles to social media—expands the labor movement's reach: "We're trying to bring [our issues] to the public realm so that it becomes a conversation for the public and we gain more momentum and support for the issues." She argued that media also make movements more accessible. "Everyone can't make it out to a direct action. People are going to see that on their Facebook, on their Twitter, on their social media feeds. They are going to see articles in the paper about that," she said. "It's really about really uplifting a conversation about change that a lot of folks feel is needed, and trying to really gain support and momentum for that change."[8]

Similar to Local 105 and BLM5280, the Massachusetts Nursing Association used a variety of distribution tactics throughout its 10-month strike at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts. Nurses went on strike in February 2021 against Tenet Healthcare, the owner of St. Vincent and the second largest private healthcare provider in the U.S. They were fighting for improved patient-to-staff ratios, among other issues. Nurses and MNA staff

[7] Interview with author, June 15, 2016

[8] Interview with author, July 19, 2017

used picketing, social media, and op-eds in local newspapers, among other methods, to communicate with the public throughout the strike.

I interviewed nurses during the strike for an 8-minute documentary that was published on *The Real News Network*, an independent journalism outlet. At the conclusion of the strike in January 2022, I conducted seven in-depth interviews with nurses and MNA staff for an oral history about the union's preparations for the strike, their communication strategies, and structural issues within the U.S. healthcare system. The timing of the strike—amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and discourses about essential and frontline workers—created favorable conditions for the strike, nurses said. Writing op-eds in local newspapers and posting on social media "gave a lot of positivity to the strikers," one nurse said. By creating their own media, nurses reframed stories about the strike published on Tenet Healthcare's Facebook page. One nurse said: "We don't have a multimillion-dollar propaganda effort to write all these articles… so, we had to make sure that we, at least, were fighting from our side saying, 'No, no, no, no, no, this is *not* how it is.'"[9] Several nurses said it was important to clarify and debunk news reports that portrayed the striking nurses in a negative light or misrepresented the conditions inside the hospital.

These rhetorical contests occurred often on social media. Carla LeBlanc, an MNA nurse I interviewed for the oral history, said: "When you'd see people on social media saying, 'These lazy nurses' or 'These bully nurses are loud mouth nurses, irresponsible, and they have an oath,' it was hard not to come back at that with anger and frustration." However, she responded to social media commenters "in a way that you're going to bring people back into hearing your side of the story." She asked people to hear the nurses' side and invited people she interacted with online to the picket line to have face-to-face conversations about patient safety and the conditions inside the hospital. In this instance, LeBlanc bridged disparate spaces, moving the MNA's claims from venues in which the nurses had little control (social media) to one in which they had more agency (the picket line). While social media presented challenges, it allowed for flexibility in messaging style. LeBlanc said she was "a little spicier" than her colleagues who chose to write op-eds, "so, it was almost like we were the good and evil of it. I could kind of be snarky on social media, and [my colleague] would be super sweet trying to educate people."[10]

Several nurses acknowledged that the MNA was not fully prepared to run a social media campaign against Tenet at the outset of the strike, nor did the union have the resources to do so. Several nurses said they were "caught off guard" in the early weeks of the strike, whereas Tenet was ready with marketing materials and press briefings. One nurse said it was disappointing to see negative comments and false information about the strike on social media, but her spirits

[9] Interview with author, January 17, 2022. Conducted on-camera for oral history about the strike.

[10] Interview with author, January 18, 2022. Conducted on-camera for oral history about the strike.

were uplifted when she walked the picket line and saw community members delivering donations, honking their horns, and walking alongside the nurses. MNA also received positive affirmation from pro-labor TikTok accounts and local activist groups who argued on behalf of the nurses.

Although social media, op-eds, and news coverage were important distribution tactics for the MNA, several nurses and union staffers stressed the importance of their existing relationships with faith-based groups, local labor unions, politicians, and grassroots organizations. These constituents were essential for supplementing the union's online activities and bridging the various political terrains in which this strike was fought.

Community meetings and media workshops

The activist groups I partnered with hosted numerous public gatherings. These events helped organizers strengthen the social relationships among members and supporters and contextualize their protests and social media activities. This section reviews two in-person gatherings hosted by SEIU Local 105 to review how these spaces were an integral part of the group's distribution efforts.

In 2018, I collaborated with Local 105 to organize a screening of *Radical Labor*, a documentary I co-produced with the union that focused on labor organizing in Colorado. I worked with María Corral, the union's communication coordinator, to identify panelists for a question-and-answer session at the screening. The panel consisted of Ruggiero, Local 105's president; a Local 105 field organizer; a labor and economics professor at the University of Denver; and an organizer with a grassroots organization in Boulder. I secured an auditorium in Boulder, Colorado, and worked with union organizers to promote the event via e-mail listservs, a Facebook event page, and flyers hung around the city of Boulder.

We partnered with a grassroots organization in Boulder to promote the event and foster new connections among activists in the area. Prior to the screening, an organizer from the group made an announcement about an environmental initiative his organization was working on, and he passed around a sign-up sheet to gather signatures and e-mail addresses. Following the announcement, I introduced the film and explained my motivations for making it—connecting fights for workers' rights with movements for racial justice.

After screening the film, I asked the panelists to sit at the front of the auditorium to share their reflections. I asked each panelist about racial and economic justice and about media's ability to divide publics or bring people together. The organizer with the grassroots organization spoke powerfully about the limits of media. She said that although media may introduce people to new concepts and ideas, face-to-face interactions are necessary to promote empathy and create inclusive and compassionate societies. She described her personal experiences as a queer person, explaining how LGBTQ rights have advanced, in part, because members of those communities were forced into direct contact with their friends and families. "We were right here," she said, placing her fingers an inch from

the tip of her nose. She described how U.S. schools and cities are more segregated now than they were in the 1960s, and that this should concern everyone fighting for justice.

Her comments resonated strongly with the audience, and they continue to inform my approach to activist filmmaking. Social media, film, and art will not in and of themselves secure justice; they can, however, carry affect, information, and perspectives across unfamiliar spaces and promote new understandings. For this to occur, organizers must move their claims off social media and into spaces where they can identify comrades with whom to build broad-based movements for change. Media can be a conversation-starter, but people represented in media make their issues tangible when they intervene directly in peoples' material and social lives.

After the screening, I secured distribution for the film on *Roar Magazine*, an online socialist magazine. *Roar* provides international perspectives on labor, racial justice, and activism, and I decided it would be an ideal venue for the film.[11] In addition to using the film to promote Local 105's organizing, I also sought to connect the union and its story with international labor movements. *Roar* shared the film on its social media accounts, and it has since been viewed in Australia, the Czech Republic, Spain, and India.

Another notable event for exploring how movements disseminate their politics across various spaces was a media workshop I co-organized with Local 105 on April 18, 2017. During a planning meeting for *Radical Labor*, Corral asked if I would lead a workshop with the union's members. She provided flexibility on the format, but suggested we screen a short film I produced about Melissa Benjamin, a home healthcare worker in Denver. She thought the film would be a helpful way to discuss how media connect personal stories to systemic injustices. Corral also suggested we conduct on-camera mock interviews with the attendees, so they could practice communicating their stories to journalists. The exercise asked participants to think through how to answer journalists' questions thoughtfully and succinctly. I provided the videos of the mock interviews to Corral, with transcripts and feedback, which Corral later shared with the workshop attendees.

Screening the short film about Melissa also served as an opportunity for me to gather feedback about my filmmaking with Local 105. After a brief introduction in which I explained how Melissa and I coordinated production of the film, we watched the documentary and opened the floor to comments. There were ten Local 105 members present and most were healthcare workers or organizers in the healthcare industry. Because many were familiar with the difficult work that home healthcare aides do, they were sympathetic to Melissa's story and appreciated how the film made visible the unseen labor of home care workers. However, not everyone reacted favorably. One home healthcare worker said the

[11] *Roar Magazine* was discontinued as an active publication in April 2022, but its archives remain online. *Radical Labor* is available here: https://roarmag.org/films/radical-labor-aligning-unions-streets/

film didn't accurately reflect the dynamics of home care. By filming Melissa adjusting her client's chair and brushing his teeth, she thought the film portrayed home care work as "easy." This did not match her experiences of being spit on and cursed at while providing care for clients.

Corral and other workshop attendees responded by saying that the purpose of the film was not to delve into the unfortunate aspects of home care work, but rather to humanize home care workers and connect individual workers to broader conversations about inequities in the healthcare system. Another participant noted how the film highlighted the intersectional nature of Local 105. This was accomplished, she said, when images of a Black Lives Matter sign were shown and when still photographs were included that depicted Black and Hispanic workers standing together at rallies. I discussed with workshop attendees my desire to balance the affective aspects of home care work with factual details about Denver's economy. One participant said she did not get any facts from the film, only emotion; others rejected this reading and pointed to statistics cited by Melissa about the cost of living.

Because there were conflicting reactions to the film, I asked Loree Lattik, a home care worker and organizer with Local 105, for her thoughts during her mock interview. "I could see and feel that Melissa was speaking from her heart, and that is her true and authentic story, very realistic," she said. "I remember in the video when she actually gave some affection to the person she was caring for, even though that person couldn't respond in kind." The film added depth to Melissa's story, Lattik said. "People have heard me talk about what I do and tell my story about the skills that I use and the duties that I do," she said. "But I've never been filmed or shown actually doing that work, and I think that makes a big difference. I think that does send a message in a different way."

Both events, the film screening and the workshop, provided Local 105 opportunities to refine its messaging and debate how its issues are being received. Reflecting on the criticisms about Melissa's film, perhaps information graphics could have more effectively conveyed cost-of-living data, or perhaps voiceover narration could have described the difficult aspects of home care work. But what the critiques clarify is how *form* and *venue* alter the delivery and reception of information. Film has its strengths and limitations, as do text and oral communication; and small in-person workshops have different social dynamics than social media. Local 105 acknowledged these strengths and limitations and created educational spaces across numerous terrains, allowing its members to be heard, seen and validated.

Conclusion

As publics clash rhetorically and physically, online and in the streets, they are not only framing their issues and demanding recognition as political actors, they are redefining the terrain of politics. The struggles over symbolic and political power reveal democracy's antagonisms, and represent the moments in which society's rules, resources, and beliefs are defined. By communicating

simultaneously across various terrains, contemporary movements are expanding the boundaries of politics and revising our conception of the political.

While Mouffe (2005) acknowledged that antagonistic relations cannot be completely eliminated in pluralistic democratic societies, this study has complicated her "agonistic" framework—which argues that political adversaries operate according to a shared set of rules and within a common symbolic space (p. 52). As governments manipulate online networks to claim information supremacy,[12] and as local and federal legislatures rewrite laws that criminalize dissent,[13] we need to ask: Which rules are shared? Which symbols are held in common, and by whom? To address these questions, this article has proposed the *distribution of movements*: a framework that examines how language and symbols are expressed and contested across space and time, and that foregrounds the conflictual and antagonistic nature of politics and meaning. Tracing the spatiotemporal dimension of distribution reveals the unequal power dynamics among people seeking to claim hegemonic control. Making issues legible and emotions visible across disparate information systems requires having the material resources needed to produce, publish and amplify information; it also requires navigating complex and often-fraught social and cultural dynamics among movements, publics, and institutions.

Each distribution tactic has its strengths and limitations: While social media provide movements opportunities to publicize their campaigns and solicit donations from global audiences, these sites are increasingly captured by private companies working in concert with governments to restrict speech deemed too deviant and outside the bounds of acceptable political debate. And while protests attract media attention and place movements' issues on the public agenda, this attention is fleeting and driven by spectacle devoid of context. Community meetings offer opportunities for organizers to foster deeper, more intentional dialogues among citizens, ones in which diverse groups of stakeholders can map out their goals and discuss their organizational capacity. But not everyone can attend these events and discussions at public meetings are often dominated by a few voices.

Contemporary movements are therefore developing hybrid distribution strategies to introduce new symbols into the public consciousness and re-position their members across ever-shifting political terrains. As technological and political-economic factors modify our information and political systems in

[12] During the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign, Twitter "blocked" news articles about then-presidential candidate Joe Biden's son from its platform; company executives said the decision was not due to pressure from Democrats or law enforcement. In 2021 U.S. government officials pressured Meta to "censor" certain COVID-19 content, including humor and satire, from its platforms. In August 2024 Kamala Harris's campaign for president edited published news headlines and descriptions in Google ads to make Harris appear more favorably in search results. Google said the practice did not violate its rules.

[13] For a detailed look at how local and federal legislatures across the U.S. are criminalizing dissent, see "The War on Protest is Here," by Adam Federman, April 17, 2024, *In These Times* magazine.

fundamental ways, movements are adapting and reshaping the terrain in which politics occurs.

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Transforming the statist domination of society: radical democracy in Mexico and Kurdistan

Madeline Lord

Abstract

Drawing on interviews, email exchanges, and archival research, I examine how the radically democratic societies of Cherán, Mexico and Mexmûr, Kurdistan are transforming the statist domination of life. In this paper, I contend that Cherán and Mexmûr are transforming the statist domination of society above all through practices of women's liberation, ecology and stateless democracy, along differing structural paths. Further, the communal subject emerges as key in the transformation process.

Keywords: radical, democracy, statist, domination, transformation, Mexico, Kurdistan, women, liberation, ecology

Introduction

There is no shortage of academic output on so-called alternative, autonomous societies, places across the globe that are rejecting and resisting statist domination. Yet we lack constructive accounts of experiences from the 21st century which could and should act as inspiration for our own aspirations of societal transformation. This paper thus starts from that gap to explore how radically democratic societies are practically transforming statist domination and building alternatives, building on the experiences of the towns of Cherán, Mexico and Mexmûr, Kurdistan. Drawing on thematic analysis, I analyse participant exchanges and archives in Cherán and Mexmûr. Building on Grubacic and Dirik, I argue that Cherán and Mexmûr are transforming the statist domination of society along divergent structural paths above all through practices of women's liberation, ecology and stateless democracy; and that the emergence of a communal subject is a key element in the transformation process.

The seeds of this paper were planted years ago, during travels across Bakur (Northern Kurdistan), where I was first exposed to the Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM). This personal experience sparked an interest in other movements proposing and living out alternatives to the devastation and oppression of the capitalist system; places where 'people display the desire and political will to govern themselves' (Küçükkeleş, 2022: 2). The paper provides insights into the experiential side of the struggle to build an alternative society, with all its challenges. Exploring these dynamics through data collection in two somewhat overlooked examples brings valuable empirical data into the theoretical realm of radical democracy. The underlying vision aims to acknowledge those movements building alternatives to the hegemonic statist, capitalist paradigm in different corners of the globe: as such, the research is

carried out in a critically constructive mode of solidarity with the societies explored. This research is motivated by the belief that another world is both possible and urgently needed.

The paper starts with an exploration of the academic literature on radical democracy and statist domination, followed by the rationale behind the case study selection. Participant exchanges are then presented around three main themes of hierarchy transformation. Thirdly, there is an exploration of the divergent structural paths to radical democracy across the two sites, before presenting the common element at the heart of the transformations as the communal taking precedence over the individual.

From statist domination to radical democracy

Statist domination

The critique of the nation-state as a dominant, hegemonic force is found across accounts of scholars researching alternatives for society, from Holloway (2010) to Grubacic (2010) and Öcalan (2020). Dupuis-Déri (2016) presents an analysis of 'the state itself a system of domination', whilst bemoaning the lack of literature concerned with said topic. In reality, there is a growing awareness and body of scholarship around the idea of 'statist domination' (Barrera, 2021: 216), in other words the 'monopolisation' of the nation-state's 'ideological vision' which 'pervades all areas of the society' (Komar, 2012) and eliminates the possibility of imagining alternative ways of organising life and relating to one another. Escobar (2022: xxviii) refers to the 'ontological occupation' of our lives and thoughts by the 'discourses, structures and practices' of the state and capital. Öcalan takes this idea further to argue that the state embodies 'the maximum form of power', acting as the 'common denominator of all monopolies' with its 'ability to unite all these monopolies within itself in a cohesive way' (2019: 209-213).

Indeed, the intrinsic links between the state's domination and other forms of domination in society are underlined by Bookchin, who denounces the 'domination of humans over humans' at the root of the 'domination of humans over nature' in his paradigm of social ecology' (Hammy and Miley, 2022); whilst Öcalan links the 'rise of hierarchical and statist power within society' to 'women's enslavement' (Güneşer, 2021). If these hierarchies are connected to each other and enabled by a wider logic of domination, they cannot be fixed in isolation or through incremental reforms, but require a deep uprooting within society - and the development of viable alternatives.

Indeed, key sites in which radical, antisystemic alternatives are being constructed across the world today are increasingly rejecting the state as a potential agent of change in society, as noted by Wallerstein (1996). Such perspectives allow for the state itself to become an object of critique, comprehending the need to move beyond statist structures which reproduce domination, monopoly and hierarchy (Komar, 2012). Whilst the Marxists of the 19th and 20th centuries famously 'failed to liberate' the question of the nation-state's domination of society (Öcalan, 2020: 208), leading to disastrous consequences in places like the USSR

and China (ibid: 194), the shift in focus towards civil society as the main site of democratic struggle and transformation rather than the state is becoming increasingly evident, as observed in Oaxaca (Raghu, 2022); Greece (Haworth and Roussos, 2022); and Cherán and Kurdistan (Colin and Cicek, 2023).

Öcalan describes how the drive towards a top-down imposition of 'national unity' by the state implies the forceful assimilation and destruction of all diversity and dissent from the status quo (2019: 213). However, the overt 'state domination from above' is but one of the faces of statist 'influence, invasion, and colonisation' which also reach the 'most hidden nooks and crannies' of society (ibid: 351). This paper aims to explore the transformation of these 'nooks and crannies' in two sites resisting statist domination in the realm of daily practice; the following section is dedicated to contextualising the dynamics of transformation, in a radically democratic direction, in the literature. For the sake of efficiency from now on the term 'statist domination' will be employed as shorthand for all forms of hierarchical, hegemonic monopolies imposed on society.

Radically democratic transformation

One proposed term to describe the shifting, porous approaches to building alternative societies which transform themselves and surrounding dynamics of domination is radical democracy. Rising to prominence in the late 1970s as the 'main alternative' to liberal democracy (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012: 2) radical democracy is in some ways an 'umbrella term' for democratic perspectives which work towards a 'deepening' of 'freedom and equality' (Asenbaum, 2021: 101) and go far 'beyond representation' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 255). The 'most well-known' (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012: 3) attempt at radicalising democracy comes from Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 167) who proposed a 'project for a radical and plural democracy' which provided the left with 'a new imaginary' (Mouffe and Holdengräber, 1989: 32). The 'radical' element refers to the development of the concept of democracy 'beyond' the state as emphasised in Akkaya and Jongerden (2012), recognising the incompatibility of state and democracy. Indeed the collapse of the Marxist-Leninist, national liberationist paradigm embodied by the splintering of the Soviet Union led to profound soul-searching amongst movements like the KFM, which eventually abandoned their separatist, state-socialist convictions to develop radical alternatives in opposition to the state itself. This historical process enabled such realities as Rojava, the radically democratic 'Bookchin-inspired' experiment (Ahmed, 2015).

Radical democracy in the literature comprises (but is not reducible to) the following elements: the development of democracy beyond the hegemonic nation-state (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012), expressed through directly democratic bodies such as councils or assemblies; the liberation of women, the 'oldest colony' (Güneşer, 2021); organising through bottom-up structures; and a tendency towards prefiguration or 'performativity practices for other worlds' carried out in the here and now (Gibson-Graham, 2008).

In order to understand the dynamics underlying the transformation of statist domination in a radically democratic direction, we must consider those peoples and places where the tradition of rejecting this status quo and developing alternatives persists. In Indigenous thought, for example, the state has never been considered 'a tool for emancipation' (Dinerstein, 2015: 12) as in the real socialist tradition, whilst an acute perception of autonomy as an ancestral capacity to be protected and defended prevails (Raghu, 2022). It is important to recognise the role played in the search for democracy outside of the state by those peoples who have always positioned themselves outside of, and in opposition to, statist paradigms: Dirik (2022a) highlights the employment of radically democratic citizenship as consciousness-raising in Kurdistan, whilst Aragón-Andrade (2017: 15) describes the 'de-commodification, de-professionalisation, de-patriarchalisation and decolonisation of democracy' led by Mexico's Indigenous peoples.

Further, if state domination pervades even the most intimate spaces, so the 'inner revolution of democratic subjectivity' is a fundamental element of transformation in a radically democratic direction (Asenbaum, 2021). Breaugh and Caivano (2022: 463) highlight 'the emergence of emancipatory political subjects' as 'central' in locating 'forms of domination' in order to achieve a 'deepening of freedom, equality and solidarity.' The vacuum left behind by the rejection of the nation-state as a potential agent of change (Wallerstein, 1996) leaves an open question as to the nature of the new key political subject-agent - whether individual or collective.

Radical democracy appears as 'a never-ending process' rather than 'simply an end-goal or the promise of a perfect democratic society' (Breaugh and Caivano, 2022: 450). However, the literature on radically democratic transformation fails to provide accounts of these experiences in practical, replicable ways. As such, this paper starts from these very questions to enable an investigation of radically democratic societies as they practically transform statist domination and build alternatives.

The 'Mother' of Kurdish democratic autonomy and the Mexican defenders of life: case selection

Across accounts of empirical examples of radical democracy, references to Kurdistan and Mexico are ubiquitous. Compelling sites for researchers of radical democracy in autonomous societies, they respectively host 'the two most prominent examples of prefigurative politics in the world' (Escobar, 2022: xxiii) and embody the 'indigenous stateless democracy, autonomous self-government, ecological and communal economy, and women's leadership' outlined as key elements of radical democracy (Piccardi, 2022: 161).

The history of Kurdistan is often narrated from a statist perspective as the story of a people whose hopes of obtaining a country were 'dashed' (Bajalan, 2020), resulting in a century of oppression between four occupying governments: Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. Whilst Kurdish uprisings have taken place

throughout history, the formation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 1978 marked an 'awakening' of Kurdish identity (Barkey, 2019). Radically democratic tradition in Kurdistan is overwhelmingly led by the Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM), the 'wider social movement' coalescing around 'the political vision of imprisoned leader' Öcalan and the 'democratic, ecological and women's liberationist paradigm,' also known as the 'freedom paradigm' (Dirik, 2022a: 28-31). Rooted in a shift away from Marxist-Leninist thought towards 'democratic confederalism,' heavily influenced by Bookchin (Graeber, 2014), the KFM today is a 'societal organisation' aiming to create 'an alternative to the nation-state' through bottom-up organising (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012: 8). The KFM has attempted to put democratic autonomy into practice across Kurdistan since 2005, most prominently in Rojava from 2012 onwards.

Almost 17 million of Mexico's population are Indigenous (IWGIA, 2022), with the majority living in the south. A policy of 'internal colonialism' comparable to that of colonial governments in Africa has been carried out in Mexico's Indigenous regions (Hernández Castillo, 2006) from the 1930s on, whilst inclusion in the Mexican nation-state meant 'adherence to a single national identity that was decidedly non-indigenous.' Indigenous Mexican struggles are more diverse and disparate than the largely unified movement in Kurdistan, although most accounts relate the pivotal Zapatista uprising of 1994 as responsible for a dramatic shift in Indigenous political consciousness across Mexico, ushering in a 'new phase of struggle' (Hernández Castillo, 2006). Undoubtedly, the Zapatistas play a vital role in inspiring Indigenous democratic movements across Mexico: from the injection of energy into Mexico's 'forgotten' Indigenous population (Gottesdiener, 2014), to the adoption of the slogan of 'mandar obedeciendo' ('leading by obeying') (Esteva, 2007: 80), the movement maintains an active impulse striving for real autonomy which influences struggles across Mexico and beyond.

A vast majority of the literature on radical democracy in Kurdistan and Mexico focuses on the two most famous examples of alternative society-building there: respectively, the Rojava Revolution and the Zapatista uprising. The focus here is on expanding academic horizons to consider two other cases of radical democracy in the regions which provide unique understandings to the transformation of statist hierarchies in radically democratic society. These are Cherán (Michoacán), Mexico and Mexmûr, (Iraqi) Kurdistan. These lesser-studied examples - whether out of academic neglect or a protective desire to conceal themselves (Graeber, 2004) - will allow for an exploration of transforming societies getting on with life away from the spotlight.

Cherán

Cherán, located in the central Mexican state of Michoacán, is the only municipality in the country inhabited predominantly by the Indigenous P'urhépecha people (González Hernández and Zertuche Cobos, 2016). In 2008, Cherán, with a population just short of 21,000 (Data México, 2020), saw

organised criminal gangs destroy forests, completely overrun the town and take more than 20 lives - with no reaction from the authorities (Gasparello, 2018). The situation worsened until citizens took to the streets in 2011, kicking out the cartels and the municipal employees and beginning their experience of self-government (Wolfesberger, 2019). Cherán's uprising has played a crucial role in the 'revindication of indigeneity' and autonomy in Mexico in recent decades (Gasparello, 2018: 99), embodying a popular, local grassroots attempt to defend land and life and winning a broad support base across Mexican society (Gasparello, 2018).

Mexmûr

To the south of Kurdish-inhabited lands lies Mexmûr (also Makhmour, Makhmur), a once 'desolate town' 60 km from Erbil, located in territory contested between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi government (Küçükkeleş, 2022: 6). Kurds fleeing 'state violence north of the border in Turkey' settled in a camp next door to the town of Mexmûr in 1998. The camp's population stood at around 12,000 in 2022 (Küçükkeleş, 2022), officially considered refugees under the UNHCR's authority. Since July 2019, Mexmûris have had their movements restricted by Iraqi federal forces and suffered under Turkish airstrikes, resulting in a 'dire humanitarian situation' (Küçükkeleş, 2022: 9). Yet the inhabitants reject any victimhood, instead presenting their camp as an 'autonomous alternative to the nation-state system' (Dirik, 2022b: 160). Indeed, the celebrated model of Democratic Autonomy in Rojava was developed years earlier in Mexmûr as 'the first site' of experimentation in democratic autonomy for KFM; representing the 'mother' of Kurdish radical democracy (Casagrande, 2018) which embodies a key step 'towards non-state politics' and a 'new political consciousness' (Küçükkeleş, 2022: 9).

Cherán and Mexmûr as 'marginalised' sites have suffered 'the most severe damage to nature and culture' caused and exacerbated by 'modernity' and the state (Esteva and Prakash, 1998: 167). The broader environment in Kurdistan and Mexico represent sites of collapse for nation-states and oppression for the inhabitants of their lands: dystopias rendered material. These 'worst hit' populations are those creating the most promising 'contemporary initiatives for radical democracy' (Esteva and Prakash, 1998: 167) from the 'cracks in the neoliberal edifice' (Breaugh and Caivano, 2022: 450).

Methods

This paper draws on interviews, email exchanges, and audio and video archives in order to investigate how the statist domination of society is transformed in the case studies. I received ethical approval from the University of York for the investigation. I first used my own contacts in Cherán and Mexmûr to recruit participants, employing snowball sampling to reach a wider range of people. I then carried out interviews and email exchanges with the recruited members of Cherán and Mexmûr, in the form of semi-structured individual conversations. I additionally looked at the "Memoria Viva" archives of women's collective Fogata Kejtsitani in Cherán, as well as several publicly accessible videos from YouTube channels connected to Cherán and Mexmûr, to enrich the data set. Next, I used thematic analysis to explore the key elements and contrasts in the data. I focused on collecting data from the case studies based on exchanges, archival interviews and videos, emphasising participants' own explanations and interpretations of the transformative dynamics of their societies. Thus my aim was not to 'demonstrate a majority sentiment' (Dirik, 2022a: 30) but rather to 'develop a greater understanding of subjective realities' (Sköld, 2019: 294).

I personally have been generously hosted in communities connected with struggles in Mexico and the KFM. As an advocate for the development of societies centred around a democratic, free, and communal life, I wish to do research in solidarity with those creating such models. This does not imply turning a blind eye to challenges and contradictions, but employing a constructively critical approach. I am not interested in unearthing hidden tensions in Cherán and Mexmûr, nor do I wish to become another of the 'miners engaged in the extraction of a precious resource' (Gorman, 2024) in which people and communities 'studied' in social sciences are expected to give up their time, share information and facilitate subsequent exchanges, for no obvious benefit to themselves. The western academic figure suggests legitimacy; this position is one of privilege and power, however much we try to distance ourselves from the colonialist paradigm, and as such carries a profound responsibility. I am inspired by research which contributes to grassroots movements and their agency, such as Steven Sherwood with EkoRural in Ecuador which 'enables impoverished people to analyze the roots of their problems and find lasting solutions' (EkoRural, 2025). I have tried to incorporate principles such as accountability to the case study communities and an informed ethics of care from "Designing Anti-Extractivist Research" (Gorman, 2024).

Transforming the statist domination of society

This section outlines the findings of the study, exploring how Cherán and Mexmûr have transformed the statist domination of society in a radically democratic direction. Whilst each of the hierarchical dynamics transformed in our case studies has its own history as a system of domination, they are linked to each other and enabled by broader statist logic. Through conversations with participants, certain dynamics of domination emerged as key in societal

transformation: the 'liberation of women from masculine domination', 'liberation of nature from capitalism' and 'liberation of democracy from the state' were given priority, echoing Grubacic's (2019: 1074) analysis; although elements such as morality, education, justice and health also came up often. We will now explore how our case studies have transformed these three dynamics of domination in a radically democratic direction. A caveat: participants generally referred to 'our' way of doing things, or referenced Democratic Confederalism in Mexmûr, rather than using the term 'radical democracy.' I follow Dirik (2022a) and Komun Academy (2018) in interpreting the concept of democracy in the KFM's ideology as radical. Cherán and Mexmûr certainly demonstrate attempts to implement features of radical democracy, but the concept should be understood functionally, as a means of identifying and exploring the similarities and divergences of societies rejecting the dominant paradigm, and not as a dogmatic, fixed idea.

Women, ideological bearers

The uprooting of patriarchal dominance across material, cultural and psychological realms emerged as a key transformation, most prominently in Mexmûr. Women's freedom is one of three fundamental pillars of society in Öcalan's *Democratic Confederalist* paradigm which Mexmûri society strives to embody, with Öcalan describing women as the 'oldest colony' (Al-Ali and Kaser, 2020: 227), and patriarchy the most deeply-rooted hierarchy in society. Women in Mexmûr rejected liberal ideas of representation as constituting transformation: Arjin from the *Akademiya Jin* (women's academy) highlighted how in Europe, women 'working because they have to' is considered progress, whereas in Mexmûri society women emphasise working with 'passion' for things they believe in - not out of obligation or in servitude to bosses - as true liberation. Organisationally, Mexmûr follows a paradigm of women's autonomy. All women involved in the town's structures are linked to the women-only *Ishtar Council,* independent from the (mixed gender) general people's council, which deals exclusively with problems 'with women, between women, from men to women,' explained Sara from the municipal council The *Akademiya Jin,* open to all women for education according to their needs, emphasises 'empower[ing] men and women on how to create a democratic family' and 'live together equally,' according to Arjin. Finally, the *Jineolojî* Committee researches the history, culture and morals of women obscured by male domination throughout '5000 years' and educates wider society.

By enforcing mixed-gender shared leadership and ensuring that women's affairs are dealt with by women, Mexmûr has taken clear, practical steps to prioritise women's perspective in their democratic system. This embodies Phillips' (1991) interpretation of the rewriting of gender into democracy as an essential part of overturning the patriarchal system, in contrast to Mouffe's (1992) vision in which in order to truly liberate women, gender should be entirely erased from democratic systems. Arjin observed how men from outside Mexmûr 'respect the Mexmûri women but treat their own very badly, they see that the women here

command respect' and have 'freedom and power,' a testament to their uprooting of the patriarchy dominating surrounding societies.

In Cherán, women's decisive role in the uprising which facilitated societal transformation has meant that they are increasingly valued in society. Interviews from the "Mujeres por la Memoria" archives, explicitly concentrated on regular Cherani women's perspectives, remarked on the 'great change': 'in order to carry out any activity in the community, women's voices and opinions are now taken into account.' Women now 'have to be part of the Council' of 10 Elders, the maximum decisional authority in Cherán elected by direct assembly every 3 years according to Ángela, thus cementing women's role in decision-making. The Mujeres por la Memoria collective represents another important autonomous site for women to record their experiences. A discussion around women working in spaces previously considered to be exclusively male realms, such as the *Ronda Comunitaria* (community defence unit) or the tree nurseries, brought up a critique of the idea of 'men's jobs.' Cherani women like Ángela are deeply aware that 'in principle, women have always been helping in the fields' and are working to reclaim past narratives and present areas of society obscured by the patriarchy.

The most notable parallel across the transformation of patriarchal hegemony in Cherán and Mexmûr is ideological. Ángela emphasised how women in Cherán 'have this task of ensuring that in the family we continue with the project, and to make sure our children understand why things such as this struggle arise,' placing the burden of the ideological preservation of the movement through the next generations onto women's shoulders. Ángela stressed women's ideological responsibility as 'something that you [as a woman] are defending, that you are valuing, that you are taking care of...' In Mexmûr, Ronahî from the *Wexfa Jin* (women's foundation) stressed that women feel responsible not only for their own liberation, but 'freedom for women in Afghanistan, and around the world,' such is their role as ideological bearers. Indeed, Mexmûri women dominate the building of a new culture, in contrast with mainstream society in which, according to Zozan from the cultural centre, 'men make culture' and 'women stay at home.' Mexmûri women generally don't work outside the camp, whilst men out of necessity seek jobs in Mosul or Baghdad; women thus have more time to further themselves in ideological education and the building of a 'women's cultural movement or a culture for freedom' which contributes to wider women's liberation in Mexmûr, according to Zozan.

In both cases, this represents a transformation of the patriarchal monopoly on cultural and ideological production and an opportunity for society to transform further in a direction led by the women tasked with this responsibility. The trend of women either positioning themselves explicitly or naturally adopting the role of ideological bearer reflects literature on women's liberation in radical democracy, for example Habersang's (2022) work on the Argentinian *Buen Vivir* movement in which women are 'knowledge-providers' who 'prefigure alternative futures.' In both sites, increasing women's participation and consideration of women's voices and opinions are present. Yet the more profound transformation is embodied in women's quest to unearth their own histories, rediscover their

contributions to society, and lead the ideological struggle for freedom; societies across the globe could benefit from such a perspective on women's liberation as an alternative to representative liberal policy.

'Asking the forest's permission'

As Bookchin demonstrates how statist, capitalist hegemonies are directly linked to the ecological crisis (Brincat and Gerber, 2018), so Cherán and Mexmûr are working to transform the human-led domination and exploitation of the natural sphere. This dynamic is particularly notable in Cherán: the impetus for the 2011 uprising which led to the transformation of Cherani society came from attacks not on people, but the town's forests and water sources. 'All water is sacred to us but this water is sacred to our community' commented Guadalupe in a video archive. The town is considered an 'example' of what communitarian organising can achieve in the face of the colonisation of nature (Avispa, 2024). Cherán's ecological position has roots in the beliefs of the Indigenous P'urhépecha, whose ancestral rapport with the natural world differs greatly from that of statist society: in the "Mujeres por la Memoria" archives, Ximena pondered, 'when did we begin to disrespect [nature] so much? Just as our grandparents [ancestors] didn't want…' Indeed, in post-2011 Cherani society, there is a renewed emphasis on returning to the practice of 'asking the forest's permission to enter, or if you need a plant for medicinal purposes or food' according to Ximena, putting the non-human natural world on an equal, or even superior level. Mariana highlighted 'the power of nature,' referencing traditional healers in Cherán who use medicinal plants; whilst Juan, a conventional doctor, stressed how he 'shares his activities with traditional healers… respecting each other and sometimes helping each other.' This contrasts with mainstream society in which connections with nature, whether spiritual, medicinal or otherwise, are rapidly disappearing.

Juan highlighted the important role of the *Ronda Comunitaria* and *guardabosques* (forest guards) in protecting the forests and preventing 'the plunder of timber' in Cherán. Other ecologically-focused elements include the requirement of a permission from the council to cut down trees for heating; whilst Juan reported a few 'complaints of corruption' concerning this rule, the majority perceived it with 'great respect and admiration' according to Miguel from the community cafe. Patricia, member of the communal forest nursery which works to replant deforested areas of Cherán, commented that she feels 'responsible for the forest' and wanted above all to communicate this message: 'to the people that come to cut down a pine tree: cut down one, and plant two! [que corten uno que planten dos!].'

Theoretically speaking, ecology represents 'one of the roots' of the Democratic Confederalist paradigm followed in Mexmûr, explained Dilşad, a grower, in an archival video. He reinforced that 'if we look into the oppressive system, the most attacked field is nature itself.' The criticism of mainstream society's relationship to the natural world implies that humans today are generally 'far from nature,' and the statist system creates everything with 'one template' to be the same, from

chickens in factories to humans in the quotidian, in Dilşad's words. He also gave a practical insight into permaculture initiatives in the camp, born out of research on methods for cultivating food and storing water. Nujîn highlighted the idea that 'people learn everything from nature' in another archival video, embodied in the connection between Mexmûris and their ancestral villages whose 'landscape and beautiful nature brings happiness' and whose memory is kept alive through the practice of *dengbej (singing-storytelling)*. Indeed, the harsh realities of Mexmûr's geography and climate, far from inhabitants' native villages, were repeatedly cited, and Sozdar, teacher at the *peymangeh* (youth education centre) emphasised the importance given to studying 'how to improve' the environment there. Students of the *peymangeh* have ecology lessons, covering above all 'the ecology of the camp …[and] gaining knowledge of/for the camp,' with a plot of land dedicated to practical experiments in cultivation.

Two connected points stood out in relation to transforming the dominant societal anthropocentrism in Cherán and Mexmûr. First, the theoretical idea of ecology as fundamental is more developed in Mexmûr than in Cherán, where the ecological principles of caring for and defending the natural world are expressed spontaneously by interviewees. Second, the impression that Cheranis feel both 'responsible' for, and a sense of belonging to their forests, rooted in pre-colonial P'urhépecha belief systems, contrasts with the relationship of Mexmûris to the land they are currently on. Berivan from the women's *Ishtar Council* in Mexmûr expressed how 'everyone wants to go home to Bakur' and their mountain villages, a far cry from Mexmûr's desert climate, whilst Nujîn said 'I miss my motherland.' This difference in comprehension of the land and environment as a permanent home, as in Cherán's case, versus a foreign, temporary site in which Mexmûr's inhabitants 'are not secure' according to Newroz from the People's Council, naturally impacts the extent to which transforming the ecological hierarchy can be prioritised. The sense of indigeneity to one's environment observed in Cherán is a fundamental part of wanting to care for it and to flourish together with it; yet despite the refugeehood of Mexmûris, they still consider the topic important both ideologically and in practice.

'We no longer have a government'

A transformation of the statist system of governance lies at the heart of radically democratic society. Whilst the domination of governance by the state has many faces, the focus here is on several key components: decisional power, monopoly on violence, and political agency. Cherán has carried out a genuine 'transformation in the structure, logic and relations' of government in the town, removing hierarchical figures and installing a communal system (Gasparello, 2018:99). Carmen described Cherán's system in an archival video as 'a different type of government… with a sentiment of servitude.' The town's maximum authority is the people, with a *Concejo Mayor (*Council of Elders) acting as key organ. Patricia from the communal nursery stated that they 'reject' top-down decision-making and representation by political elites and parties*:* 'we no longer

have a government, but usos y costumbres (customs and traditions: indigenous customary law).'

Practical quotidian decision-making in Cherán is structured around weekly local assemblies in each of the four neighbourhoods, with a general assembly held once every three years to decide the next members of the various councils responsible for different areas of society, according to Juan. Guadalupe narrated the development of this system: during the 2011 uprising, *fogatas* (small bonfires) were defensive measures, and also represented 'a sign of resistance' and communal point of sharing food and information. Gradually these some 300 *fogatas* became 'a point of assembly for making decisions at a micro-level,' recounted Guadalupe. This evolved into more structured local assemblies, no longer necessarily centred around the *fogata,* but still reflecting P'urhépecha customs. Juan described how assemblies can be convened when 'there are problems to solve concerning the community,' and 'all interested *comuneros* attend in a voluntary manner; there are no sanctions for absentees, but the decisions taken are binding for all those present and absent.' José, a student, added that Cheranis 'know that the participation of all is necessary for the assemblies,' demonstrating a communal sense of responsibility.

At the centre of Cherán's discourse on transforming the statist monopoly on violence was the town's community defensive force, the *Ronda Comunitaria.* The *Ronda* in Patricia's words 'is for the defence of the people,' with Juan remarking that it 'protects us 24 hours a day, by day we live protected and at night we sleep peacefully.' José compared the transformative nature of Cherán's approach to "policing" to mainstream society: whilst the Mexican police force 'are seen as enemies of society,' the contrast with the '*Ronda Comunitaria* is surprising:'

> The *Ronda* seek the wellbeing of their people and know how to avoid confrontations between them, they are armed elements who understand the responsibility of carrying a weapon…they look for the best solution through dialogue before force… and the community respects and feels comfortable with them.

The *Ronda* consists of women and men who live in the town, rather than an elite, disinterested force separate from ordinary people. Further, the *Ronda Comunitaria* and their forest guard counterparts do not hold a monopoly over the use of armed force in Cherán. Carmen described how 'if something happens in the town, everyone is ready to defend themselves.' Finally, José cautioned that whilst Cherán itself is 'a very safe place, it is very unsafe to transit through or travel to the neighbouring villages at night.' The image of comparative security in the town reinforces how Cheranis have made their society safer for all by removing the institutions of hierarchical structured force and introducing a defensive guard for, and of, the people. This demonstrates the baselessness of the classic criticism that stateless societies would never work because people would turn violent, steal and attack each other if left to their own devices, showing that

a community-led guardian system which answers to and made up of the local population people is not only possible but conducive lowering crime rates (Pressly, 2016).

The Indigenous P'urhépecha people of Cherán existed long before the Mexican state, and as such are well-equipped to critique and find alternatives to it, having never fully relied on it (Dinerstein, 2015); indeed, the indifference of state forces to the cartel loggers destroying Cherán's forests confirmed the harmful image of the state for many Cheranis. Yet the material reality in Cherán is one in which the Mexican state is still present, as a source of resources: María mentioned having to 'ask for [material] support' from the government. Juan suggested that only an 'extremist group of *comuneros* doesn't openly accept dealings with the government' whereas a majority of Cheranis are to some extent in favour of this situation. Further, the use of law as a 'counter-hegemonic' instrument during Cherán's battle for recognition by the Mexican government embodies a strategic positioning of Cherani autonomy in relation to the state (González Hernández and Zertuche Cobos, 2016) rather than an outright rejection of the latter.

In Mexmûr, the statist domination of decision-making is transformed into a system of local assemblies, described by Sara: every other year two co-mayors are elected by vote, along with a council of seven others responsible for different elements of society. The candidates for these positions propose themselves with the support of their district, of which there are four in the camp. A People's Assembly, receiving delegates from district councils, 'coordinates the camp' (Dirik, 2022b: 156-169). Newroz stated that there is 'no hierarchy' in Mexmûr apart from the 'hevserok [co-mayor - one woman, one man] leadership system.'

Whilst there is no state armed force present in the camp, as of November 2023 (Rûdaw) the Iraqi army has a military presence in the nearby hills, whilst next door the KDP *peshmerga* keep guard from their own lookout post. The reality of regular Turkish bombing of Mexmûr and surrounding areas,[1] and the continued threat of Daesh' presence in neighbouring villages, renders the camp's internal security and external defence sensitive topics. However, when Daesh attacked the camp in 2014 and the PKK came to Mexmûr to defend the area, Mexmûris also fought to protect themselves, cementing their capacity for self-defence in times of need, as well as their rejection of the state's monopoly of force.

Mexmûris, as refugees, lack recognition by any state: they are citizens of no state. Dirik (2022a) interprets the statelessness of refugeehood as making space for alternative conceptions of citizenship without reliance on the state which was never within reach of the refugee in the first place. Sara from the municipal council was keen to stress that the Mexmûri system is 'different from Baghdad… we can manage ourselves, we don't want to work with them' but strategically try to obtain resources from them. Mexmûris reject refugee victimhood for political autonomy and the creation of their own system and attempts to 'improve

[1] For reports of the latest Turkish attacks on the camp on 10.09.24, see https://hawarnews.com/en/3-women-injured-in-turkish-occupation-bombing-of-makhmour-camp.

ourselves,' according to Sara, yet simultaneously employ their refugeehood as something the government should 'protect,' recounts Newroz, demonstrating a strategic employment of identity.

Both Indigenous Cheranis and Mexmûri refugees are already situated somewhat outside the state system, and thus are able to exercise autonomous political agency which doesn't depend on the state for validation. This confirms ideas of Indigenous people and refugees as advantageously located to conceive of and build alternatives to the current hierarchical systems, as argued by Dinerstein (2015) and Dirik (2022a); indeed those of us born and raised as citizens of the statist paradigm and thus lacking such imaginative faculties can look to Cheranis and Mexmûris for inspiration. We also see how both Cherani and Mexmûri societies are able to use their agency to relate strategically to the state when it benefits them without being dependent on, or defined by, statist structures.

Discussion

Eventful action, ideological instruction

Structurally, the political mechanisms giving rise to our radically democratic case studies have causal relationships in shaping the outcomes in a path dependent manner: exemplified by a spontaneous reaction to an eventful moment in Cherán, and an organised ideological struggle in Mexmûr. Cherán and Mexmûr thus demonstrate two clear principal ways in which radically democratic societies transform statist domination. Firstly, Cheranis did not spend years preparing ideologically and physically for an uprising, but rather carried out a spontaneous 'resistance' led by 'ordinary people' on 15th April, 2011 against ecological destruction at the hands of criminal organisations and state impunity (González Hernández and Zertuche Cobos, 2016). This fits the idea of an eventful collective action which sparks the development of a society with group agency which can shape autonomous, capable subjects. In fact, the lack of any one cohesive ideology in Cherán, or indeed ideological instruction, represents a stark difference from Mexmûr: the transformations in society there came about in the wake of a disruptive event and people's attempts to make sense of it, meaning that there is no singular orthodoxy to follow, but rather the expression of a communal agency which comprises disagreements and diversity.

On the other hand in Mexmûr we see how ideological education and the creation of a moral society which births conscious subjects contribute to maintaining and furthering this transformation, rather than any one decisive moment; as such the idea of eventful protests as the key structural factor in the transformation of society does not fit Mexmûr's experience. In fact, there is an explicit awareness concerning the process of transforming domination, as well as a conscious desire for their Democratic Confederalist system to be a functional, inspirational model for others. Mexmûr's connection to decades of struggle and ideological debate within the PKK and wider KFM mean that it has inherited certain structural features; the emphasis on women's freedom, for example, can be traced directly

to the 'immense struggle' carried out by female guerrillas 'to liberate their emancipation from the male gaze' within the PKK (Souvlis and Dirik, 2017).

Thus observations from Cherán and Mexmûr to some extent corroborate the idea of path dependence from a structural perspective, which helps to explain radically democratic transformations in Cherán and Mexmûr. The connection to a wider movement and struggle in Mexmûr, and the lack thereof in Cherán, also influences dynamics of transformation in the two societies. The most striking comparative element is that of the levels of awareness at which the subjects of each society are operating to transform their societies, seemingly due to their differing paths to transformation: Cherán's organic development contrasts with Mexmûr's organised intentionality.

Creating the communal

Moving beyond structural dynamics, the actual content of overturning the statist domination of society in Cherán and Mexmûr shows that the key element underpinning their transformations is that of the communal taking precedence over the individual. Across the three areas explored, there is a common node of communitarian agency coming to the fore. Firstly, women's liberation is observed in Mexmûr as a collective undertaking involving women learning, researching, organising together and exercising their autonomy as a key group subject in society, 'creating a new sociality' in order to become, know and exist in a new way as embodied in the concept of "xwebûn" or 'being/becoming oneself' (Cetinkaya, 2025). Ecologically speaking, in Cherán the communal develops and extends to include non-human elements like the forest or the rivers which take priority over individual preferences. Finally, in both societies governance, defense and political agency are reimagined as collective processes requiring new structures such as assemblies, communal protection rounds and shared identities. Thus the creation of a communitarian subject comprises the most radical transformation of society, that of the communal taking precedence over the individualist domination of statist domination, with group agency replacing hierarchical authority and autonomy substituting submission.

If state-dominated society prioritises the individual, attempting to undermine the peoples' 'natural tendencies towards democracy and cooperation' and 'crushing cooperative solidarities' (Grubacic, 2019: 1075), any radically democratic project aiming to free society from domination must emphasise the communal, communitarian subject, created through daily practice and positioned as a key agent of transformation. Indeed, in response to Wallerstein's (2002) premise that the state can no longer be the principal agent of change for radical movements, in Cherán and Mexmûr the communal or communitarian subject steps into this vacuum to become the key actor for transforming society; indeed the very transformation of society towards a radically democratic horizon is a formative process for the communitarian subject which feels responsible for, and to, its society, and evolves society in a radically democratic direction through interaction and participation. This opens up questions for future research

concerning the freedom and agency of the individual as part of a wider communal subject in radical democracy.

Conclusion

The experiences of societies opting out of the statist system and attempting to create a radically democratic alternative is strikingly overlooked in the literature in favour of theoretical debates. Yet experiences of societies capable of organising their own communal life in resistance and as an alternative to statist domination can and should inform theories of radical democracy and beyond. Cherán and Mexmûr represent two richly complex case studies which are transforming the statist domination of society along divergent structural paths above all through practices of women's liberation, ecology and stateless democracy. Further, the emergence of a communal subject is key in the transformation process. Much remains to be explored in order to deepen our understanding of such autonomous societies: from the role and nature of the communal subject, to the prioritisation of transforming certain elements over others, and the limitations to hierarchy transformation.

As the need for an alternative to our current paradigm becomes increasingly undeniable, comprehension of these pioneer sites of radical democracy will become increasingly fundamental. Yet as Holloway (2020: 19) warned, we should be cautious of the 'exoticisation of hope,' or the idea that 'for people of the "North," hope lies in the "Global South," in Kurdistan or Latin America, exciting places that are comfortably far away.' Learning from the valuable experiences of those autonomous towns must now enrich our own local, immediate struggles to reclaim hope and act to prefigure better societies here and now.

As of July 2025, Mexmur is under embargo at the hands of the KRG and Iraqi governments, whilst Cheran is once again under attack from organised crime which acts with complete impunity. In the words of P'urhépecha Community in Resistance (2025):

> 'Not one step back in defense of our autonomy!
>
> For life, dignity, and the memory of those who have fallen in defense of territory.'

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Spontaneity during moments of the whirlwind: Airport protest to President Trump's original Muslim ban

Thomas Piñeros Shields

Abstract

In his first term, when President Trump announced an immediate travel ban on Muslim countries, protests emerged 'spontaneously' at airports across the country. Scholars have long debated the role of spontaneity vs. organizational capacity in protest (Snow and Moss, 2014). This paper theorizes the concept of the moments of the whirlwind (Engler and Engler 2016) to explain how social movement actors integrate spontaneity with pre-figurative protocols (Kruglanski 2024). Using private group chat data and a group history telling method with 18 members of the organizers of the Boston airport protest, the case reveals how organizations (1) decide to protest, (2) construct protest space, and (3) leverage protest to gain legitimacy. This study contributes to ongoing scholarship about spontaneity in protest by reaffirming the power of pre-existing organizational capacity.

Keywords: protest, spontaneity, whirlwind, mobilization, Trump Muslim ban, airport, immigration

Introduction

On January 27, 2017, President Trump signed *Executive Order 13769 Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into The United States* banned travelers from seven Muslim majority nations (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen) from entering the United States (Trump 2017). By the next day, US Customs and Border Patrol (USCBP) officers hastily attempted to interpret and carry out the cancellation of 60,000 visas (ACLU 2017; Boston Globe 2017; Hersher 2017). By the next day, thousands of protestors in forty states transformed over fifty airports from sites of government surveillance and strict social controls into protest arenas (Collingwood et al. 2018; Gambino et al. 2017; Ramos and Ryan 2017). By the evening, a New York judge blocked the order, forcing the administration to rescind and revise the order (ACLU 2017; Hersher 2017). While protestors and lawyers claimed victory in 2017, Trump's early second term began with a flurry of executive orders that faced little to no sudden protest mobilization. In this context, experienced activists recognize the need for spontaneous protest events to respond to sudden political threats (Sifry 2025).

Sudden protest events like the response to Trump's 2017 Muslim Ban often appear "spontaneous protest," defined as "not planned, intended, prearranged, or organized in advance of their occurrence" (Snow and Moss 2014, 1123).

Activists often explain their actions as spontaneous (Polletta 1998; Snow and Moss 2014; Kruglanski 2024). Furthermore, political leaders, media and the public can be surprised by sudden large-scale protests that appear to emerge quickly and without forewarning (Leferman 2023; Kruglanski 2024). But while the media, public and social movement activists themselves understand how 'spontaneity' can play an important role in protest, social movement scholars have long disputed spontaneous explanations of protest, positing that a pre-existing organizational presence provides evidence against spontaneity (Snow and Moss 2014). Such critics represent spontaneous protest as an irrational and sudden event (i.e.- emerging out of Zeus' head) without a pre-existing organization or pre-planning, and in so doing, create a false dichotomy. For them, the presence of pre-existing organization and planning nullifies spontaneous actions and decisions. Recent scholarship questions this false dichotomy and revives interest in explaining protest through spontaneity (Kruglanski 2024; Leferman 2023; Snow and Moss, 2014, Cheng and Chan 2016; Flesher Fominaya 2015; Pilati et.al. 2019; Ho 2018; Anisin 2016).

The debate between spontaneity and organization obscures the role of contextual factors that initiate protest. Members of pre-existing social movement organizations often plan protest actions by marshalling a broad coalition of allies and stakeholders, determining talking points, scheduling an agenda with speakers, obtaining permissions and permits, recruiting people to attend and arranging logistics. Other times, perceived momentum for a demonstration emerges quickly, and would-be protest organizers adapt "spontaneously" to perceived opportunities and threats. This paper advances and theorizes the concept of "a moment of the whirlwind" to explain this latter situation (Engler and Engler 2016; Silfry 2025; Silfry 2021; Cash et al 2008).

Moments of the whirlwind require activists to act spontaneously, while also marshalling pre-existing organizational resources and routines to guide their contingent choices during a protest event (Sifry 2025; Sifry 2021; Cash et al 2008). Engler and Engler (2016) defined a moment of the whirlwind as "a dramatic public event or series of events that sets off a flurry of activity, and that this activity quickly spreads beyond the institutional control of any one organization" (Engler and Engler 2016, 178). Metaphorically, a moment of the whirlwind captures the feelings and point of view of activists during protest events as they strategize on the fly while navigating pressures from multiple, intersecting and sometimes contradictory social spaces. During a moment of the whirlwind, the usual rules and routines of protest may be suspended, temporarily changing strategic calculations of protest by granting access to contentious repertoires that would typically be unavailable. Donald Trump's 2017 Muslim Ban provoked a moment of the whirlwind that led to spontaneous protests at airports across the United States.

The current case study reveals micro-dynamic interactions within the moment of the whirlwind protest at Boston Logan Airport in which hundreds of peoples suddenly arrived at the international terminal for several hours. Data from a private group chat and group telling method reveal real time and on the fly actions

of protest organizers based on a combination of spontaneous decisions and pre-existing organizational priorities and capacity. Leaders of an immigrant rights social movement organization called Cosecha responded to the Muslim Ban by leading a protest at the Boston Public Airport. Analysis of their private group chat shows how leaders responded to a series of rapidly emerging political dilemmas that required spontaneous (unplanned), but intentional and strategic decisions: (1) deciding to protest; (2) appropriating control of a crowd and (3) leveraging that crowd to obtain power and standing with police, political leaders and the media. This contributes to understanding the interplay between organization and spontaneity in contentious protest during a moment of the whirlwind event.

Spontaneity and organization in protest

Both activists and scholars have long debated the relative influence of spontaneity vis-à-vis organization in political protest. Since the 19th Century, Hegelians, Marxists and New Left revolutionaries debated whether social forces determine actions or spontaneity mattered more in explaining human events (Kruglanski 2024; Dlugach 2009; Snow and Moss 2014; Marx and Engels 1848/1996). For instance, Holst (2009) explains how Antonio Gramsci believed the party could build organizations to transform the "ideas that sprang up from the spontaneity of day-to-day struggles of the popular classes" (Holst 2009, 627). Notably, Marxist revolutionaries including Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Rosa Luxemburg contributed to spontaneity vis-à-vis organization debates that others continued for over a century of which a full review would be beyond the scope of this paper (Roesch 2012; Holst 2011; Holst 2009; Chen 2015; Dlugach 2012).

By the 1960s, a new generation of revolutionaries, developed the idea of prefigurative politics, which some social movement scholars explain as a compromise between spontaneity and organizational control (Kruglanski 2024; Bevins 2023). Prefigurative politics refers to organizational structures in which groups enact the vision of the world that they want to create in the future, which some social movement scholars explained as a compromise between spontaneity and organizational control (Kruglanski 2024; Bevins 2023). Specifically, prefigurative politics emerged in the New Left and Students for a Democratic Society out of critiques of the bureaucratization of the Soviet Union which (they argued) subordinated means to ends (Bevins 2023). Events in 1968 such as the insurrection at Columbia University provide cases that explain the dynamics of how such prefigurative politics could be incorporated into non-hierarchical organizational protest structures (Bell 1968).

Spontaneity remains a potent explanation for activists. Polletta (2006) points out how the spontaneity among Civil Rights-era lunch counter protesters was situated within a larger cultural moment and socio-historical stage. Her analysis of narratives about the Greensboro lunch counter sit-ins reveals that activists saw 'spontaneity' as a central explanation for the actions.

> Spontaneity meant something other than unplanned. In fact, closer examination of the sit-in stories indicates that it meant several things. Spontaneity denoted the sheer power of moral protest. Sitting in was motivated by an imperative to act now that brooked no compromise. One simply put one's body on the line, without debating its ideological potential or waiting for instruction from higher-ups. (Polletta 2006, 40)

Activist longstanding use of protest spontaneity narratives continues among popular educators and community organizers moved beyond spontaneity narratives to develop theoretical frames that reaffirm spontaneity in protest (Polletta 2006; Moyer 2001; brown 2017; Engler and Engler 2016).

Just as revolutionaries and activists have long debated the relative importance of organization and spontaneity, social movement scholarship on this debate waxed and waned. Mid-20th century social movement scholars emphasized spontaneity in explaining protest events as cathartic responses after social strains reach a 'boiling point' to trigger social insurgency (McAdam 1999, 9). Similarly, Moyer (2001) defines a trigger event as a "highly publicized, shocking incident' that 'dramatically reveals a critical social problem to the public in a vivid way" (Moyer 2001, 54). Metaphorically, the term "trigger event" suggests a mechanical and automatic sequence of actions, but also implies something pathological and dangerous when used to describe emotionally upsetting events that cause past trauma to resurface. While social movement scholars sometimes discuss trigger events and spontaneity synonymously, the use of the term differs from spontaneity within protest. Trigger events suggest something that catalyzes a mechanical sequence of actions, while spontaneity affirms the agency of protestors. Instead of "trigger events" this case adopts the *moment of the whirlwind* metaphor to reintegrate spontaneous agency with organizations to explain protests.

By the 1980s, leading social movement scholars rejected "spontaneity," which they associated with the pathologizing and mechanistic logics that trigger events share with mid-20th Century scholarship such as structural strain and threshold theories of protest (McAdam 1999). As Kruglanski (2024) noted, scholars 'de-bunked' a definition of spontaneity characterized as a linear, directional and reactive explosive event. As such, scholarship about organization and spontaneity shifted towards an almost myopic emphasis on organization, as resource mobilization and political process theorists began to eschew and de-legitimize the role of spontaneity in explaining protest (Morris 1981; McAdam 1999; Snow and Moss 2014; Killian 1984). For instance, in one classic analysis of sit-in tactics during the Civil Rights Movement, Morris (1981) pointed to the importance of preexisting organizational forms to dispel claims of protest spontaneity. This rise of resource mobilization and political process theories led to a virtual erasure of spontaneity in explaining protest. Such social movement theories presented examples of preexisting organizational planning, strategy and structures in protest strategy and decision making, as evidence that protests were not spontaneous (McAdam 1999; Snow and Moss 2014). In part, this erasure stems from the juxtaposition of spontaneity and organization in dichotomous

opposition (Snow and Moss 2014,1125). In upholding this false dichotomy, scholars missed the ways protest actions could result from dynamic and dialectic interactions between organization and spontaneity.

More recently, scholars began to take notice of the shifting role of spontaneity in protest (Snow and Moss, 2014). In the past decade, there has been a renaissance of research into the role of spontaneity in social movement protest (Snow and Moss 2014, Cheng and Chan 2016; Flesher Fominaya 2015; Pilati et.al. 2019; Ho 2018; Anisin 2016). Snow and Moss (2014) re-theorized the relationship between spontaneity and organization in Occupy Wall Street and other protests, by identifying four precipitating conditions that promote spontaneity within protests, including non-hierarchical forms of organization. In so doing, they bridged the (false) dichotomy between organization and spontaneity (Snow and Moss 2014). Subsequent scholars incorporated spontaneity into analysis of Spain's 15-M movement (Flesher Fominaya 2015); Gezi Park protests in Turkey (Anisin 2016; Över and Taraktas 2017); the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (Cheng and Chan 2017), and the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan (Ho 2018).

Some critics still attempt to dismiss spontaneity's role in protest by pointing to preexisting organizations. In a paper entitled, "Debunking Spontaneity," Flesher Fominaya (2015) disputes 'spontaneity theses' by documenting how a small group of activists with established social networks and 30 years of deliberative cultural practices, initiated Spain's 15-M/ Indignados protest (Flesher Fominaya 2015). Such straw-dog arguments equate spontaneous decision making among protestors with "immaculate conception" origin myths of protest (Flesher Fominaya 2015, 158). Other definitions of spontaneity provide more room to allow protestors to engage in sudden on-the-fly decision making without requiring such decisions to emerge without any preparation or practice. For instance, Leferrman (2023) explores the multiple meanings and definitions of "spontaneity" in protest including temporal, spatial and immediacy, meaning a logical order to sudden protest events.

Other recent scholars also recognize spontaneity can play a role in protest strategy, noting "contingent and unplanned actions are by no means an antithesis of rationality and action" (Cheng and Chan 2017, 223). For example, many alternative organizations reconcile spontaneity with organizational planning by developing *prefigurative protocols* in the form of horizontal agreements that help members navigate uncertainty and spontaneity during day-to-day interactions (Kruglanski 2024, 82). Building on this idea, the current case study reveals how Cosecha's pre-established principles serve as prefigurative protocols applied to a sudden event. The next section will theorize the metaphor of the moments of the whirlwind to both advance and reconcile the longstanding debate related to spontaneity and organization.

Moments of the whirlwind

> The defining attribute of a moment of the whirlwind is that it involves a dramatic public event or series of events that sets off a flurry of activity and that this activity

> quickly spreads beyond the institutional control of any one organization. It inspires a rash of decentralized actions, drawing in people previously unconnected to established movement groups (Engler and Engler 2016, 177-178),

The earliest use of the moment of the whirlwind metaphor for spontaneous protest can be traced to Nicholas von Hoffman, lead organizer of The Woodlawn Organization with Saul Alinsky (Sifry 2021; Engler and Engler 2016). In 1961, von Hoffman is quoted as saying:

> I think that we should toss out everything we are doing organizationally and work on the premise that this is the moment of the whirlwind, that we are no longer organizing but guiding a social movement. To his surprise, Alinksy responded "You're right. Get on it tomorrow. (Engler and Engler 2016, 54)

This origin story of this metaphor moment of the whirlwind within Saul Alinksy's tradition has been repeated to become lore among community organizers and social movements (Sifry 2021). The morale affirms the importance of spontaneity in some cases (Sifry 2021; Engler and Engler 2016). Such spontaneous actions contrast sharply with the Alinsky structure-based tradition that emphasizes rational and planned strategic decision making and organization building. The paradoxical origin of the moment of the whirlwind from Alinksy's structured organization-centered school of social change suggests the metaphor's potential for bridging organization-spontaneity debates, which continue to resonate in 21st Century protest.

The moment of the whirlwind presents an apt metaphor for spontaneous protest, by recognizing those types of events when organizations and organizers must cede control to the unexpected rush of a crowd, while simultaneously seeking to harness that moment (Kruglanski 2024; Engler and Engler 2016).The moment of the whirlwind situates spontaneity in a temporal, albeit fleeting, episode of sudden protest events. The moment of whirlwind as a theory resolves abstract philosophical requirements that undergird joint action as both spontaneous and a rational activity (Leferrman 2023).

In the first decade of the 2000s, a group of revolutionary activists with roots in the alter-globalization protests of the late 20th Century formed Team Colors Collective, which sought to intervene in the organizing leading up protests around the 2008 Democratic and Republic National Conventions, through analysis of the political composition of the working class and the state, as well as critique of movements themselves (Cash et al. 2008). In the introduction to their 2010 edited book, the Team Colors Collective posit the potential of cycles, and contrasting the whirlwind period of the early 21st Century with past cycles of protest such as those in the 1960s (Hughes et. al. 2010). For Team Colors Collective (2010), current organizing reflected a tension between organization and spontaneous protest:

> Our discourse now is plagued with non-profit and professional thinking, to the point where the betterment of struggle takes a backseat to the betterment of organizations. (Hughes, et al. 2010, 9).

Team Colors Collective found promise in the metaphor of whirlwinds, pointing to the fluidity, openness and constantly shifting terrain of winds, which search for commonalities in new ways as they circulate, and sometimes come together into whirlwinds among multiple radical struggles to tease at revolution. Subsequently, the second decade of the 21st Century has been called a "mass protest decade," with protest events in Tahir Square and Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and others characterized by "horizontally organized, spontaneous and digitally coordinated" tactics (Bevins 2023, 4).

Furthermore, whirlwinds metaphorically imply forces of nature, which cannot be completely controlled or planned. Many of today's thought leaders and activists eschew deliberate and calculate structured organizing tradition but instead look for ways to influence the nature and shape of such events towards social movement or even revolutionary ends. This may be why Engler and Engler (2016) propose three propositions related to organizing around moments of the whirlwind:

> First, that moments of the whirlwind are not as rare as they might seem: second, that there is art to harnessing them when they occur spontaneously; and third, that activists willing to embraces a strategy of nonviolent escalation can sometimes set off historic upheavals of their own." (Engler and Engler 2016, 179).

Notably, Engler and Engler (2016) point to an "art," not science, to harnessing spontaneous moments of the whirlwind. This raises questions about how such moments of the whirlwind can be harnessed? The current case study explains how one group of protest organizers harness one such moment of the whirlwind protest event through joint, rapid, and strategic decision making that leveraged prefigurative organizational protocols.

This paper builds upon the integration of spontaneity and organization by arguing that prefigurative organizational protocols facilitated on the fly (spontaneous) decisions during a moment of the whirlwind (Kruglanski 2024). The anti-Muslim ban Boston Logan airport protest demonstrates how social movement organizers decided to protest, took control of the crowd and leveraged that crowd in negotiations with politicians, police and the media. These decisions happened quickly and without prior planning during a moment of the whirlwind.

Methods

Three primary sources of data were used in the construction of this case study: a transcript of a private group chat among 18 members of the social movement organization, *Movimiento Cosecha* (Cosecha), a focus group using the group chat transcript as a guide, and the live social media broadcast of the event. In addition, we held follow-up conversations with members of Cosecha.

Movimiento Cosecha

In July 2015, a small group of immigrant community organizers launched a campaign "for permanent protection, dignity, and respect for the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States." (Cosecha 2015). The group adopted the name *Movimiento Cosecha*[1] to reflect "the long tradition of farmworker organizing and the present-day pain of the thousands of undocumented workers whose labor continues to feed the country." Cosecha's all-volunteer team of activists and organizers rely upon donations for their sustainability. At the time of this case study, thirteen volunteer community organizers from faith-based, labor and immigrant rights movements constituted the core Boston team of Cosecha.

The founders of Cosecha abandoned community organizing approaches that emphasize building organizations, and instead, developed a movement-centered activist strategy, whose tactics include sudden nonviolent direct actions to disrupt existing social institutions, public demonstrations and economic noncooperation. They seek to mobilize a large portion of the US population to participate in a general strike among immigrants and their allies to ensure "permanent protection, dignity and respect for all undocumented immigrants" (Cosecha 2015). Cosecha's decentralized nonhierarchical structure builds circles consisting of three or more activists who commit to prefigurative protocols (Kruglanski 2024) in the form of a common set of fourteen principles developed by the original leaders (Cosecha 2015). Cosecha leaders describe the principles as "tools to protect the movement" that guide members to make decisions in response to strategic dilemmas during an action.

Group chat data

This study obtained rare access to private group chat discussions that took place among Cosecha organizers *during* the planning and implementation of this protest event. Between 8:08am on Saturday and 2:41pm on Sunday, 18 members of the organization communicated via a private group chat hosted on encrypted software *Telegram*. The members shared 620 relevant comments that were transcribed and presented as a timeline of events during the focus group with Cosecha leaders.

[1] The Spanish word "cosecha" translates to "harvest" in English.

Group history telling focus Group

On 1 March 2017, eight of the twelve Cosecha leaders met in their office and participated in focus group modeled after the *group history telling* method (Ryan, et. al 2013; Ryan, et. al 2016). Among the discussants, seven identified as Latino/a and one as white; two identified as male and the rest as female. The researcher did not collect data about the group members' nationality or immigration status, in compliance with human subjects protections outlined in their institutional review board (IRB) protocol. During the focus group, participants were prompted by the timeline of the group chat, which was projected onto a screen. Participants were asked to walk through the evening and describe key decisions and events that took place during the protest event. The focus group was recorded, transcribed and entered into the nVivo qualitative analysis software.

In addition to the Telegram feed and transcription of the focus group, the recording of Cosecha's live Facebook broadcast during the protest event was entered into nVivo qualitative analysis software. The video was incorporated into NVivo to triangulate time and dates of events during the protest event along with the transcriptions of the Telegram chat group and the subsequent focus group. All data was deidentified prior to analysis. An analysis of narratives within this data revealed three distinct strategic decision-making stages of the protest event that occurred that day: (1) deciding to protest; (2) appropriating control the protest event and (3) leveraging the protest to obtain legitimacy with powerful players. These three stages form the organizational spine of this in-depth case study in the following.

Deciding to protest President Trump's Muslim ban in Boston

On Saturday 28 January 2017, the Boston chapter of Cosecha planned a party to release stress, build community and raise funds; but those plans changed as news spread about people being detained at airports across the country. At 9:47am, Jorge, one of the Cosecha founders, typed three messages to the group chat: "Let's resiste/ Are there any in Boston Logan/ I can lead a march into the airport." This was the first call to protest among the Cosecha chat group members and it set off a day-long discussion amongst the members of Cosecha. As protests began at other airports around the country, Cosecha leaders sensed momentum for a Boston airport protest against the Muslim Ban. Still, they did not immediately react. Instead, they wrestled with the decision to organize an airport event. Their discussion centered around resolving three dilemmas. First, Cosecha sought to obtain ownership to protest policies that targeted a different constituent group, namely the Muslim community. Second, the leaders of Cosecha needed internal agreement from all the members of their group. Third, they wondered if they had the capacity to organize such a protest in a short time in light of growing national momentum for airport protests. How Cosecha leaders resolved these three dilemmas will be discussed in turn.

Claiming "ownership" of the protest

Activists often seek to be the "owners" of particular social problems or action (Best 2021). As used here "ownership" suggests that a particular group has a legitimate stake in the leadership of an action or event. Often such ownership of a protest involves obtaining legal permits from the state that provide legitimacy to the leaders of the protest event. In this case, however, Cosecha leaders sought permission from the people most affected by Executive Order 13769, the Muslim community.

Cosecha's primarily Latino/a constituency works on immigration reform, an issue that is tangential to, but not the same as the oppression of Muslim people in the United States. Cosecha leaders recognized a dilemma of a primarily Latino/a organization taking a lead in responding to policies that targets the Muslim community. In our focus group, Natasha asked, "are we going to be seen as being opportunistic?" In response to this dilemma, Cosecha developed a public "solidarity pledge" with the words "MUSLIM SOLIDARITY @EVERY AIRPORT," which they began to share on social media in the early afternoon. While this solidarity pledge centered Cosecha's allyship with the targets of the travel ban, this still did not legitimize Cosecha's ownership of the event. As Natasha noted, "we know that we are standing in solidarity, but are others going to see it like that? So for me that was a hesitation."

Cosecha leaders wanted the Muslim community's consent before they took leadership for the protest, but as in most communities, the Boston Muslim community is not monolithic. No one person speaks on behalf of the entire community, which complicated and delayed Cosecha's "spontaneous" protest. As a compromise resolution to this dilemma, Jorge tried to convince a local Muslim Imam to take the lead in an airport protest. When the Iman expressed reluctance to protest at the airport without permits, Jorge asked for tacit permission for Cosecha to lead the protest. The Imam did not oppose the idea, which Cosecha took as sanction for them to assume leadership of the Boston airport protest event.

Obtaining consensus to protest

During the afternoon, Cosecha leaders communicated in person, on the phone and in the Telegram chat about plans for the protest. While they agreed on the importance of this action, they also considered the needs of group members. The stress of feeling attacked during Trump's first week in office took a toll on members.

> We had a huge community resonating session (two days prior), with everybody in Cosecha, and that took many hours and people were crying, a lot of emotions were expressed and I felt that tone that on that day carried out for the rest of the week. That is why we felt very drained on that day.

Other executive orders and public statements that targeted immigrants drove this stress. Members felt a range of emotions, including fear, uncertainty and risk. They intended to have a party to relieve this stress.

At one point, Mari wrote into the chat "Let's move the party to the airport." The group turned to the leaders who had spent the week planning the party for the final decision about whether or not to protest. They referred to these two as the "bottom liners" meaning that they would have the final decision-making authority for initiating the action or not:

> We were in the car, and we were like, it's up to you two whether we change from the party. We could do the party at the airport potentially (chuckle), but like cancel the party and move it to the airport. At 4:30, it was like yes, then we started communicating out with everyone, and we started moving the pieces forward.

As deliberations continued, Jorge designed a Facebook event invitation for an airport protest, originally announced to begin 4:00pm, but Cosecha decided to move the start of the protest to 7:00pm. Very quickly, hundreds of people had seen the invitation.

As they travelled to Logan Airport, Cosecha members began to assign roles to one another to lead the program, keep the crowd engaged, coordinate with the Boston media, host the livestream Facebook feed, work as police liaisons, and reach out to allied groups such as immigrant rights groups, labor unions, and ACLU lawyers. Cosecha's leadership began to redefine the airport as a contested protest space that they could coordinate through a common and established organizational network.

Overcoming fears and responding to momentum

In addition to stress, some of the organizers suppressed fear that they could not actually manage to execute an effective airport protest event. Francesca explained:

> It's also that we were just scared that we were going to make a call for this and nobody was going to show up. And that was a lot of the phone conversations… but I remember being in the car and people on the phone saying, 'but are people actually going to show up?" And so, if we were to do something when we were tired, and put, literally all of our resources as volunteer organizers, if no one goes. then it's like, ok?

Such fears were countered by the reports from other airports. While the Boston based Cosecha team deliberated, news stories reported on protest events that that emerged "spontaneously" at airports across the country. One story from Pro

Publica reported the Muslim ban would block over 500,000 legal residents from reentering the US, Jorge wrote in the group chat: "500,000!!!!, this is going to be a major trigger event."

A short while later, another member of Cosecha noted, "There is so much momentum here." Cosecha leaders recognized the airport protests as a political opportunity that was gaining "momentum." Rather than being purely spontaneous events, the shared private communications among protest organizers reveal that the organizers deliberately sought to capitalize on what they perceived to be a trigger event (Moyer 2001). This more spontaneous protest differed from pre-planned protest events that required weeks or month of deliberation, planning and resource mobilization. Instead, Cosecha leaders recognized and seized the political opportunities in the moment of the whirlwind.

In such a moment of the whirlwind, traditional rules of protest were suspended. For example, a union organizer approached Jorge with warnings that past attempts to protest at the airport failed, and would likely lead to police arrests, he explained how this protest event differed from her past organized labor strikes at the airport:

> Look, if there was no momentum nationally, and we came just us, with 50 people or even with 100 people, with no momentum, we would just get arrested immediately. There would be no negotiation. Right? And there were also no cameras, right? So, when you don't have momentum, they have way more authority than you. So, you have never done this…Because you don't have that momentum…but we have cameras here so we're good.

Jorge said to the labor organizer, "So, you have never done this" because those protests did not have national "momentum" including media attention and public interest. This analysis lends insight into how the rules for a protest event during a moment of the whirlwind differ from other situations. Also, this reveals that Jorge and Cosecha leaders perceived that "momentum" would allow them to assume control of the protest event and acquire leverage in negotiations with politicians, police and others. The next two sections will describe how Cosecha leaders took control of the protest event and used it to leverage negotiations with police and political leaders.

Appropriating the protest event

When Cosecha activists arrived at 6:30pm they encountered at least twelve people with signs who were "trying to start chanting." Cosecha leaders quickly assumed leadership of the protest event. Reflecting on that moment, Cosecha members described how they "took control" of the crowd. Far from a "spontaneous" reaction, leaders described four collective practices important for leading a protest: (1) assuming leadership of the program; (2) socializing attendees to the protest arena; (3) staying on message and (4) broadcasting the

message. Cosecha leaders quickly carried out these tasks during this moment of the whirlwind.

Assuming leadership of the program

During our focus group, Francesca, one of the Cosecha organizers reflected on a key moment that established them as early leaders of the protest:

> A beautiful thing that happened with Mari and Paula borrowing someone's mike (sic) who was there; like literally taking over that space in a lot of ways, in that it allowed us to have pretty much control of the program throughout the night. And so, we could pass it off internally… the first people who begin to do things are the ones that are seen as the ones that are leading the rallies, in some ways. And as more people arrive, you have more risk of other people or random people or other groups being the ones to sustain.

Francesca describes "literally taking over that space" that allowed Cosecha to lead the protest for the rest of the night. When she describes "who are the first people who begin to do things are the ones that are leading the rallies," she expresses the principle of "path dependency," which refers to how actions at an earlier point in time predict and define actions later in the evening (Mahoney 2000). In this way Francesca describes a phenomenon that is the inverse version of the "being there" dilemma, which is when a social movement player who exits a protest arena gives other players a freer hand to act in their absence (Jabola-Carolus et al. 2018, 5). In this case, Francesca is describing a "staying there" phenomenon in which Cosecha's ability to appropriate, hold and control the microphone early in the evening allowed them to "take over the space." In this otherwise public and open space, Paula and Mari established Cosecha as "the one who is going to run the program." While these two leaders maintained primary roles of guiding the program, over the next several hours, different members of Cosecha took turns speaking, introducing chants and messages along the way. In addition, using the group chat, they offered each other feedback and ideas. They led the attendees for the next three and a half hours.

Socializing attendees to the protest

As the crowd grew, new members needed to be socialized into the protest. Eliza described teaching members of the crowd songs and chants at the beginning to the smaller initial crowd, so as the crowd grew, newcomers could adopt the same messages. Cosecha leaders recognized that many people in the crowd were new to protesting, so they drew upon their repertoire of chants, songs and slogans. For example, one technique that the Cosecha leaders taught the protest attendees was known as the "people's mic." This tactic of communicating with large groups became popular during the Occupy protests of 2011. In the people's mic, the speaker makes a statement, pauses, and the crowd repeats that statement so that others can hear. Early in the evening, Eliza described teaching the crowd to use

the people's mic. Initially the protest attendees didn't react when she asked them to use the people's mic, so Eliza asked a small group of experienced activists to help her get it going. "We are going to use the people's mic." They repeated, "We are going to use the people's mic." She then gave instructions for the people's mic until the larger crowd caught on. She later reflected on the meaning of this moment saying, "It was an indication to me that people weren't familiar with mass protest who were there; it took a little bit of crafting to actually get it going."

In this way, Eliza and other leaders reacted to the dilemma of inexperienced protestors by innovatively teaching these tactics on the fly. At the same time, she drew upon an existing cultural practice used in many past protests. For some of those in attendance, they learned to adopt new normative practices. Strangers who stood together shouting in unison or repeating chants were not doing so spontaneously, but rather, relied upon cultural transmission of protest norms and the intentional efforts of experienced social movement activists.

Staying on message

In addition to socializing new members into the protest, Cosecha leaders sought to establish and maintain a clear message against the Muslim ban, but they also wanted to encourage participation among newcomers. So, they established an "open microphone" where anyone could speak. This created a new dilemma as the crowd grew, since new and unknown potential speakers might take the crowd "off-message" from standing with Muslim travelers. The dynamics of the growing size of that crowd became a source of anxiety for the leaders who feared that either intentionally malicious infiltrators or innocent participants with other interests might discredit their claim or even disrupt the protest event (Jasper 2015).

To resolve this dilemma, Cosecha leaders established strategies to manage risky speakers by using chants to re-focus the crowd. As Eliza explained about one unknown speaker, "its ok, because if she gets off-message, then we can start chanting." In this way, Cosecha organizers monitored the boundaries of the protest event's social space, and in particular, the messaging of the speakers. They made sure to "hold the microphone." This occurred several times and involved choosing who and when to pass the microphone to non-Cosecha speakers and responding to times speakers would go "off script." In such an unplanned event, Cosescha developed organizational strategies to reign in spontaneity.

Broadcasting the message

The protest represented those present in the airport in the physical sense, but a more distal audience watched the event through social media. Some of those who watched chose to spontaneously join the event in person or virtually. Social media provided Cosecha leaders with direct access to a public who followed the story over the night, and with the ability to help shape the narrative of events as they took place (Best 2021). As Naomi noted, during the live stream, Kathy

repeated messages like "we are in solidarity" calling for viewers to text were repeated directly to the public through social media platforms.

In addition to social media, professional news media acted as "secondary claimsmakers" to filter and shape the group's messages (Best 2021). As leaders of the protest, some television and print journalists did interview Cosecha leaders (Ramos and Ryan, 2017). Most, however, focused on politicians like Mayor Walsh and Senator Warren with little mention of the protest organizers (Arsenault 2017; Gambino 2017). Even though media reports presented politicians and protestors as a unified contenders to the Trump Administration's executive order, behind the scenes, groups jockeyed for influence.

Leveraging protest for legitimacy with powerful actors

The ability of this group to claim credit for this protest event depended upon successfully appropriating control of the protest event. Once they gained control of the crowd during this moment of the whirlwind, Cosecha leveraged the crowd to obtain standing and legitimacy in their negotiations with powerful actors, specifically (1) politicians, (2) police, (3) lawyers and (4) families to negotiate the end of the protest successfully.

Politicians and Principles

By 2017, many pundits considered Senator Elizabeth Warren to be a potential 2020 presidential candidate. A political ally shared the news with Cosecha leaders that the senator might arrive to speak at the protest event. Just before 8:00pm, Jorge sent a message to the group chat asking "Should we let her speaks or not? #breakingprinciples." On the one hand, they had established an open mic and invited anyone to speak.

On the other hand, by writing "#breaking principles," he reminded the group of Cosecha's fourth principle, "We don't dance with political parties." The principle means "we speak for ourselves." During the protest, as hundreds of people arrived, Cosecha leaders wrestled with a version of what Jasper (2015) called the "powerful allies" dilemma (Jasper 2015; Nicholls & Uitermark 2015). In this dilemma, players with more power (i.e., politicians) may ally with less powerful players (i.e., protestors) and, in the process, supplant the intended agenda of the contesting group. In this moment of the whirlwind, Cosecha made "on the fly" decisions to resolve this tension between the group's principles and the crowd's desire to hear from a popular politician.

When Senator Warren arrived, the crowd parted in a way that leaders later compared to Moses and the Red Sea. The senator took the megaphone and spoke for a little over two minutes describing the executive order as "illegal" and "unconstitutional." After Warren finished speaking, Francesca took action to resolve the tension between Warren's presence and Cosecha's principle. She took the megaphone back and stated:

> We don't dance with political parties. We came here and the politicians followed, because ultimately the power rests with us, and not with them.

By claiming rhetorical power of the moment and identifying us as the people and politicians as them, Franchesca established Cosecha's independence. Mari commented on people's reaction after Francesca's statement:

> I had been seeing the women who were crying and totally all-around Elizabeth Warren, and to stand up there I looked in their direction, (laughing) and people were like (perplexed facial expression) like why is she saying this? And then they realized, oh, that's why she is saying that. (laughing)

The reaffirmation of Cosecha's principles helped solidify their collective identity as independent from party politics. After Senator Warren spoke, other politicians spoke at the protest including Councilman Tito Jackson, Mayor Marty Walsh and Attorney General Maura Healy. After each speaker, the Cosecha members repeated the phrases, "we came here and the politicians followed" and "we don't dance with political parties." Cosecha leaders felt it was important to repeat this message through the live stream of the event on social media, and to translate this message from English to Spanish.

Police and control of the terminal space

As the protest began, Jorge and Bautista assumed the roles of police liaisons. As first, police did seem concerned about their presence, but as the crowd grew to over 100 people, police asked the group to move to a corner of the terminal. Cosecha leaders sought to claim space within the international terminal that would provide leverage for the protest. According to Jorge, "It was a battle of authority. (Smack sound) Who controls the airport?"

The protest occupied a space between the doors to the United States Customs and Border Patrol (USCBP) and the main exits to the terminal. Physical space can play an important role in contributing to many aspects of a contentious political protest event (Zhou 1998; Anisin 2016). The physical location of the protest in front of airport exits was strategic for mobilizing the public. Cosecha's improvised tactic of non-violent cooperation sought to disrupt everyday routines to acquire and assert power (Alinsky 1971).

In this case, Jorge and Bautista adopted a strategy of stalling to wait for more protestors to arrive. As Bautista explained, "when this gets bigger, they can't get us out." Cosecha's tactic relied upon leveraging their control of the growing crowd to prevent police for forcibly removing them. As a stalling tactic, the organizers "negotiated" with the police about where the crowd was allowed to stand, while trying to prevent the use of force that could disrupt the protest altogether. Jorge

and Bautista even went so far as to hide from police in the crowd while asking local politicians to intervene on their behalf.

Cosecha members estimated that their stalling tactics allowed the crowd to grow to over 2,000 people in the center of Logan Airport international terminal. Police locked the terminal entrance, so that if people stepped outside the terminal they could not reenter. In response, Cosecha organizers sent out a social media message to redirect people to other terminals and walk through the hallways that connected to the protest. Cosecha improvised on-the-fly tactics to delay and redirect crowds spontaneously, which they implemented through pre-existing organizational protocols and existing relationships. This improvised strategy seemed to work. By 8:15pm, Jorge reported, "Space taken over, this airport is ours."

Improvising new roles to support lawyers and families

The international terminal of Logan Airport contains one large set of opaque doors that separates arriving passengers passing through Immigration and Customs agents from waiting friends and family members. Even before the protest began, lawyers joined those waiting for Muslim travelers who had been detained. Lawyers saw each detained traveler as a potential case to challenge the executive order in court, so, they waited. But how could the lawyers identify the Muslim travelers?

Mari described how she identified the families who were waiting for the travelers:

> I would just sneak into groups of people. Like you could just see people's distress in their face…then I would talk to people near me, and they would be like, yeah, she is waiting for her husband. And I would wait for the reporters to leave and then I would approach her. I'm like, I'm an organizer with this protest and we are here for you. What do you need?

Mari improvised a strategy to just "sneak into the groups of people," suggests that she recognized that her behavior breached social norms of talking to strangers and eavesdropping. Despite this, Mari tried to establish her legitimacy as "an organizer of this protest." Once she had established contact with families, Mari found legal support for them by improvising to meet lawyers:

> I had zero relationships with the lawyer, so I felt like I needed to be her assistant so she would feed me information. So, I would be like, what do you need? Do you need water? (laughing) And she would be like "Actually, yes." And I would be like what do you need? And she was like, I need a pen and a pencil. and so, I stole Eliza's clipboard …so that's how started knowing about the families.

Mari began working with lawyers by recognizing one of their basic human needs– thirst. In this simple act, she built trust with lawyers and appropriated resources (a clipboard) from her colleague (Eliza) that the lawyers needed. Mari's role evolved into becoming an "assistant" and liaison between lawyers and families.

Around this time shouts of celebration erupted from parts of the crowd. "What happened?" Francesca asked. Eliza announced, "A federal judge made an order to stay the executive order!" Earlier that day, USCBP prevented Hameed Khalid Darweesh, a former US Army translator with a valid visa from entering the US. ACLU lawyers brought the case to US District Court in New York, and the judge prohibited USCBP officials from blocking entry to any person with a legal visa. With this news, some protestors wanted to declare victory, but Mari reported that one family still waited for a Muslim traveler to be released.

Ending the protest

The remaining detained traveler refused to come out because she feared the press and attention. At the same time, Cosecha leaders did not want to end the protest before she departed. Mayor Marty Walsh and "his entourage" arrived on the scene and began negotiating with Jorge to end the protest. Jorge recounted the negotiation:

> I said, look mayor, we know there is a person inside. And we are a very organized group. We are the people here who are controlling the whole protest. So, once we get this woman released, we will make sure we all leave. And we'll make it peacefully.

In these unplanned negotiations, Jorge reaffirms their control over the crowd. His statement "we are a very organized group" establishes Cosecha's legitimacy with the Mayor and leveraged the crowd in his negotiation.

Jorge knew of the remaining traveler because Mari's work with lawyers and families. Meanwhile Mayor Walsh needed to confirm the existence of the remaining traveler since the City did not hold jurisdiction inside the airport. An aide asked Jorge how he knew about the family of the remaining traveler. Jorge looked the older white man in the eye and said, "because racially profiled them." The older man looked surprised but nodded.

Jorge and the Mayor Walsh agreed to a process for the last traveler to exit. The Mayor and the traveler would leave together surrounded by 20 police officers. Cosecha agreed to not announce her departure until she left but spontaneously applauded as she left. This improvised agreement with the Mayor allowed protestors to claim victory and peacefully end the protest. At 10:27pm Mari typed in the chat, "she is coming out," which she followed with (10:29pm), "she is out" and "claim victory and run!" Afterwards, the protestors celebrated with shouts of joy, hugs and tears. City officials arranged for empty buses to transport the crowd

away quickly, and Cosecha members celebrated on the group chat: "let's partyyy" and "We did it!" until the next day.

Discussion and conclusion

The case of Cosecha's tactical decisions to protest, control and leverage the Boston airport protest of President Trump's first 2017 Muslim Ban analyzes collective decision-making during a moment of the whirlwind protest event. The moment of the whirlwind metaphor provides analytic leverage for reconciling several aspects of the long-standing organization-spontaneity debates.

First, the case conceptually advances the moment of the whirlwind theory as a temporal phenomenon within an ecology of exogenous conditions to the protestors themselves. Much like a weather event, moments of the whirlwind emerge suddenly, promising an opportunity, as well as dangers. Moments of the whirlwind bring together large numbers of the public as participants and stakeholders that even experienced revolutionaries, movement leaders and community organizers may not be able to completely predict, but which they can recognize. Their emergence demands spontaneous decision making from protest leaders.

As the case shows, during such periods, routine rules of protest may be suspended to exploit new and temporary political opportunities. In this case, the executive order and a flurry of airport protests nationwide created momentum. So, even though past attempts to hold protests at Logan airport met with arrests and failure, this time was different.

Second, this case contributes to ongoing discussions of spontaneity in protest by dismantling the flawed binary between organization and spontaneity. During this protest, decision-making emerged from interactions between spontaneity and prior organizational commitments, or what Kruglanski (2024) called prefigurative protocols. In particular, the strategic decisions by the Cosecha organizers of the Boston airport protest of the Muslim Ban revolved around three stages: (1) deciding to protest, (2) appropriating and controlling the protest event, and (3) leveraging the protest during interactions with powerful stakeholders. Each of these sets of decisions relied on a combination of pre-existing organizational infrastructure and shared values, on the one hand, with a willingness to innovate and improvise based on changing and unpredicted circumstances, on the other hand.

Third, this case study challenges the false dichotomy that presents organizations as rational and spontaneity as irrational. Social movement actors make decisions 'on the fly,' not because they were 'triggered' to adopt automatic, mechanical responses but because a rapidly changing situation required members of a social movement organization to exercise strategic decisions, innovations, and tactical adaptations to new conditions. The case restores collective agency of protestors, whose discussion demonstrated considered, strategic and collective decisions in response to changing circumstance, during this protest events. As such, this case eschews the baggage that pathologizing and mechanical terms like "trigger

effects" can suggest. This case recognizes spontaneous decision making of protestors as rational, and the fluidity of organizational prefigurative commitments.

Importantly, there is also a risk of over-stating spontaneity and moments of the whirlwind. Not every protest event possesses the conditions for a moment of the whirlwind. Seasonal and recurring conditions provide opportunities for organizations to plan scripted large-scale events that include the participation of large numbers of people. Furthermore, groups that repeatedly seek spontaneous and rapid mobilizations may risk burnout among their members.

Still, this case study presents ways that pre-existing organizational norms do not invalidate spontaneous protest but, in some cases, prepare protest leaders to better recognize, navigate and leverage conditions of spontaneous protest. As Sifry (2025) notes, the return of Donald Trump to the white house in 2025 has already provoked new whirlwind moments, with wide ranging spontaneous protest responses with collectivist organizational cultures.

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Reviving the mass organization for social movements? The meaning of membership in the Democratic Socialists of America

David Purucker

Abstract

What does membership mean in a mass organization today? Work in the sociology of social movements and civic organizations indicates a long-term decline of movement organizations with mass memberships in the United States. Movement organizations have moved from membership to management, as professionalized advocacy organizations with "checkbook" memberships replaced formal, democratic mass organizations. Since 2016, however, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a left-wing political organization, has experienced surprising growth using the mass organization model. In this ethnographic case study of a DSA chapter, I find that recruitment in DSA has been mostly "virtual-individualistic", not occurring through bloc recruitment; that membership is bifurcated between "paper" and "activist-cadre" groups; and that while the structure of the organization theoretically permits a third type of "effective but non-intensive" membership, this is not realized in practice. I conclude with some comments on the generalizability of the new mass organization form for social movements today.

Keywords: social movements, organizations, mass parties, democratic socialist movement, civil society, DSA

Introduction

What does membership mean in a mass organization today? In the United States and Europe, sociological research on civil society—the social space existing between the state and the economy—indicates that patterns of voluntary organization and group-formation have changed significantly over time. In the United States, voluntary civic associations have moved from "membership to management" (Skocpol 2003). Large organizations which once brought Americans together across local communities, with common ideologies, thick collective identities, and democratic practices, have given way to lean, nationally-centered, and professionalized organizations, which relate to their members more as clients than as constituents. In the realm of politics and social movements, mass parties with large and democratically-empowered memberships were once powerful vehicles for expanding political and social citizenship in liberal democracies (Abbott and Guastella 2019). But mass-membership political parties never took root in the United States, and throughout Europe they have been in steep decline (Mair 2013, van Biezen and Poguntke 2014).

However, the obituary for the democratic mass organization may have been written too soon. Since 2016, just such an organization has reemerged in the United States: the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). DSA has the formal structure of a mass-member, federated civic organization or mass party. The organization is built around a membership that pays dues and exercises democratic decision-making powers at both local and national levels. Between 2014 and 2021, DSA's membership grew explosively from around 6,500 to 95,000, an increase of over 1300% (Schwartz 2017, DSA 2021b). Its local chapters and organizing committees have multiplied from around 20 in 2012 to over 320 today, spanning all 50 states, while organizational decision-making is conducted through representative processes similar to those once employed by federated membership organizations (DSA 2023a, YDSA 2023). DSA is the largest socialist political organization in the U.S. since the Communist Party's implosion in the mid-1950s (Schwartz 2017).[1]

In addition to its organizational innovations, DSA has also made remarkable political inroads for an anticapitalist organization. It now claims over 100 elected officials as members, including five members of Congress (Dreier 2020), with socialist elected officials organized into over a dozen state legislative caucuses, and a "win rate" of 59% (DSA 2022).[2] Though not legally registered as such, DSA expresses certain features of political parties, such as candidate recruitment, fundraising, and competition on Democratic Party ballot lines, and the organization is formally committed to building a "party-like organization" that is "independent of the Democratic and Republican Parties" in the medium-term future (DSA 2023b). Official political education courses for members in DSA emphasize the importance of building a "mass organization", and the organization's rapid growth and confident aspirations have led observers in the mainstream media to describe DSA as representing a "true movement, and of some mass" (Tracy 2019). In addition, DSA seems to be part of a generational cohort of left-populist "movement parties" in Europe and Latin America, such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and Morena in Mexico—and, more broadly, a movement "from protest to politics" on the left (Della Porta et al. 2017, Panitch and Gindin 2017; Temocin 2021). Theoretically, studying this case of mass social movement organization (SMO) revival also responds to a call among social movement scholars for a turn back towards the study of formal organizations, after a long period of emphasizing informal networks, institutions, and online activism (Soule 2014; Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2021).

This article presents findings from three years of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in a large urban DSA chapter in the period 2018-21. First, I discuss empirical changes in the forms of civic and social movement organization and

[1] Reliable membership figures for other U.S. socialist organizations are hard to come by, but one informed commentator estimates that the second-largest socialist organization is the Communist Party USA, thought to have around 8,000 members in 2021 (SocDoneLeft 2023).

[2] A dynamic list collecting information on DSA members holding elected office is available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Democratic_Socialists_of_America_public_officeholders.

theories explaining these shifts. Second, I discuss the method and data of this ethnographic case study, which was carried out with the aim of producing "movement-relevant theory" (Bevington and Dixon 2005) for the democratic socialist movement and other social movements. Third, I present my empirical findings on the meaning and practice of membership in DSA. Three key ideas are discussed: DSA's "virtual-individual" pattern of membership recruitment, the division between "paper" and "activist-cadre" members, and the unrealized structural potential of an intermediate, "effective but non-intensive" model of membership.

DSA, I argue, represents a departure from the modal forms of organization among American left social movements and in civil society more broadly. In its formal embrace of membership, a federated and constitutional structure, representative (not professional) leadership, and a self-funding model, DSA differs from managerial advocacy organizations and networked, horizontal movement organizations. However, my research indicates that, in practice, a layer of activist members tends to dominate chapter life. Until DSA organizers can institutionalize practices to accommodate less-intensive forms of member participation, DSA's aspirations to become a "mass organization" may go unrealized. Indeed, in 2022-23 DSA has experienced a sharp decline in its membership to a current level of 57,000, making this problem an urgent one for its activst layer (zZz and K 2023). And yet, DSA's historic success in electing socialist politicians and raising the political profile of socialism may still encourage imitators in the larger organizational fields of left social movements and, perhaps, civil society more broadly.

The decline of mass-membership organizations in civic and political life

Why is it sociologically significant that DSA has emerged as a formal organization with a large membership, local-national linkages, and an emphasis on democratic decision-making? In short, because this kind of organization was once very important for extending the interests of non-elite social groups, but has been in decline for generations. In the mid-twentieth century, groups which once involved millions of Americans in socially-thick and intensive forms of participation began transitioning "from membership to management", in Theda Skocpol's phrase (Skocpol 2003). These *classical mass organizations* were replaced by two different kinds of organization: professionalized, nationalized, and clientelist *advocacy groups*, and loosely-structured, localistic *horizontalist groups* of the radical left. A similar process of erosion and fragmentation has affected *mass parties*: political parties with large memberships, programmatic ideologies, and constituencies that are "externally-mobilized" from outside elite milieus (Abbott and Guastella 2019, Shefter 1994). Though mass parties have not historically been central to American politics, they were vital to achieving extensions in political and social citizenship in European countries. Over recent decades, they too have been in steep decline (Mair 2013, van Biezen and Poguntke 2014).

In its structure and strategy, DSA resembles both civic mass-member voluntary organizations and mass parties—or, at least, comes much closer to resembling these forms of mass organization than other contemporary left-wing social movement organizations in the United States. In addition, as I show, intellectuals associated with DSA, and representatives of the organization itself, consciously seek to emulate the historic mass parties. Understanding these two related types of organization and what has happened to them is therefore important for understanding DSA's own significance and pattern of development. In turn, DSA's successful renovation of the mass organization model could react back upon other social movements and civil society, encouraging other groups to adopt a similar form of organization.

From membership to management: the thinning of mass civic organizations

Prior to the 1960s, American civic life was dominated by a type of organization that involved millions of people in translocal networks of interaction, with frequent face-to-face meetings, distinctive rituals of solidarity, and democratic self-government. These organizations were both vertical and horizontal: their federal structure tied together local branches across an expanding nation, and a common set of cultural practices connected members laterally between cities, states, and regions. Beginning in the struggles for national independence and unity around the Revolutionary War, fraternal and voluntary associations like the Odd Fellows, Masons, and the American Temperance Society proliferated and modeled themselves on the new constitutional federalism of their country. New communication infrastructures supported by the federal state, especially the postal service, enabled "joiners" on the frontier to connect with national organizers. Overall, between 1810 and the 1990s, American organization-builders constructed 58 voluntary associations that enrolled 1% or more of U.S. adults as members (Skocpol 2003:27).[3]

Skocpol and her colleagues find that, contrary to conventional wisdom that assumes civic organizations emerged from the "bottom-up" in thousands of small towns and cities, civic associations were nearly always founded by a core group of organizational leaders, then seeded "from above" as members diffused outwards with the expanding nation. America was indeed a "nation of joiners", in Arthur Schlesinger Sr.'s phrase, but it was led by a "nation of organizers" (Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson 2000). Most major voluntary associations were founded before local chapters and the development of large memberships. This was so because this "translocal", federal model could simultaneously support "intimate solidarities" among local groups of war veterans, Shriners, and teetotalers and a national, extensive collective identity. Skocpol writes that "multiple tiered national federations were the key institutional supports of American voluntarism,"

[3] This figure excludes political parties and religious denominations. For associations that recruited members based on gender, 1% of the population of American adult men or women is the benchmark.

because of their success in combining these intensive and extensive social identities (Skocpol 2003:89-97).

Membership in these organizations was intensive, ritualized, and emotional. Members attended frequent local meetings, accepted positions of responsibility as officers, and developed skills as speakers and organizers, record-keepers and facilitators. Though groups did sometimes offer instrumental benefits to their dues-paying members, like old-age insurance, Skocpol notes that "the appeal of America's most successful membership federations went far beyond individual economic calculation." (2003:84) The appeal of the largest federations was moral and ideological—though their micro-scale benefits to social capital were also important (Putnam 2020).

Membership also frequently cut across class lines. These were "segmental" power organizations (Mann 2012) that bound together individuals across divisions of occupation, status, and, less often, religion and ethnicity (racially-integrated associations were very rare). But by and large, civic associations were not bourgeois-led organizations. Douglas Rae argues that "a majority of all civic organizations were headed by regular folks for whom high office was not the routine expectation in life" (quoted in Skocpol 2003:107). And though popular associationalism was hardly a guarantee of popular liberalism (Riley 2019), this historical phase of civil society genuinely did nurture the "great free schools" of democracy described by Alexis de Tocqueville (2003). For example, cross-denominational mass associations of Christian reformers were the institutional bases of temperance and abolitionism, the first national social movements in the United States (Young 2002).

This format of organization began declining steeply in the 1960s for multiple reasons, including the declining social acceptability of racial and gender segregation and the mass entry of women into the workforce. The organizations that emerged to replace traditional civic groups were nationally-centered (not translocal) nonprofit associations run by professionals. Groups like Common Cause, the National Organization for Women, and the Children's Defense Fund exploited new institutional levers to influence public policy in Washington, D.C. Innovations in direct-mail solicitation allowed for the new advocacy organizations to interact with "members" solely as individuals—face-to-face meetings were less necessary for raising funds or making decisions.

Skocpol identifies the broad process as a withdrawal of elites: a rising professional-managerial class endowed with new techniques of strategic action had less need to mobilize ordinary people (Skocpol 2003:178). While some of these new "tertiary associations" retained formal memberships, the meaning of this membership was redefined away from face-to-face participation, democracy, and "thick" collective identity, and towards a desocialized, "thin" model of service provision, with members rendered more like clients. Matthew Painter and Pamela Paxton (2014) report declines between 1994 and 2004 in the percentages

of voluntary association members who participate actively, and increases in the proportions of "checkbook members" who donate but never attend meetings.[4]

How is this history relevant to understanding DSA? Though DSA enrolls far fewer members than the mass organizations profiled by Skocpol—currently, around 0.02% of the American population, not 1%—its model of organization is unusual in how it departs from the professionalized advocacy model typical since the 1960s. Organizational policies are determined by representative-democratic institutions similar to those of classic voluntary groups with bylaws and constitutions. While there is a staff bureaucracy in the organization, it remains small in proportion to the growth in membership: just 32 full-time staffers in an organization with 95,000 members in 2021 (DSA 2021b). Local DSA chapters have autonomy to develop their own campaigns and strategies within parameters set by the national organization, and there is no professional board of directors supervening over elected leadership.

Antipathy towards the conventions and limitations of the nonprofit "third sector" is, of course, also a characteristic of more radical, "horizontalist" social movement organizations (Fong and Naschek 2021; den Hond, de Bakker, and Smith 2015; INCITE! 2017). However, DSA is also distinct from this latter type of organization. Like both classic voluntary associations and professional advocacy organizations, and unlike horizontal movement groups, DSA manages to retain both extensive coordination and intensive authority without sacrificing membership democracy. At least in the history of American civil society, DSA's closest analogue is probably the federated voluntary organization. However, in terms of ideology and aspiration, DSA is undoubtedly more inspired by a different kind of organization: the mass party.

Weapons of the working class: the mass party

In a recent review, Jared Abbott and Dustin Guastella define the mass party as an "externally-mobilized" political organization which differs in structure, ideology, strategy, and social base from "internally-mobilized" parties. The spatial metaphor is adapted from Martin Shefter and refers to the historic concentration of political power in the hands of old regime and bourgeois insiders in courts, legislatures, and capitols. As excluded outsiders, the working-class movements formed during the Industrial Revolution (as well as movements of national and religious minorities) found it necessary to, in Shefter's words, "bludgeon their

[4] The question of whether associational social capital (i.e. membership in formal organizations like civic, faith, or local community groups) is actually declining in quantitative terms has been contentious in the literature, owing in part to data limitations. The General Social Survey (GSS) stopped asking respondents about voluntary association participation in 2004. Using an alternative survey source, Weiss, Paxton, Velasco, and Ressler (2019) found that total associational social capital appeared to be stable, not declining, during the years 2008-13. However, their data does not address qualitative changes in the *meaning* of this associational social capital, i.e. the shift from active to passive membership in civic associations found by Painter and Paxton (2014) for the years 1994-2004. For evidence pointing to declining overall U.S. social capital in the 21st century, see Putnam and Garrett (2021).

way into the political system by mobilizing a mass constituency" (Abbott and Guastella 2019, Shefter 1994).

The nascent mass parties, located predominantly in European countries, lacked the economic resources for patronage or the connections to broker agreements with elites, and so were forced to involve ordinary people much more intensively, and find novel ways of binding them together in a common project. Most obviously, mass parties needed to substitute membership dues for donations from capitalists and agrarian elites, and the mobilizing labor of party members for the institutionalized electoral advantages of elites under conditions of limited suffrage. Beyond their dues obligations, members were socialized into a distinct identity as partisans and organization-builders—an identity which was reinforced by the "encapsulation" of party electorates in relatively homogeneous communities (Mair 2013:77-82). These parties were also compelled to develop party programs to hold candidates accountable and provide a means of assessing the performance of party leaders. The opportunistic drift of politicians in office was checked by the need to maintain the mobilization machine of party members and preserve the party's identity in the electorate. Rather than being "catchall" parties, then, mass parties of political outsiders became ideological, centralized, and relatively democratic (Kirchheimer 1966).

The mass party was an effective structure for counteracting ruling-class efforts at conciliation and repression. Indeed, these parties, write Abbott and Guastella, were "the single greatest weapons the working class has ever produced" (2019:15). From the 1860s onwards, they played a key role in winning extensions in civil, political and, later, social citizenship, though these gains would not be stably institutionalized until after the Second World War (Eley 2002). The democratizing pressure of mass-movement parties forced significant concessions from elites and gave rise to what Mair calls the "golden age of party democracy" (2013:81). However, this "golden age" has now passed. Mair, along with his colleagues Ingrid van Biezen and Thomas Poguntke, argue that parties have been losing their capacity to effectively organize society and carry out democratic representation through party government. Their data show steep secular declines, beginning in the 1980s but accelerating dramatically in the 1990s, in electoral turnout, the consistency and stability of partisan preferences in the electorate, and, most dramatically, rates of party membership. As a general explanation of these trends, Mair points to the effect of economic globalization reducing the scope for state-directed economic management, and the declining coherence of social "cleavage structures" over the neoliberal period (2013:55-59; van Biezen and Poguntke 2014).

These remarks apply mainly to European party systems. In the United States, a mass party of labor never cohered. Most explanations for this emphasize some combination of the deep ethnic and racial fragmentation of the American labor movement during the Second Industrial Revolution; intense state repression; the two-party bias created by plurality-voting, single-member electoral districts and a strong, nationally-elected presidency; and the strategic efforts of the Democratic Party in the New Deal-era to “articulate” a new constituency by

incorporating key sectors of organized labor (Foner 1984, Mann 2012, Domhoff 2013, Eidlin 2016). The "safety valve" effect of the settler-colonial frontier also played a role (Grandin 2019). The effect has been to produce an American party system in which the two major parties are decentralized and internally-mobilized. The Democratic and Republican parties rely on donor funding, not dues, and their supporters are registered party voters, not members with rights and obligations. Both parties are dominated by their officeholders: party leaders are elected by other elected politicians, not rank-and-file supporters (Abbott and Guastella 2019:22-23). Finally, the two establishment parties are embedded more in the state than in civil society—what Katz and Mair call "cartel parties." Voters register as party supporters through government institutions, party primaries and internal officer elections are regulated by the state, and state-regulated ballot access rules conspire against third parties (Katz and Mair 1995, Ackerman 2016).

How is the theory of the mass party relevant to DSA? First, DSA already bears some resemblance to the ideal-typical mass party sketched by Abbott and Guastella, and debate within the organization seems to be converging on the goal of forming an independent working-class party (Brower Brown and Reade 2023). The organization is externally-mobilized, having been founded in 1982 as a merger of two small left-wing networks of labor socialists and New Left activists, not elite insiders (Aronowitz 2010). Its resources are generated internally: in the first half of 2021, 89.6% of DSA's budget was funded through membership dues (DSA 2021b). Members are also endowed with formal democratic rights and are, to a degree, expected to participate in the organization's internal activities and culture. In comparison to the mainstream parties, DSA's formal structure is centralized and representative-democratic, with local chapter organizations electing delegates to a biennial convention that in turn constructs a national program and elects an executive to implement it.

The organization is ideological not "catchall", with a universalistic political worldview of democratic socialism. DSA also embraces a mass-mobilization strategy, instead of an "inside" strategy that relies on elected officials or labor leaders to bargain with elites over policy. For instance, in 2019 the organization's national convention passed a resolution endorsing a "class-struggle elections" strategy, which directed DSA candidates and elected officials to

> see mobilizing and fighting alongside working people as one of their primary responsibilities... [and] [c]ommit to using their campaigns and elected offices to help build and unite socialist, union, and other worker organizations and militancy independent of candidates' campaigns and of the Democratic Party (DSA 2019).

This same resolution also states that "in the longer term", DSA aims to form an "independent working-class party," a position reaffirmed at the organization's 2023 convention (DSA 2023b).

In both the voluntary mass organization described by Skocpol and the mass party described by Abbott and Guastella, the ability of members to self-organize, elect a representative leadership, and construct an intensive collective identity is necessary for the overall success of the organization. For the federated voluntary organization, this group solidarity is more an end than a means, while in the mass party it is a necessary step towards external political goals. For both types of SMO, however, the task of cultivating a self-conscious and committed mass membership is fundamental. But after decades of decline for mass movement organizations, what does membership mean today in an organization like DSA? This is the question addressed by the rest of this paper.

Data and methods

This research employs an ethnographic method involving participant observation in the field with a DSA chapter and in-depth interviews with DSA members. My ethnographic approach consisted of 11 weeks of continuous participant observation fieldwork with the Portland, OR chapter of DSA in the summer of 2018. For three years after the conclusion of primary fieldwork, I continued to intermittently travel to Portland and conduct observations and interviews. My participant observation in Portland DSA during the intensive research period involved attending work meetings where campaigns would be planned and chapter business conducted; externally-oriented political events where DSA members would engage in a demonstration or direct action to accomplish some strategic goal; and social gatherings where members and interested newcomers would deepen personal relationships, as well as debate politics and strategy. Jottings were produced in the field and then elaborated as fieldnotes for later analysis using a grounded theory method (Charmaz 2014).

In total, I conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with chapter members.[5] Interview subjects were selected to help trace Portland DSA's history and structure as a supplement to my direct participant observation. For my interviews, I used a theoretic sampling method (Warren and Karner 2015), and sought out chapter members in leadership and cadre positions within the organization (often described by members as the chapter's "core"). These positions provided a vantage point from which to narrate a wide variety of chapter processes. They included, for example, developing the chapter's merchandise operation, organizing a "socialist day school" with DSA speakers, or carrying out a contentious revision of chapter bylaws at the end of the organization's first year.

Interviews with these core organizers helped me analytically reconstruct chapter processes that I may have missed as a direct participant-observer. By the time of my involvement in the summer of 2018, the chapter's division of labor was already highly varied (and growing rapidly), with at least 19 formal or quasi-formal subgroups to carry out different organizational functions, such as communications, fundraising, planning social events, and so on. My participation

[5] For participant privacy, interviewees are identified by randomized initials.

strategy was to attend as many of these different chapter happenings as possible, with site visits selected randomly by means of the chapter's online public event calendar. This gave me a wide-angle view of life in Portland DSA, but mostly prevented close involvement with any single group or program, which would have allowed me to follow its development over time. I compensated for this weakness with my process-tracing interview strategy, and also by following along with the activities of unfamiliar working groups and projects using the chapter's internal communications platform, Slack.

This research was conceived from the start as an exercise in producing "movement-relevant theory" (Bevington and Dixon 2005)—that is, to develop concepts from the categories and dilemmas articulated by movement participants themselves. The aim is to "[put] the thoughts and concerns of the movement participants at the center of the research agenda and [show] a commitment to producing accurate and potentially useful information about the issues that are important to these activists." (ibid., 200) I am myself a member of DSA, and my participation in the organization's activities was (and is) a product of sincere commitment to DSA's program and ideas. This commitment, I feel, facilitated closer ethnographic engagement with DSA participants, but it also imposed a critical control on my theory-building: attachment to the success of a social movement should *incentivize* both accuracy in research and the willingness to criticize one's research subject, in the interest of solving real organizational and strategic problems within a movement. In Bevington and Dixon's words, "[t]his engagement not only informs the scholarship but also provides an accountability for theory that improves the quality of theory." (ibid, 190)

Case selection

Why choose Portland DSA? And can findings from this single-chapter case study be generalized to say something about DSA as a whole? I believe that they can. Case selection was determined first by research site accessibility: Portland DSA was the nearest large DSA chapter to my university. While DSA chapters vary widely in size and some do exist in rural areas, I wanted to examine a large urban DSA chapter because DSA has had its greatest political impact in major cities like New York City, Chicago, and Minneapolis. Portland DSA was also one of the largest chapters formed during the period of DSA's explosive growth from 2016-20. Prior to 2016, active DSA chapters existed in only a handful of large cities: Atlanta, Detroit, Chicago, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia. In late 2016 and 2017, spurred by the moral shock of Donald Trump's election as president, a wave of new chapters were founded across the country, and by the end of 2017 there were already around 300 local groups (Heyward 2017). In addition to being a large urban chapter, Portland DSA struck me as a clear case of the "new DSA" (Meyer 2019) because it was founded in this new wave, and lacked a consolidated "old guard" of pre-2016 DSA members. At the end of its first year in December 2017, Portland DSA had around 800 members. In 2023, the chapter has around 1,700 members, making it the sixth largest DSA chapter in the country.

How did the sociology of that new chapter compare to that of the organization as a whole? Fortunately, some quantitative data exists to answer this question. Four nationwide membership surveys have been conducted in DSA's history, in 1991, 2013, 2017, and 2021 (DSA 2021a). These surveys asked respondents questions about demographics, engagement with DSA, and their ideological identity and issue priorities. Taken together, the surveys capture the dramatic social and political transformation in the organization that occurred in the second half of the 2010s. A similar survey, billed as a "chapter census," was conducted in Portland DSA in 2019, one year after my period of active fieldwork (Portland DSA 2019).[6] Comparing these surveys indicates that the Portland DSA membership in 2019 was basically similar in its social and political formation to the larger national membership in 2017 and 2021. The average Portland DSA member, like the average DSA member, was a white, male, young professional with an annual household income of around $70,000, whose issue priorities were climate change, health care reform, solidarity with workers, and racial justice.

A plurality (42%) of Portland DSA respondents were between the ages 25-34, while the median age of all DSA respondents in both 2017 and 2021 was 33. Nine in ten Portland DSA respondents were white; in DSA in 2021, 85% of respondents were white. 67% of Portland respondents were male, compared to 75% (2017) and 64% (2021) of DSA respondents.[7] A plurality of Portland DSA respondents (26%) had household income between $25,000-$50,000, while a plurality of DSA respondents (35%) in 2021 reported household incomes between $20,000-$60,000. The Portland survey did not ask about educational attainment, but in 2021 41% of DSA members had a bachelor's degree, and 35% had a masters or doctoral degree. 21% of DSA respondents in 2021 were union members, while 22% of Portland members were employed in a unionized workplace.

Politically, Portland members reflected the priorities of the national membership, prioritizing (in descending order) ecology, healthcare, labor solidarity, and racial justice. In 2021, all DSA members reported prioritizing the same set of issues in the same order. In terms of engagement, 66% of Portland DSA respondents reported being "active", and 40% of respondents spent three or more hours per week engaged in DSA activities. 66% of DSA respondents in 2021 reported that they "had attended a DSA meeting or engaged in DSA activism," while similar proportions of Portland DSA members (14.9%) and all DSA members (13%) reported never attending DSA meetings (of course, inactive "paper members" were underrepresented in all of these surveys). Taken together, these figures

[6] The 2017 survey had a response rate of 3,240 DSA members, or 16% of the 20,000 DSA members at that time. The 2019 Portland DSA survey received responses from 428 members, or 29% of the ~1,475 chapter members. The 2021 survey, conducted at DSA's membership peak, received 12,971 responses for a response rate of 14% of the 95,000 members at that time. Data from these surveys are available upon request to the author.

[7] The skewed gender ratio in DSA precedes its 2016 "rebirth": 76% of members in 2013 and 70% in 1991 were male. Note that the overall figures obscure significant recent growth in LGBTQIA+ membership, from 18% in 2017 to 32% in 2021. Between 40-55% of DSA members under the age of 30 self-identify as LGBTQIA+.

indicate a basic similarity of background, outlook, and engagement between Portland DSA members and the overall population of DSA members in the years 2017-21, and provide a basis for making some measured generalizations about the organization as a whole.[8]

Empirical findings and discussion: the meaning of membership in a DSA chapter

In this section, I present empirical findings on DSA and interpret these data. Here, I concentrate on the meaning of membership. I find that membership in the organization is bifurcated in a *participation fork*. One group, the *paper membership*, includes approximately 75% of chapter members, and is defined by its lack of participation in internal chapter work, its atomization (the lack of connective networks between individual "paper" members), and its invisibility to a second, smaller group of activists. This second group, which I term the *activist-cadre*, meanwhile, carries on most of the labor of organizational reproduction through a *voluntarist* method of action. I discuss structural, political, and cultural forces in DSA that may contribute to the phenomenon of participation inequality. Then, I discuss a possible solution: a latent structural potential of DSA to sustain an *effective but non-intensive* form of membership, which I argue has been unavailable in advocacy and horizontalist-type movement organizations of the recent past.

The participation fork: paper and activist-cadre

Membership in DSA comes in two basic varieties: "paper" and "activist-cadre". The great majority of DSA's explosive membership growth has been of the first type. Painter and Paxton (2014) report increases in the share of "checkbook" members in American voluntary associations—members who pay dues or donations, but do not involve themselves directly in face-to-face settings with other members.[9] Active DSA members use a similar term for this population: "paper members". Though members report different feelings about the term "paper membership", its basic meaning is widely understood: paper members are individuals who pay dues to the organization, appear on local membership rolls dispatched to DSA chapters by the national office, and receive communications from both the national office and their local chapter affiliate, but who do not appear at DSA events. In particular, paper members do not attend internal gatherings where chapter policies are discussed and work is organized. They are, by definition, not present.

[8] The interviews with DSA members presented in Freeman (2019) paint a broadly similar picture of the social and political base of the organization.

[9] Painter and Paxton note that "the increase in checkbook memberships is smaller than the decline in active memberships", implying that tertiary associations have not succeeded in replacing active memberships even in quantitative terms (2014:421).

The proportions of the activist and paper membership layers in Portland DSA can be determined by looking at rates of participation at general membership meetings and usage statistics for the chapter's internal communications platform, Slack. The monthly general meetings are the decision-making assemblies for Portland DSA, and the "internal" events that draw the largest number of chapter members ("external" political events—a protest, door-canvassing event, etc.—may on occasion draw larger numbers). However, attendance at general meetings has rarely included more than 10% of total membership. Similarly, on Slack, active users on the platform (those who log onto the system at least once a week) only slightly exceed the monthly averages for general meeting attendance, and are again dwarfed by the overall membership figures. The graph below, shared with me by Portland DSA's Membership Working Group, shows the overall pattern between 2017 and 2020 (fig. 1).

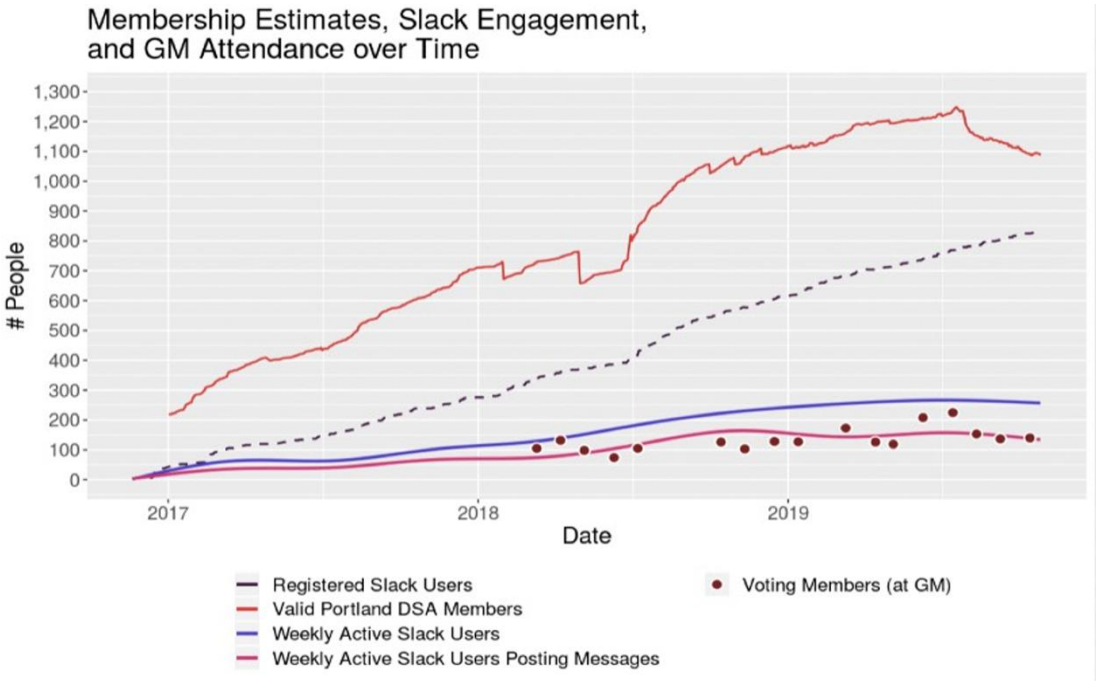

Fig. 1: Membership, Slack usage, and GM attendance

My participant-observation experiences support the overall trends shown in this data. External political events, internal meetings for decision-making and strategizing, and social events for building camaraderie are all disproportionately places for a core of activist members. While nearly every meeting would feature some quantity of new recruits—at each monthly general chapter meeting during my period of observation, never less than one-fifth of the 100-150 attendees were new or first-time participants (and sometimes as high as one-half)—overall rates of participation were still always much lower than the on-paper membership. In addition, the high proportion of inactive members seems related to problems in

retaining members from year-to-year. In late 2019, the chapter had an annual member retention rate of around 67%.

This gap in participation is a puzzle. In both its formal structure and aspirations, DSA resembles the mass organizations of the early 20th century, and the politics of socialism has traditionally been associated with very strong intensive identities and high levels of commitment.[10] But the participation pattern among DSA members is more similar to the disembedded advocacy organizations described by Skocpol and Robert Putnam. What can explain this participation fork, by which some members recruited to the organization follow a path of intensive involvement, and others of diffused, passive membership?

"What are we not providing?": explaining the participation fork

One highly-involved DSA member, PM, spent three years in the chapter organizing a system to manage membership data and on-board new members. She describes the work of the chapter's membership team as "primarily [revolving] around new people who are sort-of regularly visible people"—those who attend meetings and can, therefore, receive membership services: being credentialed as voters, connected to particular areas of internal chapter work, introduced to social gatherings, and so on. PM's mention of "visibility" points to a key dilemma for volunteer organizers in the chapter: those who aren't visible are far more difficult to reach, and because they are difficult to reach, it is difficult to know much about this population. PM comments that "because they're inactive, it's really hard to figure out why they're inactive."

A mid-2019 survey of chapter membership attempted to gather data on this population, and was initially branded as a "census" intended to reach every member—around 1,250 people at the time. Unfortunately, the "census" only elicited 423 responses. The paper membership remained opaque, and organizers interested in nurturing more participation remained frustrated. Reflecting on the issue, PM remarks that "it's definitely on us [chapter organizers]. Like, what are we doing wrong? You know, what are we not providing?" Nevertheless, PM's close involvement with the chapter and familiarity with the membership rolls gives her some leverage to make inferences about these invisible socialists. She notes that the term is a "shorthand" that actually refers to three groups, who, she thinks, are each "on paper" for different reasons:

> PM: ...those are three categories, right? The people who don't want to be involved, but want to support us [1], the people who do want to be involved, but can't figure out how [2], the people who were involved but you know, things have shifted, and either their life has changed, or perhaps DSA has changed,

[10] See, for example, Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (New York, NY: Verso, 2020).

> and they don't want to be, or their perception of DSA has changed and they don't want to be involved anymore. Or they're just taking a break. [3]

How should this phenomenon of participation inequality be explained? Researchers have long observed a relationship between movement mobilization and political opportunities (McAdam 1999). My research indicates that the quantity and quality of DSA's membership involvement is influenced strongly by external events. Since 2015, DSA's growth has been consistently associated with political events outside of the organization's direct control. In his study of DSA, Nathan J. Robinson (2022:224) notes that "national politics heavily drive local recruitment." In Portland DSA, surges of overall membership growth connected to national political events would yield predictable increases in rates of participation for both external chapter campaigns and internal administrative labor and predictable decreases in participation after the galvanizing moment had passed (fig. 2). For example, a large spike in membership occurred in summer 2018, when the surprising primary victories of Rashida Tlaib in Michigan and, especially, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York put DSA members into Congress for the first time since the 1990s. This unanticipated surge wasn't limited to Portland: national DSA membership increased from around 30,000 in October 2017 to 40,000, just after Ocasio-Cortez's primary victory on June 26, 2018 (DSA 2017, Resnick 2018). Only two weeks later, national membership had leaped up to 45,000 (DSA 2018).

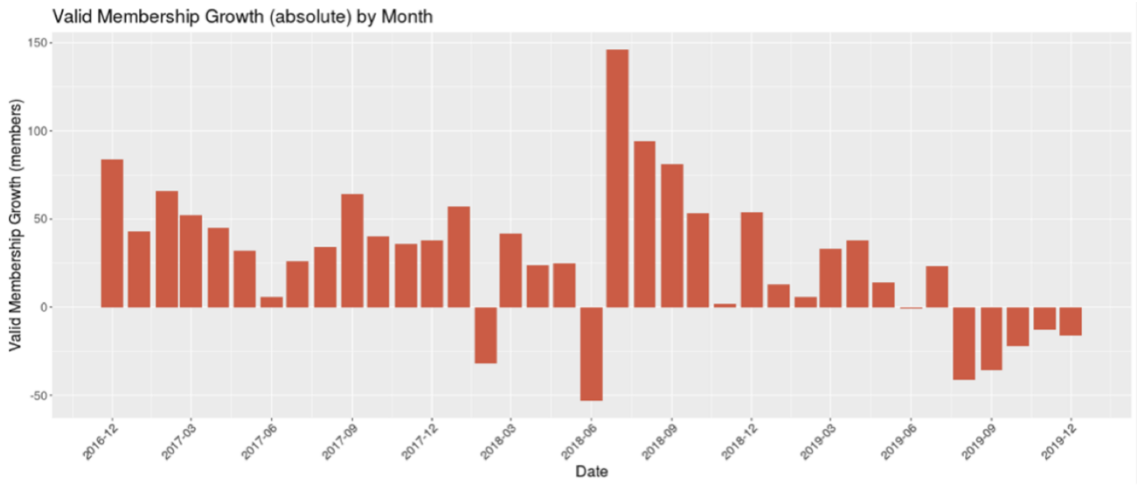

Fig. 2: Portland DSA membership growth, Dec. 2016-Dec. 2019

This is a general structural dynamic affecting any movement organization. However, in the case of DSA, some additional, non-structural factors may help explain the paper membership issue. The first is political. Antonio Gramsci wrote of party members criticizing their leaders "'realistically', by dispersing or remaining passive before certain initiatives" (1971:150-51). Viewed this way, mass

disengagement may be a kind of uncoordinated vote of disapproval at the actions of organizational leaders. Rather than a technical problem, of too few opportunities to "plug-in" or too few mentors for new recruits, the issue may be that paper members perceive political differences between themselves and activists, but lack collective organization to contest their leadership.

This may have been the case in Portland DSA in winter 2021, when a reform slate of candidates promising changes to the chapter's political direction won a plurality of seats on the chapter's leadership committee in an unusually high-turnout general meeting—perhaps the largest in the organization's history, according to PM. Significantly, this group's strategy involved targeting members in the second and third categories of paper member: those who "do want to be involved, but can't figure out how", and disillusioned individuals who were once involved, but whose "perception of DSA has changed." The incumbent faction in the election, by contrast, seemed to rely on its superior networking within the activist core. By politicizing the issue of participation hierarchy, the opposition group was able to win a (partial) mandate to "build a mass movement" through "widespread participation in campaigns," according to its election platform.

The second relates to the particular form that recruitment takes in DSA. Supporters become DSA members through a process that is virtual, taking place online, not through face-to-face interactions, and individual, taking the form of a decision made by a single person filling out a form. This is different from "bloc recruitment", in which pre-structured networks of people are brought as a collective unit into a social movement organization (Tilly 1978). From its inception, Portland DSA has attracted members in ones and twos. At the first meeting of the organization, on November 19, 2016, 18 people attended, but "everyone at that meeting were strangers, basically, except for like three people", according to one attendee, SC.

The role of networks, especially those formed through face-to-face interactions, is understood by DSA organizers. A recent national training call conducted by the organization emphasized the distinction between "structure-based" and "self-selecting" organizations, and the staff leaders of this call were candid with the fact that DSA is a self-selecting organization that relies on recruits pushing their way in, rather than joining through networks.[11] The absence of pre-structured networks of interaction between members means that the organization itself is the primary site through which membership networks can develop. Face-to-face mobilization ties cannot be formed for members who never set foot in the social space of DSA. Direct mobilization ties also seem more likely to increase new recruits' ambitions. One interviewee who had joined through the "virtual-individual" pathway explained that he had joined DSA simply to feel that the organization had grown: "I just want[ed] to be one more number to add to that list" [of members].

[11] The distinction between "structure-based" and "self-selecting" organization is drawn from Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

The third factor affecting participation is cultural, and seems specific to a period in which civil society and social movements have been dominated by two competing logics of organization: "advocacy" and "horizontalism". The first is best represented by nationally-centered nonprofit lobbying groups with extensive bases of supporters who give regular dues but usually possess few means of participating more actively or influencing the policies of the organization. The second is exemplified by loose associations that come together during protest movements and are structured mainly as networks, not formal organizations with clear boundaries and leaderships (Kauffman 2017, Tufekci 2017). Participation in these latter groups is often very intensive, with status and authority allocated on the basis of commitment. For the first type of organization, membership is *clientelistic*, and for the second, it is *voluntaristic*. DSA's novelty lies in the way that it combines in one structure the politics of an antisystemic movement association with the mass base of supporters characteristic of advocacy nonprofits.

But despite the formal conjunction of these elements in DSA, ideas about the meaning of membership seem mostly to remain in the advocacy/spontaneist binary. This is apparent in the responses my informants gave when asked about how the participation issue could be ameliorated. Most often, the answer is to find better ways to turn paper members into activists. PM, after narrating to me the process of "mobilizing" a new member, accepted that the idea of mobilization was to produce a member regularly engaged in the internal meeting labor of activists:

> David: And so the people who are, let's say, effectively mobilized, maybe they get a phone call—I guess the idea then is that they then become a regular sort of, like attendee of a meeting, of a particular working group or campaign, and then they're contributing to that work in that way.
>
> PM: I mean, that would be what we hope.

Frequently, the figure of the "organizer" is offered as an alternative to producing activists. Another informant, EV—a fierce critic of what he calls "activist-ism"—suggests that DSA insiders should seek "to get [paper members] activated, like, as *organizers*... that is our duty." (emphasis added) This may not be an effective alternative for paper members, however. The "organizer" role may differ from the activist role in its method of building power—by developing the motivations and capacities of ordinary people, rather than by mobilizing the most committed volunteers (Han 2014)—but it is not necessarily different in the demands it makes on an individual's time, intensity of involvement, specialized knowledge, and so on.

I refer to the "organizers" described by EV as an "activist-cadre." These members are the visible face of DSA. They are individuals who, voluntarily and without the aid of very many preexisting organizational "structures of socialization," participate intensively in the life of the organization. They are "activists" because they devote a large part of their free-time and energy into building DSA and

carrying out its activities, and fuse their identities and personal networks into those of the organization. And they are "cadre" because they are, in a way unlike activists in most new social movements, "framed" into the functional scaffolding of a structured organization (in French, *encadrement*). But despite being formally framed into a division of labor, the actions and strategies of these members are mostly "voluntaristic"; for the most part, they are not determined by organizational inducements or sanctions, though some of these inducements and sanctions do exist. This activist-cadre is larger and expresses a more developed division of labor than that which could be supported by looser, network-type movement associations, but their methods remain characteristic of activism.

One interviewee, JX, describes the activist-cadre method of organization as a kind of "voluntarism." JX was an early chapter joiner, and very early in 2017 he attended a general chapter meeting. There, he was "struck by the fact that there appeared to be nothing for new members to do. So I was like, 'okay [claps for emphasis], I can solve this problem.' So, basically by myself, [I] went and started a canvassing program for single-payer healthcare." It was a relatively successful program, according to JX, but it was driven by the energy of a few volunteers like him, not by any decisions or sanctions coming from the organization:

> JX: During that entire process, the leadership never asked me about what I was doing, or the decisions that I was making. I was basically figuring things out on the fly. I only ever had to justify myself to the chapter once, at a general meeting. And my motion to start a campaign passed unanimously, basically.

After leaving the chapter for a year and then returning again, he began to realize that "it seemed like everything else that the chapter had done kind of followed the same model," where volunteers drive a particular project or campaign that is never "explained or justified to the membership how that [campaign] fit[s] into any broader strategy."

My data support JX's claim: chapter projects and campaigns are rarely initiated by organizational leadership and ratified democratically by the membership. Instead, they are usually begun through the self-directed effort of a few intensively-involved members, who develop a project, gather a group of supporters around themselves, and then simply begin doing the work under the banner of Portland DSA. Another member, FS, who was at the time a co-chair of the chapter's Membership Working Group, describes the effect of the "voluntarism" identified by JX on the structure of the organization. In his opinion, voluntarism contributes to a conception of DSA as an "activist hub," a place where members share their autonomously-initiated projects with each other and try to recruit support for them. This produces an eclectic organization—FS calls it "scattered"—with little centralized identity. FS instead favors what he calls an "organizing model" that involves building chapter capacities: "anything

that is not in the service of growing the chapter and its influence and resources should be deprioritized."

Effective but non-intensive membership

The voluntarist model of organization plausibly contributes to the participation fork issue. The structural reliance on voluntarism in DSA means that ordinary members without the capacity to commit intensively will feel disempowered. But DSA's configuration as a (proto-) mass movement organization, I believe, makes possible a third type of membership, what might be called "effective but non-intensive" membership. Effective but non-intensive membership would entail conversion of the dichotomous paper member/activist-cadre participation structure into a smoother, gradational pattern, with a substantially larger layer of intermediate participants between the paper membership and activist-cadre. These moderately-engaged members would be defined more by their *possession of organizational skill* than by their actual level of involvement. Though they may not be consistently present in internal work, these members would have the practical knowledge necessary to monitor the activist-cadre and understand factional disputes. This bloc would be most visible in the organization as rank-and-file volunteers for external campaigns, and as an informed and self-confident electorate in chapter democracy.

There are, I believe, three missing conditions for activating this structural potential in a contemporary mass movement organization: (1) effective and visible political tendencies within the organization; (2) internal media, bulletins, and communications to explain intra-organizational processes and politics; and (3) consistent, structured external political campaigns that provide meaningful but *limited* involvement for rank-and-file members. First, the DSA experience shows the importance for mass organizations of visible, stable political formations rooted inside the structure of the larger organization. DSA has now passed beyond a threshold of size in which political divisions (and organizational processes) are difficult to comprehend for any individual member, even one in the activist-cadre. Observers of intra-DSA politics have noted that this is true for the national organization (Sernatinger 2021), but it now also seems to be a reality in larger urban chapters (Portland DSA now has around 1,700 members). Mass organizations seeking to involve their rank-and-file members need to ensure that those members can form and participate in defined caucuses, which can clarify the stakes of conflict and articulate clear programs.

Second, and related, effective but non-intensive members can only become "informed citizens" in a mass organization by means of centralized, accessible media to report on happenings in the organization. In DSA, activist-cadre can learn about developments in the organization firsthand from members initiating new organizational or political projects, or they can use their superior networking in the online "socialist public sphere" on Twitter, but these channels are not accessible to less active members (Barnes 2020). News of political developments in DSA can be gleaned from Twitter, but only by following the right accounts—a

time-consuming and opaque process. Mass movement organizations of the past frequently had a robust set of internal publications that could meet this need. Some of these media do exist for DSA, but are fragmented across many communication networks (e.g. DSA's official website, its two in-house publications, an internal DSA web-forum, and various caucus and chapter-based publications). Future mass organizations could provide resources for a range of internal media to support an informed membership base.

Third, effective but non-intensive members need regular, structured external political campaigns that they can participate in. The key characteristic of this form of participation is that it does not involve the mundane (though very important) "infrastructural" labor of attending meetings, preparing lists of contacts, and concentrating resources. In DSA, this kind of work, which is the specialty of the activist-cadre layer, can be discouraging for new members who are most interested in making a concrete difference in the world outside DSA. The best kind of work for involving new members sustainably seems to be tasks like phone-banking, canvassing, and solidarity protests, with clear on-site leadership, instructions, and time-windows. Mass organizations need to offer a range of continuous and low-intensity forms of participation that can involve non-activist members, and help them feel collective self-efficacy *as* members.

The case of DSA shows the importance of ensuring the rights of internal tendencies and caucuses, supporting intra-organizational media and communications infrastructures, and establishing routine, low-intensity forms of participation for members. By institutionalizing these practices, nascent mass movement organizations can nurture a role for “effective but non-intensive” membership, and break free of both the top-down advocacy model and the horizontal network model of social movement organization.

Conclusion: from management to membership?

This paper has applied arguments about changing patterns of civic and political organization to analyze the growth of the Democratic Socialists of America. DSA, I argue, is potentially reinventing the mass organization model for social movements in the United States. It is similar in certain respects to both mass-member voluntary organizations in American civic life and the mass parties of European social democracy. However, participant observation and interviews in a DSA chapter qualify this comparison. Though it incorporates a larger and more active membership than many left-leaning advocacy organizations, and sustains a more even pattern of participation than "horizontalist" movement organizations, the meaning of membership in DSA doesn't match up to the mass organizations of the early 20th century.

Membership in DSA bifurcates in a participation fork between a small core of intensively-involved activist-cadre and a much larger group of paper members. I discussed structural, political, and cultural reasons why this may be the case. Then, I theorized an intermediate type of membership, which is potentially available but not realized in practice: the effective but non-intensive member,

who does not involve themselves with infrastructural work but still possesses enough organizational skill to participate in democratic processes and feel emotionally attached to the organization. Finally, I discussed some necessary preconditions for creating this intermediate type of membership, which I argue will itself be a precondition for sustainably reinventing the mass organization model.

This work could be extended in several ways. Future research could try to examine the meaning of DSA membership for paper members themselves. Comparative-historical research could also examine how "self-selecting" movement organizations become "structure-based" over time through processes of bloc recruitment, encapsulation, and political articulation, and how these processes may or may not be applicable to DSA (Mair 2013, Eidlin 2016, McAlevey 2016). Finally, research could explore whether and how DSA's re-formation as a mass organization spreads to other groups in a process of mimetic isomorphism (Powell and DiMaggio 1983). While DSA's larger base of members has given it a mobilization edge that contributes to its political successes, the organization's democratic socialist ideology and identification with the working class may make it difficult or impossible for established advocacy-type organizations to adopt its practices. In particular, DSA's ideological subordination of a professional staff to an empowered membership may be simply unacceptable for organization-builders in the professional class. If this is the case, DSA's partial advance from "management to membership" may remain unique in the landscape of American civic and political organizations.

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JX, phone interview with author, Portland, Oregon, January 29, 2021

EV, phone interview with author, Portland, Oregon, February 2, 2021

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Daughters of the comb: exploring consciousness-raising, anchored consciousness, and micro-resistance in the natural hair movement

Taura Taylor

Abstract

In the interest of broadening what is known about collective action, collective consciousness, and everyday resistance, I present my analysis of Black women's and men's perspectives of the natural hair movement. The growing preference among Black women to renounce conventional straightening options is contraposition to status quo grooming norms and policies—norms and guidelines that often revere white beauty standards and rebuke Black aestheticism. Whereas protests, demonstrations, picket lines, sit-ins, litigation, and lobbying are many collective actions heavily researched by social movement scholars, my study draws attention to non-contentious resistance. Relying upon in-depth interviews and survey data, I utilize an intersectionality framework synthesized with the theoretical frames of systemic gendered racism, cognitive sociology, and the coding procedures of grounded theory methods to analyze the narratives of Black women and men regarding the trending popularity of natural hair in the United States. I take the position that the natural hair movement is inadvertently modifying, if not expanding the parameters and praxis of social movements. I introduce several concepts to expound upon my theorizing of Black women's and men's perceptions of the natural hair movement, including my novel concepts of anchored consciousness and micro-resistance.

Keywords: Everyday resistance, consciousness-raising, anchored consciousness, micro-resistance, natural hair, United States, systemic gendered racism

Introduction

For many Black women, the process of transitioning from chemically relaxed hair to unaltered hair texture is accomplished in concert with others. On a regular basis, Black women who go natural learn and teach.[1] They make and watch hair videos, read and write hair blogs, extol the benefits and virtues of being natural, and do not tolerate people touching their hair. They are savants in the art of DIY, TWA, 1A to 4B, coconut oil, Jamaican black castor oil, and an expanding catalog

[1] "Going natural" or "being natural," refers to Black women's preference to renounce conventional straightening hairstyles, particularly chemical hair straightening.

of organic ingredients.[2] They scrutinize conventional beauty norms while concurrently encouraging other Black women to go natural. The participant accounts in this study reveal a natural hair thought community; a socio-cognitive community that is structured by beauty and bodywork, body politics, and moderately shared typification of the world. Participants impart that, Black women with natural hair are likely to adopt perspectives that accentuate their ideological proximity to other Black women and some Black men based on hair texture. They come to see women with natural hair as having gone through similar "awakenings" as themselves whereas some, perceive women with chemically straightened hair as *still* anchored to social securities associated with conventional hairstyles and a racist status quo. As such, within Black women's hairstyle choices are concurrent conceptualizations of and resistance to racial power obscured by notions of personal preference and beauty conventions.

In this study, I ask how do Black women and men make sense of the growing popularity of Black women's natural hair. To wear one's curly hair unmodified by straightening methods is contraposition to status quo grooming norms and policies—norms and guidelines that often revere white beauty standards and rebuke Black aestheticism. Hair straightening is a socially desirable norm among Black and non-Black women. For people from racial and ethnic marginalized groups, and Black women specifically, physical characteristics such as skin complexion, and hair texture are markers of shared subordinate status in Western culture's racial hierarchy. Racialized whiteness and all associations with whiteness embody "racial power," or more pointedly, "systemic privilege" (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Thus, when persons of color straighten their hair or use skin-lightening products, the acts are interpreted as attempts to achieve privilege via association with whiteness (Glenn 2008, Lake 2003, Mercer 1990). Symbolic "distancing" from darkness and Black identities is understood as calculated attempts toward a preferable life chance within America's racial hierarchy. In consequence, Black women turning away from mainstream hairstyling norms is provocative.

In their 2013 US Black Haircare Report, industry firm Mintel published that chemical relaxers approximated 21% of the Black hair care market, which accounted for approximately $152 million in revenues in 2012 (Mintel 2013). Mintel reported relaxer sales down 15% since 2011 and approximately 34% since 2009. For years 2013-2015 relaxers sales dropped 18.6%. By 2015, Mintel explicitly attributed the "negatively affected sales of relaxers" to the "natural hair movement" (Mintel Press Team 2015). In the most recent 2021 US Black Haircare Report, Mintel engages affirming language on how to "empower consumers and stylists to care for textured hair," along with references to "holistic health" the "Crown Act" and "social movements" (Mintel 2021).[3] A comparison of their reports from 2013-2021 not only captures the financial impact and designation

[2] Natural hair terms for: DIY (do it yourself), TWA (teenie weenie afro), 1A and 4B are hair texture types from the Andre Walker Hair Type System.

[3] The Crown Act is an anti-hair discrimination legislation. The CROWN acronym stands for "Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair.

of going natural as a "movement," but subsequently, exemplifies that the movement favorably shifted discourse associated with natural hair, marketing campaigns, and ushered in legislation supporting Black hair aesthetics. Overall, preference for natural hair suggests a disruption in individual and collective acceptance of anti-Black beauty ideals.

Negligently, social movements rarely focus on the specific interests and concerns of Black women, meanwhile taking advantage of their labor and participation (Harris 2011). In addition, there persists the enduring criticism that racial solidarity, in its many forms, is predominately male-centric and heteronormative. The natural hair movement (NHM) is not only raising public awareness about hair as a unique and abject site of socio-political struggle for Black women, but it is also mobilizing Black women *and* Black men in solidarity around a social injustice mostly germane to Black women. I take the position that the natural hair movement is inadvertently modifying, if not expanding the parameters and praxis of social movements (Poletta and Jasper 2001). By analyzing how Black men and Black women think across social locations. I explore how race, gender, age, profession, and migration interact in the creation of socio-mental structures that govern individuals' thoughts and behaviors regarding beauty conventions, solidarity, social justice, and resistance. To theorize Black women's and men's perceptions of the natural hair movement, I discuss the role of consciousness-raising and introduce my novel concepts of anchored consciousness and micro-resistance.

Theoretical framework

My study considers that Black women's hairstyle choices occur in a society that normalizes identities, perspectives, and behaviors based upon polarized and hierarchical borders. However, American society has multiple systems of oppression and stratification. Thus, I engage the frameworks of intersectionality and systemic gendered racism to take into account that within American society, there exists racist and sexist oppression, which overlap to, create distinctly different outcomes for men and women of color (Wingfield 2008; Crenshaw 1991). As a theoretical tool, intersectionality offers a framework for analyzing discrimination and the appropriation of social privileges based on arbitrary social divisions. Intersectionality explores how the effects of social divisions such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and political affiliation, influence worldviews and life chances (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991).

In addition, I utilize cognitive sociology to explain that human beings are members of "thought communities" and are products of their particular social environments (Zerubavel 1997). Through cognitive socialization, individuals learn how to perceive, focus, classify, signify, reckon time, and remember, as social beings and members of multiple but distinct intersubjective communities. Human membership in multiple thought communities provokes both cognitive social norms among members who have shared experiences and cognitive socio-cultural differences among people with separate community affiliations

(Zerubavel 1997,9). Cognitive pluralism emphasizes the cultural dimension of knowledge acquisition and considers how attitudes and beliefs vary across cultures, within cultures, and across time. Cognitive pluralism unites cognition and sociology into a theoretical perspective that considers cultural influences on human knowledge. I use a synthesis of intersectionality, systemic gendered racism, and cognitive pluralism to engage in a critical analysis of Black women's and men's conceptualizations of natural hair and Black aesthetics as empowering resistances to the status quo.

Research design

The first phase of the study began with the distribution of a survey online via Survey Monkey. The objective of the survey was to collect preliminary data about the respondents' social location (age, ethnicity, marital status, and/ profession), regional location, current and previous hairstyling choices, and general opinions about natural hair and chemically/thermally-straightened hair. Along with providing descriptive information, the survey served as an instrument for screening participants, to participate in a single follow-up, face-to-face or telephoned one-hour, tape-recorded individual interview. In the face-to-face interview, the subject did not have to know how to read, or write, and were not restricted to residing at a valid address or having a phone (Dillman, Smyth, and Melani 2009).

The individual interview was the second phase of my study. I used open-ended, semi-structured questions to probe 20 respondents and to contextualize their preliminary responses gathered from the survey. Face-to-face interviews were conducted for the Atlanta participants. However, I conducted video and phone interviews with out-of-state participants. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour and were tape-recorded.

Participants were Black men and Black women, over the age of 18 years, and who represented a variety of social locations that vary in ethnicity, marital status, religious affiliations, age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, political orientation, and health/physical wellness. In the interest of heterogeneity, I selected 20 interview participants from cities that are demographically diverse and have a renowned natural hair community (i.e., Atlanta GA, SFO/Bay Area CA, Washington DC/MD, and NYC) and locales where natural hair is sporadically worn and underrepresented (i.e., Los Angeles CA, Phoenix AZ, and Boston MA) (see Table 1). My objective was to capture a diverse sampling of Black men and women with various levels of familiarity with natural hair and the NHM. The overall goal was to interview enough participants to achieve theoretical saturation.

Although six women with relaxers and fifteen men completed the survey, only one woman with a relaxer and three men volunteered to complete the interview. I attribute the low representation of women with relaxers and men to self-selection and lack of interest in the topic. Women with natural hair and men who favor natural hair are prepared to share their perspectives, meaning they are

primed to discuss the subject. Two men shared that the interview was lengthy, (it took about 10-15 minutes to complete and had 32 questions). In addition to the three men that I interviewed, three additional men volunteered to complete the interview, however, they were non-responsive when it was time to schedule. Considering the exploratory nature of this study it is not immune to limitations. The predominance of natural hair wearers and the limited number of women with diverse textures such as relaxers, thermal styling, and/or weaves among my participants skewed my findings towards those with more positive attitudes and perspectives about natural hair. Overall, I obtained approximately 82 completed survey responses and 20 participants for individualized interviews. All participants interviewed responded favorably towards natural hair. What participants think about natural hair as a social movement is a matter of how they think about hair as a site of shared consciousness, resistance, and personal community.

Consciousness raising

As they discuss kinky hair's stereotypical association with poverty, or critique the characterization of natural hair as unprofessional, with consistency, participants perceive natural hair as a discernible attribute from chemically altered hair and one that externalizes meanings about the wearer's esteem and deference in society. Participant accounts align with scholarship on the natural hair movement—accenting that natural hair has important implications regarding shifts in Black women's understandings of identity, social networks, community, health, self-care, and empowerment (Ellington 2015; Gathers et al. 2009; Neil and Mbilishaka 2019; Bankhead and Johnson 2014). Whether they explicitly perceive natural hair as a social movement or not, opting for natural hair initiates cognitive socialization into a subculture of Black society. Here I examine how members of the natural hair thought community (NHTC) come to rearticulate natural hair, and most particularly, how they conceptualize hair texture as a marker of association and disassociation within the Black collectivity.

Annelle communicates explicit awareness of the natural hair thought community (NHTC) and offers her insights about the perceptions Black women have of each other based on how they wear their hair:

> So, there's a community around hair. Like sometimes, that's how I feel — like, what is hair? I'm not new to it. That's a teaching moment for me, learning to see people awakening. And then it's like, oh, we are one. You actually get to see how you are not one with, but you're connected to, other women and men who may not feel that connected to you in any other way. And there's a disconnection too. I found that, with people that have natural hair and people that have short…chemically processed hair, it's cute, both styles are cute, but there's this energy between those two people, and I'm like, it's hair. But I get it, because so much about us has been used to separate us.

Annelle prefers to decenter the comparative attractiveness between chemical and natural hairstyles and instead draws attention to the "energy" between individuals. Similar to findings from Banks (2000), Annelle conveys that for Black women, hair holds considerable intraracial significance, most particularly status beliefs about the wearers of chemically altered and naturally textured hair. From her perspective, hair emerges as an observable signifier of one's worldview, a mechanism for social connectedness, and one source of bifurcation between Black women and even some Black men. When I asked Annelle how is Black women's hair similar or dissimilar to other women's hair, she did not hesitate to single out "the stigma." She emphasizes that Black women's hair "can't just be hair, it has to mean something." Participant Nzingha agrees, "We have a community. What makes it a social movement, we have a community, there is pride linked with being natural, there's stigma associated with it."

Michaëlle is among several participants, men and women, who consider colorism in their discussion of natural hair. Their beauty and bodywork process include the reconceptualization of Black hair and dark skin as beautiful. Michaëlle:

> I mean, I think I will admit that it has helped me come to the place where I am where I think that I, I finally think that I'm beautiful, in terms of being really dark skinned and [having] really nappy hair! I'm going to say it, nappy hair. Because I see a lot more of it around me. I think definitely, yeah. If I really think about it, yeah. Because it's hard to — you need that affirmation. As a human being, you need that affirmation. So, I think it would have been hard for me if it was still, you know, twenty years later, almost twenty years later, if I was still, like, one of, like, three people, you know.

I interpret Michaëlle's ability to embrace Black women's diverse hair textures as her ability to see herself within mainstream and as part of a spectrum of Black beauty. Like skin complexion, hair texture is a status characteristic that invokes comparative beliefs among Black women about their social ranking along intersecting social statuses. This ranking exists between them and non-Black women as well as between them and other Black women. Annelle, Nzingha, and Michaëlle, like several other participants in the study center overcoming the stigma and shaming of natural hair. Their cognitive processes of destigmatizing natural hair and Black aesthetics bear resemblance to consciousness-raising activism, which they further distinguish from experiences that reify the status quo, or what I term *anchored consciousness*.

Historically, consciousness-raising involved women sharing their personal narratives of discrimination and sexism. Feminists and advocates for women's rights used consciousness-raising processes and activism to help women perceive their personal experiences as common among other women and to ground their mutual experiences as structural constraints and outcomes of systemic oppression. Kathie Sarachild is credited with popularizing consciousness-raising

as a process during the 1960s women's movement (Sarachild 2000). Informed by Marxism, consciousness-raising is a strategy for overcoming false consciousness and attaining class-consciousness, or awareness of common oppression among marginalized individuals and groups. In 1974, radical Black feminists of the Combahee River Collective utilized consciousness-raising in their grassroots formation of a movement for Black Feminism and activism against the "interlocking oppressions" of "racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression" (Taylor 2017). The Combahee River Collective raised awareness of "identity politics" and catapulted the political stance that a Black woman's feminism was necessary to ensure the liberation of Black people and all women of color. Although participants did not mention consciousness-raising specifically, it is interesting how many of them attended Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCUs), studied and/or had social science careers, came from politically active families, or found some level of social activism in their life course. Today, Black women social justice activists, academics, politicians, artists, doulas, midwives, and community organizers are the sisters and daughters of the Combahee River Collective. As Sowards and Renegar (2004) argued, "consciousness raising has evolved in style, substance, and function in comparison to previous conceptions of consciousness-raising." The natural hair thought community reflects the posterity of Black feminism and womanist thinking as an ever-evolving Black woman's ideology.

Table 1 Participant Demographics

Participant	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Age Range	State of Residence	Education	Employment Status	Occupation	Household Income	Political Orientation	Hair Texture	Natural Hair is a Social Movement
Michaëlle	Black/ Ghanaian	Woman	45-54	GA	BA	Full Time	Physical Therapist	$50k-$74,999	Liberal	Natural	Agree
Endrick	Black/AfAm	Man	18-24	GA	HS	Part Time	Student/Barista	$75k-$99,999	Independent	Natural	Agree
Roberson	Black/AfAm Jamaican	Man	25-34	GA	Some College	Full Time	Personal Trainer/ Bartender	$25k-$49,999	Very Liberal	Natural	Agree
Toure	American	Man	35-44	TX	MA	Full Time	Engineer	$125k-$149,999	Dynamic	Natural	Agree
Ruth	Black/AfAm	Woman	35-44	CO	Some College	Full Time	Clerical	$25k-$49,999	Moderate	Natural	Agree
Sojo	Black/AfAm	Woman	65-74	DC	MA	Retired	Retired	$25k-$49,999	Independent	Natural	Agree
Ella	Black/AfAm	Woman	35-44	NJ	BA	Full Time	Director of Development	$75k-$99,999	Progressive	Natural	Agree
Anelle	Black/AfAm Jamaican	Woman	35-44	IL	BA Some	Part Time	Educator/Film Maker Office Admin/Tenant	$25k-$49,999	Very Liberal	Natural	No Opinion
Kito	American	Woman	25-34	DC	College	Full Time	Coordinator	$25k-$49,999	Liberal	Natural	Agree
Shirley	Guyanese/ Jamaican	Woman	35-44	TX	PhD	Seasonal/ Temp	Lecturer	$100K-$124,999	Very Liberal	Chemically Relaxed	Agree
Ava	Black/AfAm	Woman	35-44	MD	PhD	Full Time	School Psychologist/ Licensed Counselor	$200K+	Liberal	Natural	Agree
Inez	Black/ Brazilian	Woman	35-44	FL	PhD	Full Time	Researcher	$175K-$199,99	Very Liberal	Natural	Agree
Cella	Black/AfAm Jamaican	Woman	35-44	MD	PhD	Full Time	Public Health Researcher	$75k-$99,999	Very Liberal	Natural	Agree
Dorothy	American	Woman	25-34	GA	MA	Full Time	Fellow	$75k-$99,999	Liberal	Natural	Agree
Kamala	Black/AfAm	Woman	35-44	TX	BA	Full Time	Contact Center Representative	$0-$24,999	Liberal	Natural	Disagree
Marjorie	Black/AfAm	Woman	25-34	GA	BA	Full Time	Admin. Jury Division	$100K-$124,999	Very Liberal	Transition Chemical to Natural	Agree
Yumi	Black/AfAm	Woman	45-54	NY	MA	Part Time	Peer Specialist	$0-$24,999	Radical Black Power	Natural	Agree
Octavia	Black/AfAm	Woman	65-74	GA	MA	Retired	Retired	$25k-$49,999	Liberal	Natural	Agree
Billie	Black/AfAm	Woman	*Omitted	GA	BA Some College	*Omitted	Retail Sales	*Omitted	*Omitted	Natural	Agree
Nzingha	Black/AfAm	Woman	18-24	CA	College	*Omitted	Clinical Psychologist/Student	*Omitted	*Omitted	Natural	Agree

Anchored consciousness

In contrast to consciousness-raising, anchored consciousness may be likened to false consciousness. Although Marx (Marx 1972, 2000) described the ideology of false consciousness as a lack of awareness of the systemic (capitalist) dynamics and beliefs held by the proletariat/bourgeois in maintaining the inequitable capitalist structure. Antonio Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony expanded on Marxist theory and implicates a complex system involving alliances, coercion, and complicity in one's own subordination. Some participants interpret wearing chemically relaxed hair as a form of false consciousness, or hesitancy to decenter systemic gendered framings of beauty and hair grooming choice, often in attempts to circumvent stigma and trade in on the social benefits of complying with white racist grooming conventions. For several participants, overcoming "the stigma" of natural hair serves as a prerequisite for membership into the natural hair community. Although Black men have similar naturally textured hair and often wear similar styles to Black women such as cornrows, locs, and Afros, they are not subject to the same grooming expectations and discriminations as Black women. Likewise, non-Black women are perceived as outsiders to the movement on the grounds of colorism and hair texture stigmas. As such, lines are drawn between Black women with natural hair and various "others" (White women, non-Black women of color, Black women with chemical relaxers, Black women with weaves, and Black men).

Black men

Participants attend to the similar physical properties between Black women's and men's hair but ultimately focus on the unequal social consequences of hair to explain Black men's exclusion from the natural hair movement. Marjorie highlights the fluidity in which Black women and men defy gender norms with men wearing longer hairstyles and women wearing short hairstyles typically reserved for men. However, the majority of participants attend to racialized gender inequity of beauty norms. For example, Ava considers the historicity of Black men's experiences with hair texture in comparison to Black women:

> Well, you know, I think that with the exception of the '40s and '50s, Black men's natural hair texture has been seen as acceptable. As long as it was cut, as long as it was shaped up or edged up, then all they had to do was wash it, moisturize it, brush it, they were fine. They could get a job, they could find a woman, find a mate, wasn't a problem. Black men jumping on that bandwagon is also a bit confusing to me too, because they have not had the pressure to chemically straighten their hair with the exception of the '40s and '50s when they put the conks in their hair, and I don't think that was everybody, I think that was probably just a few.

Although Black men once "conked" (chemically relaxed) their hair and some still apply chemical texturizers to achieve trendy styles, these chemical processes do not overshadow the wearing of their natural hair texture. Black men's careers and interpersonal relationships are not threatened by the wearing of their natural hair texture like that of Black women. Ella considers the particular role Black men have occupied in perpetuating stigma and pressures to conform to beauty standards onto Black women. In some ways, Black men emerge as oppressors or at least coercive authorities. Ella's perspective:

> I feel like there's just so — the relationship between Black men and Black women is so complex, not even in a relationship context, just even being family or being father-daughter, or neighbors or friends or classmates or whatever. I feel like there's so much emotional damage that we both have suffered from slavery, and so I feel like the whole concept of what is a beautiful Black woman is very skewed. Hair plays a lot into whether you're beautiful or not. I think that Black women often do things to their hair because of men, or at least in their mind, they perceive it because of men. It's kind of like relationships in general between Black men and women: sometimes women are timid and won't make a decision because they feel like it's not going to attract a man, or the man won't be happy or whatever, but the reality is that we do have the power, and if we change, then they change. I feel like that is something that natural hair has done. We've turned around what is considered beautiful for Black women, and we didn't ask for permission, we just did it.

Ella considers the direction of influence she perceives Black women have over men, which is surprisingly opposite to the direction of power in the dominant patriarchal culture. Several other participants consider Black men's supportive or discouraging roles in destigmatizing natural hair. Ruth shares that her husband is very supportive of natural hair:

> My husband, his mom has natural hair. I think that something like that sets a precedent, because he's grown up really viewing, admiring women around him who've had their hair natural. His grandmother is a former Black Panther, so he comes from a very socially conscious family anyway. It's not that when I had a perm, he was against it, but it's one of those things where it's like, yeah, you do whatever you feel comfortable with.

Ruth attributes her husband's childhood exposure to his raised consciousness about natural hair. She is aware that her husband's perspective is unique and that some women struggle with going natural in light of their less supportive romantic relationships. Married and partnered women, Sojo, Dorothy, Kamala, Kito, Octavia, and Shirley experience both support and non-approval from their partners. Single participants mention their concerns and struggles in dating with natural hair and various participants including men are aware of their women acquaintances' struggles. As such, Black men are designated opponents, advocates, or allies, adding a gendered consideration to racial solidarity rarely explored in racial solidarity research.

Male participants, Toure, Roberson, and Endrick are aware that the social meanings attached to Black men's hair and Black women's natural hair are racialized and gendered differently. Roberson and Endrick both wear their hair in styles that pronounce Black aestheticism. They are mindful of how they are perceived differently than when their hair was cut low. Although some people interpret their locs and braided styles as "threatening" or "radical," the men are buffered by the knowledge that they can easily cut their hair at any time and navigate the stigmas. For Black women, navigating the stigma of Black aesthetics means chemically altering their hair versus simply altering the style of their natural texture. Toure and Roberson, perceive Black men as potential allies for Black women in their journey toward natural hair. They both share that they learned

from their women acquaintances about the struggles of Black women with grooming norms. They are both purposeful in their learning but also explain how they learn inadvertently via social media posts and a growing body of articles and videos on natural hair. For Roberson, his long natural hair places him in spaces with women stylists. In addition, to care for his hair, he often seeks hair care information that exposes him to Black women's public discourse on discriminatory beauty standards. For men like Toure and Roberson, although they are hesitant to frame themselves as experiencing comparable grooming discriminations as Black women, it was clear from their accounts that some Black men, like some Black women, are becoming more conscious of gendered and racialized grooming discriminations. Learning Black women's specific socio-political concerns, as it relates to hair is dynamic. Black men in this study acknowledge their role in reinforcing beauty norms and in solidarity with Black women, oppose anti-Black grooming standards.

Black women with chemical relaxers

Annelle and Nzingha both wear their hair naturally and acknowledge the existence of a socio-cognitive community of Black women who share a similar outlook surrounding reconceptualizing and learning about hair. Based upon their criteria, members of the natural hair thought community are intimately familiar with the shame and stigma of being natural, and women who have not abandoned chemical relaxers are not members of the community. However, participant Shirley offers a contradiction to their claims. Although Shirley is not natural, Shirley shares the consciousness-raising awareness of members of the natural hair thought community and considers herself included in the movement. Shirley had no intentions of going natural anytime soon. Needless to say, she is well-versed in the culture of the NHTC. Shirley offers an interesting paradox to explain her perspective on inclusion and exclusion in the movement:

> I can see myself included even though I don't necessarily, like, have natural hair — meaning, you know, I process my hair — but I do see myself involved in the movement. It is a movement whereby, you know, people — and this could be men and women — who want to wear their hair how they want or not judged and have the agency to do what they want with their bodies. And I support that. Also, I support my friends who do wear it. I'll give you example. So I have a friend she's natural. She proclaims to be part of the natural hair movement. However, in her wedding, she wanted her bridesmaids to have a straight sleek hairstyle, and said, you know, and she was specifying what she wanted. But one of my friends, she has naturally, very curly hair, and she said no, my hair is not naturally like that, you know? Can I wear my curls? And she was like, no. Put whatever you want in it, but just get it to the style that I want. I was just like — that doesn't make sense. Like, why would she be telling you to, you know, change the texture of your hair and how your hair looks to conform to kind of like, to me and a Eurocentric kind of look. However, in my wedding, even though, I process my hair, all of my bridesmaids, had variations of natural hair. And I was like, that is fine, I want you to be comfortable, it looks good, that's fine. So, even though I don't do it, I — and I wouldn't, like, proclaim myself to be, like, wow, I'm, you know, like, I wear natural hair, and I'm part of the movement or whatever, my bridesmaids couldn't wear whatever they wanted.

Dorothy sees all Black women as included, acknowledging a gendered racial bond:

> I'm like, "Girl, I do this, and this," and we have a whole discussion. I don't have a problem with her touching my hair, because she's been through the struggle, she knows what I'm going through, she knows what my daily interactions are, and what we have to deal with on a day-to-day basis with the others. You know who I'm talking about when I say the others. She gets it, so I don't mind. It's when I know that you haven't been through that struggle, I know that you haven't had to deal with people teasing you for what your hair looks like, or having to go to the hairdresser and straighten your hair before you go to an interview, even though you know that by the time the interview's over, your hair's going to be right back in a big old poof ball because your hair doesn't deal with humidity like that. She gets it. I don't have a problem with her touching my hair. You on the other hand, you don't get it. Don't touch my hair.

However, Dorothy is clear that white women are not allowed to participate in the natural hair movement. Her sentiments of racial exclusivity are shared by several other participants, but not all. Nzingha is clear that having natural hair or being White with "natural hairstyles" or doing the bodywork of having Black aesthetic hairstyles does not give one membership into the natural hair movement:

> Anybody can participate, but — so there's a caveat being that there's emotion linked with certain hairstyles. There's history linked with certain hairstyles. If I see a white girl with an Afro, I might laugh, right? But I also might think it's cute, and I also might be confused about the white girl with the Afro. But a white girl with curly hair can definitely participate in all the stuff that we do with natural hair. I don't think it's [inaudible] — it is, but it also isn't. I have this dissonance about it. Anybody can participate, but at the same time, not anyone can participate because… some people can — you can go straighten your hair and go be imbued with whiteness, and not have to deal with the struggle of continuing all of the stuff that's imbedded within having Black natural hair. When I think of the natural hair movement, I specifically think of Black natural hair… and our natural hairstyles. White people with dreadlocks, white people with Afros, those are weird, but if they want to, do you. I just don't like it, and it's just my opinion.

Her perspective emphasizes racialization and embodiment, a lived experience that many believe non-Blacks and Black men do not experience. Once again, she emphasizes the trauma and the specific social devaluation of natural hair that constructs a specific racialized and gendered struggle, particularly the psychological and consequential social costs. She is explicit that the natural hair movement is tied to "the stuff," the social stigmas but also the resilience that is required to wear natural hair without an out. White women have the option to return to their natural and socially accepted straight hair textures, whereas, for Black women, chemically relaxed hair is the norm or "the out."

Nzingha's boundaries are not shared by all participants. Several participants such as Kito, Shirley, and Toure considered exclusion problematic or at least limiting in creating allies. Here is Kito's perspective:

> I think everybody should be allowed to participate. I think that when it comes to voicing opinions and voicing ideals, I think that's when the discrepancy starts. If you're an ally, then that's fine, but if someone is sitting and telling you they're story, it's not necessarily your place to negate or try to fight with what that person's truth is. If you've never been disenfranchised because of your natural hair, then, in my opinion, you really shouldn't have anything to say. You can support, you can help when help is asked for, but if you've never been penalized for your natural hair, or if you've never been sent home because your natural hair was a distraction, or it was unkempt or something like that, if you've never been — if your job has never been threatened because of your natural hair, I don't think you should really have much to say.

Sojo considers the global community of Black women impacted by discriminatory beauty norms and how research about their experiences impacts non-Black women:

> It's certain things that I think even with you going through your academic process and this whole process of education, it is important, and I'm thankful that you are trying, with this survey, that you're trying to gather women's opinions and how they feel. A survey that I think, across the board, because this impacts even the other women. The thing is, this is something that we can do, that we as Black women — and you know, you can't say American Black because I've seen Ethiopians with hair that looks like mine, and then I've seen some that look like a white girl's hair. So, it's a mixture — we need it! As far as women of color, and a lot of people having these babies that's coming out that have knotty hair and they have straight hair, looking like me, and they don't know? I saw that on the plane when I was flying to Dallas. Little girl was cute and everything, but Lord, they did not know how to do their hair, and I wanted to say, "Can I take her in the bathroom for a minute?"

Sojo extends solidarity to women of color, as well as multiracial families. Sojo's acute awareness of the systemic interconnections of oppression, helps her to conceptualize the natural hair movement as inclusive, and as a multiethnic and multinational community. Similar to findings from Dalmage (2000), the Black community is more likely to open their doors and extend community assistance to white women with Black children. Sojo's perspective demonstrates the lasting effects of the hypodescent (one drop) rule, particularly for older generations. Also embedded in Sojo's account is her concern with the importance of proper grooming and the child's self-esteem. Ava was another participant who mentioned the perceived neglected grooming of biracial children by White mothers. Although Nzingha mentioned that many Black mothers do not know how to groom their daughters' natural hair, however, as participants repeatedly demonstrated they were a part of a community of hairdressers who could at least thermally style to maintain their presentability.

Not all participants perceive non-Black women, particularly White women as members of the natural hair social movement. Most participants reinforce racial boundaries, taking offense or finding "humor" in White women's use of the "going natural" verbiage or wearing of Black aesthetic hairstyles. Very few participants accepted White women's inclusion into the natural hair movement. However, Sojo and Ava recognize that multiracial families have Black children—or that the phenotypes we assign as Black and white exist across racial categories. As Shirley states:

> Oh wow. I mean, let's see. Who is allowed to participate, and who's not? I mean, I guess, who am I to tell someone they're not allowed to support and do anything that, you know, furthers a cause? Because, I mean, I've heard discussions, you know, with peers, that, you know, white people are involved, in movements like these, I also tell them that, white people also have Black and biracial children. I guess, for me, if you have a genuine affinity and also a purpose, in a sense, or if you feel that you — this issue is for you to either put yourself on the line for and advocate for, it doesn't mean that you…when you know it could benefit. I think, yeah, that the movement is for you.

Shirley argues that individuals across racial categories may also be allies in the socio-mental struggle to exalt natural hair as normative, leaving room not only for participation but allowing collective action beyond the roles of spectator and bystanders, and free-riders. The salience of perceived shared characteristics can be misleading. For example, although two Black women may have different hairstyles and hair textures, leading them to believe they are dissimilar in their socio-political beliefs, a conversation could yield that they are more alike than their hair projects. It is not uncommon for women with differing choices in hairstyles to attend the same social clubs/organizations, to be members of the same communities of faith, or to grow up in the same household. Several participants interpret chemically altered hair texture as adhering to the status quo, a behavior that does not require the same bodywork and emotional investment as wearing one's hair naturally. The markedness of chemically altered hair texture exemplifies that being natural is based on a particular grievance with the meanings attached to chemical hair and cultural ideas about certain favorable and unfavorable attributes.

Framing natural hair as a social movement

After asking participants to define natural hair and why natural hair is currently popular among Black women, I asked them to share their thoughts about the current popularity of natural hair being called a social movement. In addition, I asked participants if they see themselves as part of the movement. I asked these questions regardless of the interviewee's age, sex, and hair texture. All but two participants conceptualize natural hair as a movement, however, several are hesitant to consider natural hair a movement involving political change. When asked to provide descriptions or examples of social movements, participants often focus on iconic movements that involve visible protest, policy demands, and complex social organizations and networks. They rarely mention smaller, subversive movements, or non-contentious movements. Although my findings indicate that participants similarly redirect their pattern of thinking about natural hair as it relates to health, beauty, and Black aesthetics, their perspectives are varied in their specific framing of natural hair as a social movement. By attending to Black men's and women's diverse social locations, and traditional characteristics of social resistance and injustice, several participants perceive incongruities in labeling natural hair a social movement.

The majority of participants, eight out of twenty, conceptualize the growing popularity of natural hair among Black women as a movement centering on cultural expressions of pro-Black aestheticism, which I typify as a culturalist framing. Seven of the twenty participants utilized an activism framework to perceive natural hair through a social justice lens, either perceiving natural hair as its own activism or part of a broader

movement for social change. For a smaller number of participants, five out of twenty conceptualize popularity as personal, convenient, or an indicator of individualism. Participants utilizing an individualist frame, do not subscribe to a personal framing of natural hair as political or cultural but are aware of the broader social movement connotations for others. Only one participant did not see natural hair as a movement of any sort.

I conceptualize the three frames along a continuum in which activist and individualist framings are distinct extremes from one another and culturalist is a midpoint. The two extremes share similar characteristics of abiding by certainty in their perception of natural hair as either a collective social movement or not. Whereas activist and individualist framings both display rigidity, within the culturalist framing there is more flexible or fuzzy-mindedness. Thus, those framing from a culturalist lens may likely share conceptualizations closer to either of the two extremes. For example, both Cella and Ella express a culturalist framing of natural hair; however, Cella's perspective is more aligned with an individualist framing in that she perceives natural hair as a possible medium for racial solidarity for Black people but less a social justice issue or act of resistance. Ella, on the other hand, discusses natural hair in relation to injustices and resistance in ways that are closer to an activist framing. Not only was I able to identify four dimensions common in participants' framings of natural hair, but similar patterns in their overlap among three framing types. For example, the activist framework often includes an overlap of inclusivity of the four dimensions whereas the individualist framework includes an overlap of exclusivity among the four dimensions. I analyze the four dimensions of personal community, racial solidarity, social justice, and resistance that emerge as the criterion that inform the culturalist, activist, and individualist framings of natural. hair (See Figure 1 and Table 2).

Table 2 Framing and Dimension Categorizations

Framing	Participant	(+) Dimensions	(+/-) Dimensions	(-) Dimensions
Individualist	Billie		PC	RS/SJ/R
	Dorothy		PC/RS	SJ/R
	Kamala			PC/RS/SJ/R
	Michaëlle	PC		RS/SJ/R
	Ruth	PC		RS/SJ/R
Culturalist	Annelle	PC/R	SJ/RS	
	Cella	PC	RS	SJ/R
	Ella	R/SJ/PC		RS
	Endrick	PC/R		RS/SJ
	Inez	PC/R	SJ/RS	
	Shirley	PC/SJ	RS/R	
	Toure	PC/SJ	RS/R	
	Yumi	RS/PC		SJ/R
Activist	Ava	PC/RS/SJ/R		
	Kito	PC/RS/SJ/R		
	Marjorie	PC/RS/SJ/R		
	Nzingha	PC/SJ/R	RS	
	Octavia	RS/SJ/R		PC
	Roberson	PC/RS/SJ/R		
	Sojo	PC/RS/SJ/R		

*PC= Personal Community R= Resistance RS=Racial Solidarity SJ= Social Justice

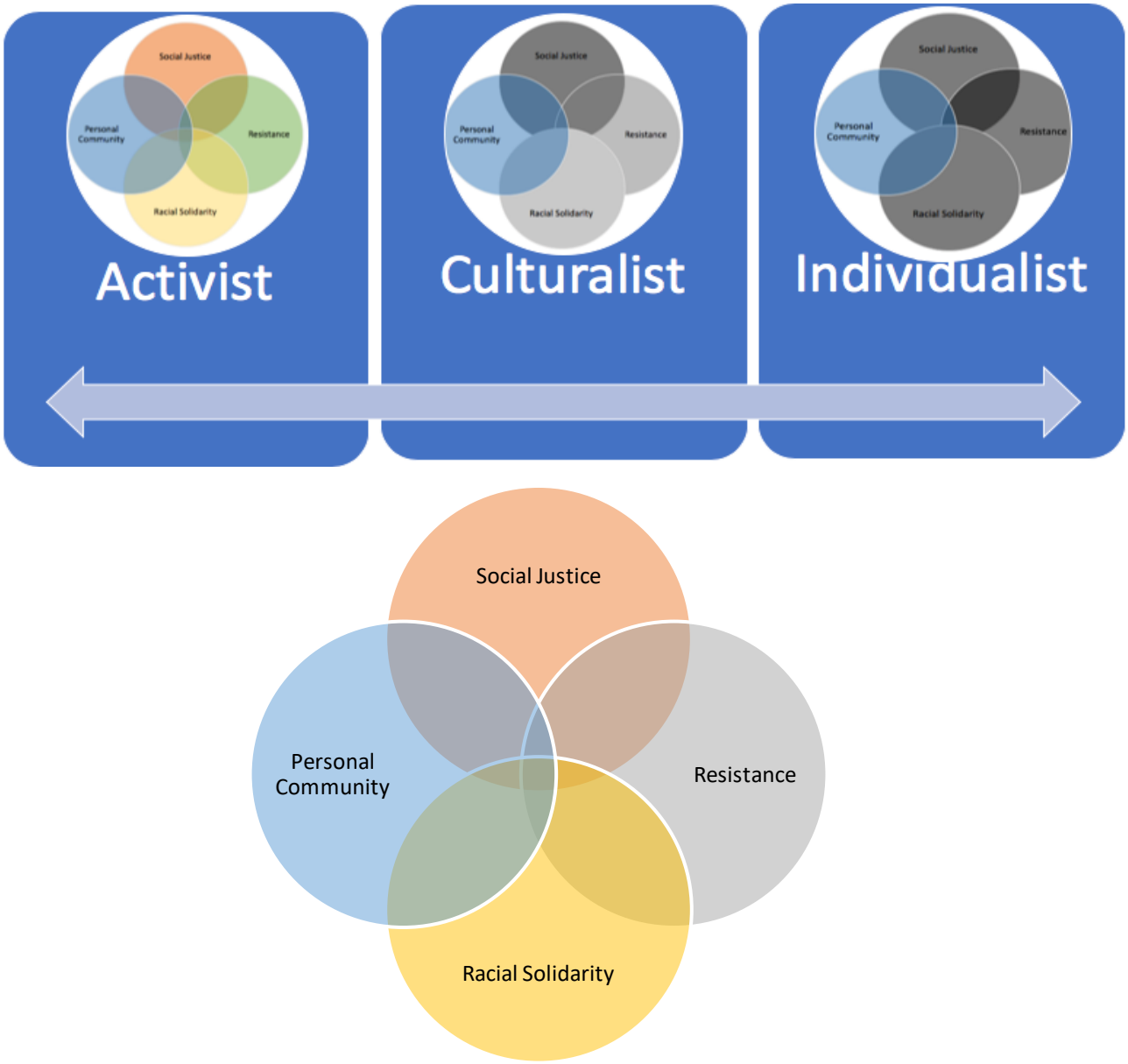

Figure 1 Social Movement Dimensions

Social injustice

I learned from participants that "social" does not always mean "political." Endrick, like several other participants initially opposes the social movement label, "I think in one sense, it's kind of contrarian, because it's like, you know, it's the way your hair is naturally, why should that be a movement?" Annelle also struggles with the social versus political implications of labeling natural hair a movement. She discloses that she associates social movements with social justice and that, before our interview, she was unfamiliar with the designation of natural hair as a social movement:

> Yeah, yeah. That's the way — it's definitely nuanced, definitely nuanced, and I mean, I hadn't heard it. I hadn't heard it. Plus, when you say social, I

> immediately think social justice, and then I immediately think who's — I say younger people, I do think that millennials, I think that's thirty and under, they are on it. They are fighting, they are educating themselves and they're educating others, and how do they look? Everybody looks like they're a part of this conversation right here.

Although Annelle is disappointed by the stigmatization of Black aesthetics and is critical of the hair texture hierarchy, she does not conceptualize going natural as a response to an injustice or crisis. During the interview, Annelle eventually decides that the social movement moniker is a label emerging from the "millennial" generation, a campaign that she sees herself aged out of. Not that she relegates social justice issues as strictly youthful matters but that she perceives a trajectory in one's awareness and responses to social inequality. Likewise, Octavia and Ella both refer to themselves as "veterans" and "old heads" and discuss their youthful engagement in historical movements, the Million Man March and the Civil Rights Movement. All three participants share a profound awareness of systemic gendered racism. Whereas Octavia, the elder of the three women is comfortable equating the movement with injustice, Annelle and Ella both interpret the current popularity of natural hair as acquiring a level of social acceptance that blurs injustice. Ella compares the trajectory of hip-hop with the natural hair movement to explain how Black culture may start as subversive or counterculture to dominant ideology and oppression but once accepted into the mainstream, the movement becomes far less subversive and more so another Western commodity:

> I feel like, to our credit, we've sort of forged a way, so they do have the opportunity to do that now. I think we took a hit like at least 15, 20 years ago, maybe even 25 or earlier, because there were groups of us who were just like, fuck it, I'm going to just do what I want. I feel like, that's the push that mainstreamed it — because we just wouldn't stop. We weren't backing down. Then we started creating products, and then we started having these hair shows, and then it spilled out into mainstream society. Now it's a bit in commodified state, which is a little scary. I feel like, I don't want Black women's hair or natural hair to go the way of hip hop. I feel like there are things that Black culture particular in America has created, and it created it for different reasons, some of it was resistance, some of it was just like a confluence of different cultures — like hip hop music. I feel like as soon as corporate America got into it and realized that it was money, and then realized that it could be commodified, it diluted hip hop extremely, and not to say that we don't have it, but the mainstream and the underground are like two polar opposites, and I don't want that to happen to Black women's hair. I don't want it to become so commodified that you're having a white person in a salon saying, "Why don't you come in and I can show you how to do this stuff with your hair."

Ella's reflection draws out a timeline of natural hair stigmatization and acceptance. Ella is skeptical of the commodification and concerned with cultural appropriation.

At the end of his interview, Endrick expresses curiosity about other Black men's and women's framings of natural hair as a movement. I shared that some participants were adamant that it was political, and some saw it as a cultural or personal choice. Endrick shares these concluding thoughts on the social movement classification:

> I think perhaps it's worth noting that I think maybe it's possible for it to be classified as social without being necessarily political. Because I think — if you classify it as being political, then I think, like you said, it's very easy, it's much easier to draw connections, you know, that aren't necessarily related inherently to the movement, or rather, to natural hair and embracing the naturalness of your hair. Because, you know, when things tend to get political it becomes about something else entirely.

Interestingly, Endrick, one of the youngest participants also is critical of aligning natural hair with social justice and resistance. Endrick considers natural hair an embrace of one's Blackness and Afrocentricity. He perceives the popularity of natural hair as part of a "broader" global movement for Black self-love and racial uplift. Like Endrick and Annelle, several participants express moral objections to politicizing natural hair. In addition, many want to avoid making generalizations on behalf of all Black people regarding their reasons for going natural. Dorothy is first-generation born American and is taken aback by the way "Black people in the U.S. love to politicize everything:"

> In terms of politicizing it, people who are natural and are very much into social activism or into politics, it's like, I'm going to span the room and spot somebody. I'm going to assume now that you have taken up a certain political view or I'm going to assume ownership of that person because of their appearance, pretty much. I guess, growing up, I don't really buy, I don't really play into it. It's kind of like, you know — but it works on both ways. If you see a woman who has her hair chemically straightened, should I now assume that you're not politically active because you decided not to wear your hair natural? So, you're not as knowledgeable now because you don't have your hair in a natural state? I think that it's mutually exclusive.

Dorothy frames natural hair from an individualist lens, and highlights that simply "scanning a room" and making assumptions about an individual's socio-political awareness and activism based on their hair may yield an erroneous "ownership of that person because of their appearance."

Michaëlle admits to struggling with her perspectives about natural hair. Although she is averse to framing natural hair as a social movement, she frames boundaries of inclusion and exclusion on who is allowed to be natural or participate in the movement:

> Every time she [Rachel Dolezal] comes on TV, I just want to scream and throw something at her. Which, again, is hypocritical, right? Because it's like, I think that — like I say, intellectually, I know that the more that we see each other's differences and recognize when somebody is being discriminated against, attacked or stereotyped for their differences, the better it is, but then on the other hand, I'm like, ugh! [laughter] And I think I'm that way because I think that you couldn't possibly know how I feel and what goes on with me. That's so hypocritical, when I say it out loud, I'm like, I realize how hypocritical that is, you know? Because I want them to understand my struggle, you know? But then I don't — then I'm upset when they seem to.

Michaëlle's perspectives are impacted by her "visceral" reaction to non-Black women's inclusion and yet she understands how some of her views are "hypocritical." Unlike Michaëlle, Dorothy is antipathetic towards the politicizing of natural hair and racial solidarity as well as her involuntary membership in the personal community, thus expressing a rigid mindedness. Michaëlle and Dorothy attribute their perspectives to being raised outside of the U.S., or in the case of Dorothy, being first-generation U.S. born and raised. When asked in what ways has the natural hair social movement affected her decision to participate in social activities not related to natural hair, if at all, Michaëlle centers her status as a "foreigner":

> I don't think it has. I think that me being a foreigner from Canada and coming here in my mid-twenties, I did not have any political thoughts, I don't think, really, until I came here. And I think that the politics and the colorism here is way more of an influence than hair.
>
> Like — and I'm sure — I mean, colorism and hair go together, but for me, it was more when I came here. I didn't really have any political — my political beliefs were formed here. And I have to say, unfortunately for the negative, watching the change in the party who was in power, and just my feelings about, like — I didn't realize that I was so into fairness and everybody — like, people don't start out in life at the same place, and it's just not fair!

Michaëlle shares that her racial awareness has heightened since living in the United States, so much so that she is now more aware of the racism towards Indigenous peoples in Canada. She explains that although her family was the only Black family in her community, her father was a doctor and thus buffered their family from discrimination. Michaëlle repeatedly emphasizes that colorism has impacted her racial identity in the U.S. more so than hair texture. She shares that she has an older sister who is just as dark as her and another sister who is biracial and has hair and complexion that in the U.S. would be exalted. However, in her family, there was never a distinction made between the sisters' hair textures and complexions. She experiences racial socialization as a secondary socialization, in that her racial consciousness is forged in response to racism, colorism, and other socio-political discriminations in the United States. Research from Ogundipe (2011) finds that ethnic identities among African immigrant and diasporic African immigrants are often differentiated and sometimes shaped by the racialized experiences of Black Americans. Blacks born outside of the United States may distance themselves, shun, or learn from the historical and current discriminations of Black Americans in constructing their own ethnic identities in America and thus reject a Pan-African racial solidarity.

As such, by attending to Black men and women's diverse social locations and traditional characteristics of social resistance and injustice, several participants perceive incongruities in labeling natural hair a social movement. Whereas Endrick and Annelle frame natural hair from a culturalist framework, Dorothy and Michaëlle draw upon their "foreign" identities to account for their individualist framings of natural hair. However, participants Inez and Shirley both were born outside of the United States but centered from culturalist frameworks. Interestingly, both Inez and Shirley have higher degrees in the social sciences. Participants' repertoire of collective action is informed by their intersecting social locations. The more thought communities that participants belong to, the more unique their perspectives, and yet we see how similar overlaps create shared

intersubjective framings about natural hair as a social justice issue.

Resistance

Participants who frame from an activist perspective are more likely to perceive natural hair as an act of resistance compared to participants who frame otherwise. Dimensionalizing natural hair as an act of resistance commonly includes perceiving grooming norms as racially biased, discriminatory, and unjust. Roberson is among the few participants who convey an in-depth perspective of natural as a resistance to systemic oppression. He implicates "society" norms, institutionalization, and ideological conformity as well as discriminatory sanctioning in the stigmatization of natural hair and thus coerced "assimilation" to wear one's hair weaved, straightened, or "processed." Roberson sees going natural as a human rights issue and an extension of a broader Black rights movement. According to Roberson, the Black Lives Matter movement is the millennial generation's Civil Rights movement, and natural hair allows Black women and men to construct a unified identity around their common oppression and culture. Like Roberson, Sojo perceives a connection between broader socio-political oppression such as police brutality, economic deprivation, and "Eurocentric" beauty norms:

> That's what I don't understand. But we won't spend that kind of money — to me, the hair movement is going to make us start supporting each other, and then our economics will grow, and then our communities — because the hair, the hair care products, I mean — that's I'm sure one of the biggest industries in the world. But do something, give something back. Give something back, and that's where I'm at with the movement, is that we have to give back. Because the generations in between me and these kids so far in between, that we really have to start working with them. We have not only hair, we have mental health, we have diabetes, we have the high blood pressure. I've never seen so many sick people in my life.

Roberson and Sojo are in the minority among participants, in that they equate natural hair with activism. Their framing of natural hair extends beyond agency as they attend to the systemic dynamics of oppression and how natural hair is interrelated to other life chances.

Participants who do not perceive natural hair as a social justice issue are less likely to perceive natural hair as an act of resistance. When asked who or what discourages Black women from going natural, several participants such as Cella and Dorothy acknowledged structural constraints such as professional grooming standards but held firm that "half of it is the woman herself, just kind of holding herself back." By framing going natural as a personal choice or cultural expression, participants minimize grooming norms and guidelines as consequential and instead attend to personal agency. Decentering structural constraints and centering agency, depoliticize wearing natural hair or going natural as an act of radical resistance.

Personal community

As Nzingha shared some people went natural without the assistance of a community, however, in the present day; Black women are frequently guided through the transitional, chemical-to-natural process via a host of resources. The promotion of

natural hair via websites, natural hair salons, and hair conferences among other natural hair activities allows some participants to align themselves with other individuals who engage in similar actions. Participants rely upon various social statuses such as age, gender, hair choice, and nationality/ethnicity to construct their connectedness or disconnectedness to the natural hair movement. For example, Annelle perceives natural hair as a medium for connectedness between Black women with natural hair and yet she is hesitant to include herself as a member of the natural hair social movement:

> In terms of a social movement, I do feel kind of excluded. Nappy and natural and all this, you know, sometimes feeling like an OG. This one woman was asking me questions about my hair and she kept saying yes ma'am, yes ma'am, and I'm like, how am I feeling in this moment right now? What is really going on? I made a joke, she told me she was military, but I still had a feeling. Like yeah, OG, I've been doing this for so long, because it's just me, it's not the movement for me, and I don't care about being on the front line for it. And then, because it is so fly, right, and it costs so much to be fly for the majority of the styles that I see and I like, I feel excluded. I'm not doing — hey! I'm not doing that. I can't do that. But people ask questions, so I do feel included. People comment as if they understand, whatever, so I feel included. I still hear that, you can do it, not everybody can do it. Oh, let me stop you there. Because then there becomes this issue of separation again.

Somewhat similar to Annelle, Octavia conceptualizes the natural movement as a youthful movement that she has aged out of partially because she does not see many options for grey hair, "I don't... yeah, I don't think it's a movement for me." However, like Annelle, public interactions with others often yield acknowledgments that she is included:

> Well, it's not big in my age group. So, it's not the in thing to do but I think that, and most of the compliments I get are from younger people, but I think that's a signal, too, that I like. That they recognize that, "Ok, um, she's with it."

Both Annelle and Octavia focus on hairstyles as a gauge for their inclusiveness in the movement. Their lumping and splitting of inclusion are related to the types of natural hairstyles that they perceive as more oppositional to beauty norms and convention versus some natural hairstyles that maintain presentability. Also, like Annelle, Octavia uses the analogy of the military "front line" about the younger generation's inclusion in the movement. For Annelle, the frontline is the millennial generation (mid 30's to mid 20's) and for Octavia the frontline is Generation X and Millennials (late 40's to early 20's). Whereas Annelle and Octavia consider age and other's acknowledgment as their gauge for personal community, Dorothy is apprehensive about affiliating herself with a natural hair movement and community:

> I would say — see, I don't really, I don't feel excluded or included, to be quite honest. I don't... I don't know if I see myself involved in it... from a group level, but I see in terms of my individual level. For instance, because I am a nurse, because I work in a really professional setting and I've chose to wear my hair in

> a natural state regardless, it may make people somewhat uncomfortable, it may not, and so I think just seeing it, and people being exposed to it, it contributes to it in a sense of it being normalized. But it's not to me — I don't consider myself to be actively involved in it.

Dorothy shares that as a first-generation American, she "was not conditioned to wear" her hair permed. This lack of "conditioning" likely contributes to her not feeling a sense of personal community in relation to going natural. She is aware that others perceive her as part of the community, and that she involuntarily contributes to narratives about natural hair wearers. Billie shares a similar perspective of involuntary inclusion:

> Included, but not because of any active effort on my part. Because like I said, I got dreads because I was wearing braids for so long, and so I was just like, I wear the same style everyday anyway, so why not just get dreads? Like I said, I get people all the time who are just like, "Yes, a natural sister," and I'm just like, "Oh, thank you." I feel kind of bad because I feel like other people, they make this big giant conscious decision, and I just decided to get dreads one day. Constantly walk up to you like, "Oh, you're a woke sister," so, there's that. That's about it really. I do feel like there's a lot of jobs I wouldn't have gotten prior to the natural hair movement because nobody wants to be deemed as a racist establishment, and I don't really go for banking jobs and things like that. I feel like it's a lot more inclusive for me, so that's beneficial. And there's a lot more variety of products that I can use, so that's good.

Billie expresses a feigned "guilt" over others' assumptions that she shares a similar conscientiousness in going natural. Being called a "woke sistah" implies that she engages in a level of consciousness-raising that aligns her having natural hair with radical intent or awakening to overcome the self-consciousness of wearing an unconventional style. Billie's motives for going natural were based upon convenience, and yet she acknowledges that she benefits as a free-rider. Billie is mindful that the natural hair movement, or others' radical intentions and motives paved the way for her to wear her hair naturally without as many social consequences. Several other participants also frame natural hair as an individual choice and equate personal community with beauty and bodywork.

Racial solidarity

Although Annelle introduces us to a thought community of natural hair wearers, she also ruminates that "so much has been used to separate us." Annelle shares her perception of natural hair as a gateway to personal community and yet an obstruction to racial solidarity. Annelle's reflection touches on the enigmatic charge for racial solidarity expected between Black people as well as structural constraints and the diffuse interests, values, and goals by which Black women and men organize themselves. Annelle's perspective echoes Shelby's (2002) argument that racial solidarity based upon common national identity and interests is far more elusive than solidarity centered on common oppression. Participants from different countries, age groups, and occupations demonstrate how a singular racial identity—even one centered on mutual experiences related to hair—ignores how individuals are members of multiple thought communities; which further narrows their perspectives to distinct worldviews. In response to my

question "should all Black people support the natural hair movement," many participants express variations in their expectations for racial solidarity centered on hair. Several participants feel racial solidarity should be reserved for more "serious" racial injustices such as police brutality. Nonetheless, some participants such as Cella subscribe to a universal racial solidarity:

> I think all Black people should support all Black people period. On everything. We just need to support each other more. I don't think we support each other enough. We don't support Black businesses as much as we should, so just in general, I feel like our support of each other is waning. I think that Black people should embrace the Black hair natural — the popularity of natural Black hair.

Participants who utilize an activist or culturalist framing of natural hair are more likely to associate natural hair with racial solidarity or at least prescribe racial solidarity in support of natural hair and/or Black empowerment.

Conclusion: micro-resistance

For the marginalized, within systemic gendered oppression, quality of life is compromised daily whether explicitly acknowledged or not. Avoidance of assimilation or embracing non-conventional options shifts the perimeters of choice. Per Foucault (1977, 1982) the body is a site of struggle, an idea that is reinforced by my participants' accounts of struggle with tiers of surveillance, gatekeeping, and coercive authority. Hair texture along with skin complexion discloses social location without consent of the individual, and thus the actions and embodiment of the individual often convey public messaging about group activity. For example, Octavia does not see herself as part of the movement but engages in subversive behaviors to bring social awareness to gendered racism surrounding the Black body as well as support for those she sees as "doing the work" of Black racial progress:

> I complain when they don't have the right shades or the right products. I make remarks, like, "This isn't nude." Like, "This isn't one size fits all," you know. That kind of thing. When they give a giveaway, I give them back. You buy a certain amount of cosmetics, they give you a little make-up bag and it has freebies? I take all the pink stuff out and give it back to them. They always say, "You don't want this?" I say, "No. I can't use any of that and no sense of throwing it away. Give it to somebody who can use it." And...so, I just make my little statements.

I contended that micro-resistance is everyday resistance informed by longstanding grievances and the successes of previous social movements. It is the class, race, and gender progress that informs and enables Black people to expend temporal, economic, and socio-mental resources towards correcting and/or addressing covert impositions on their quality of life. Micro-resistance is collective agency informed by pluralistic collective consciousness or cognitive pluralism. Although several participants with natural hair report similar experiences with degradation, family criticism, public scrutiny, and professional obstructions, their intersecting social statuses, particularly their privilege divert their attention from perceiving their experiences as oppressive and

constraining. Occupying middle-class social statuses, having stable partnerships, and various levels of autonomy and community support provide resources that allow participants to assert "agency" to navigate grooming constraints. However, expending one's individual and communal resources overshadows persisting systemic oppressions. For example, framing natural hair as a health initiative allows Black women to address health disparities related to grooming habits but minimize or disattend to structural implications and the institutionalized grooming standards that exacerbate their health disparities. The ability to enact agency to address systemic gendered oppression modifies racialized and gendered inequity but does not annihilate it. An activist framing of natural hair involves focusing on systemic gender oppression, whereas an individualist framing is less likely to consider systemic oppression, however, my findings indicate that two individuals with polarizing framings of natural hair as a social movement may very well be members of the NHTC.

Several participants, who were natural for 15 years or more before the current movement considered themselves the veterans or "O.G.s" of the movement. The veterans transitioned during college or at a point in their life course where they encountered social ostracism for being the first but less long-term professional risks because they were somewhat incubated by social spaces that allowed for consciousness-raising. Participants mentioned going natural while in college, attending HBCUs, at the height of hip-hop, or while retired, or in transition between careers. Space and place factor into the ongoing development of the natural hair thought community and reflect a trajectory of conceptualizations for going natural via a timeline of stigmatization to mainstre aming. The popularity of natural hair creates the illusion of acceptance and thus diminishes how Black natural hair and the embracing of Black aesthetics are subversive to the dominant ideology. Mainstream acceptance may change the social landscape, but systemic changes are the only way to disrupt dominant ideology. Often, as Ella pointed out via methods such as commodification, hegemony will absorb countercultures in ways that diminish its subversive momentum. As such, the natural hair movement is one phase of resistance, but an important phase, nonetheless.

Going natural is but one form of Black micro-resistance. I argue that other activities involving a growing Black population of participants in activities such as homeschooling, yoga, travel groups, community gardens, and POC social collectives are also micro-resistance. According to Sojo it is through relationships that Black women quietly mobilize and sustain the natural hair movement:

> This movement, it is a movement, it's a quiet movement, and you bringing it right on out. Because it is a movement. I know one of the sisters that does my hair, they went, her and another young lady went to a workshop of a lady that has invented or patented the Sisterlocks.[4] They went to one of her — she had something for the weekend here one time, and they went and they talked about how good it was. What is so significant which aligns with this is a lot of those sisters are still networking together that met at that conference. That's been at least three to five years ago. But they're still in contact, so that's the other thing we need — relationships. That's my take on it.

[4] Sisterlocks are micro-sized locs that are formed by interlocking loose "Afro-textured" hair. Interlocking is a technique that requires a hooking tool and is very similar to crocheting. See Sisterlocks.com

It is the exclusion as well as the marginalization of Black culture that often prompts the racialization of these activities and lifestyles. How the marginalized utilize their social privileges to improve their quality of life is a counteraction. However, as demonstrated by participants who frame going natural as an expression of individualism, some do not see their actions as collective resistance. Ella demonstrates how a generalized repertoire of contention and collective action informs participants' reluctance to understand the popularity of natural hair as a movement:

> Well, I think part of it is, is that we never had a meeting, organized around it. It was completely organic. That's why I feel like it is something that — and it was subtle, and it was almost not said. Even now, I can see sisters, or especially when I was twisting whatever, and I would see sisters, or I would have my hair — especially if women were older, they would just kind of look at me and nod and smile, almost like, I'm really glad you're doing this. It was subtle, and it was quiet. I think that's another reason why it probably took hold, because there wasn't a leader, there wasn't rhetoric or dogma around it — we just did it. You're still kind of doing it, and I think for me, the — not really the fear, but the danger is what happens when your resistance goes from subtle to overt.—

For participants and many Americans, the repertoire of resistance is based on iconic movements that engage contentious methods. The origins of movements are often overshadowed in history by organized and mobilized actions and draw attention to widespread subversive actions. For example, history now tells the story of Claudette Colvin, the fifteen-year-old who refused to give up her seat on a bus, some nine months before Rosa Parks (Glasrud and Pitre 2013). Individuals engaging in subversive behaviors suffer individualized spoiled identity. Observable subversive or unconventional behavior can have many interpretations but may simulate replication by additional social actors.

For the marginalized, within systemic gendered oppression, quality of life is compromised daily whether explicitly acknowledged or not. Avoidance of assimilation or embracing non-conventional options shifts the parameters of choice. Black people in different social locations experience divergent interactions that affect their perspective of justice and social injustice or resistance. Dorothy's shares her perspectives about anti-Black discrimination:

> At the root of it is just discriminatory practices based on appearance, right? If you want to take it one step further, Shaquita Bonquita Jones might not have natural hair, but that doesn't mean she can't be discriminated against in terms of hiring, because guess what? People look at your name, and we already know, studies have already shown that Black people are discriminated against, even before you get a job offer, just based on just funneling through a chart. Oh, that's — no, we don't want that one. I think because there is that underlying portion in terms of names, I think for that reason, I think all Black people should support [the natural hair movement]. I had one more thing to add, to me, when I say support, it doesn't mean to say that you can't have your hair in whatever state you want it. Just advocating.

Dorothy references "Shaquita Bonquita Jones," to highlight discrimination in employment and other institutions based on Black or ethnic names. Though Dorothy frames natural hair from an individualist framework she is aware of intersecting race, gender, and class biases. Dorothy is of the mindset that racial solidarity in the form of advocacy should consider the variant ways "appearance" or being Black is discriminatory.

Overall, participant experiences contribute to a broader conversation about advocacy and racial solidarity as an investment in all forms of injustice. According to Sojo, Shirley, and Billie the advocacy and solidarity must extend to not only Black bodies, but to all bodies. I agree with their perspectives and argue that destigmatizing Black bodies also involves consciousness-raising among the stigmatized and those who are adjacent and furthest away from experiencing stigma and marginalization. Natural hair serves as a public site of resistance. It is subversive and for some simply an alternative that happens to be oppositional or alternative to the status quo.

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A quiet revolution: Transcending and transforming political engagement in the transition movement for community climate resilience

Anna J. Willow

Abstract

This article explores how participants in Transition (a locally-focused but globally-networked community climate resilience movement) are reinventing processes of social change. The landscape of social movements is shifting in response to the perception of imminent catastrophe and the realization that business—and politics—as usual will not deliver desirable results. Situating Transition as an optimistic new movement arising from outside the conventional political sphere, I survey how transpolitical action and activism otherwise *can transform fundamental values, expectations, relationships, and ways of life. Twenty-nine semi-structured interviews serve as a springboard for examining how current Transition participants experience and understand transpolitical engagement, as revealed through diverse views of the movement's approach to structural change and perceptions of themselves as engaged social actors. Facing macropolitical stagnation and neoliberal domination, I advocate for inclusive definitions of political engagement that illuminate how change happens, what social movements can accomplish, and where affirmative alternatives might be sought. For social movement scholars, taking transpolitical action seriously ensures that we do not discount quiet revolutions and what they can accomplish by elucidating subtle ways of seeking change and their contemporary relevance. For movement participants, this framing can serve as a motivating force, demonstrating transpolitical action's potential to catalyze transformative change.*

Keywords

activism, climate change, environmental social movements, everyday activism, resilience, Transition, transpolitics

Introduction

Amidst the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s, folksinger Joan Baez proclaimed action to be the antidote to despair. Six decades later, these words retain their inspirational relevance. But both the sources of despair and the actions undertaken to assuage them have taken on new dimensions. Equality and peace stand elusive, while the conjoined existential threats of climate change and mass extinction now loom large on our collective horizon (Díaz et al. 2019; IPCC 2018). Global leaders' repeated failure to address these crises has led concerned

world citizens to lose faith that the systems that created such problems can ever overcome them. At the same time, neoliberal governance has obfuscated the political nature of decision-making, replacing ideals of democratic engagement with individual market choice, thereby "reinforcing dominant ideologies around what is possible" (Etherington and Jones 2018, 52; see also Madra and Adaman 2014). This article describes how the landscape of social movements is shifting in response to the perception of imminent catastrophe and the realization that business—and politics—as usual will not deliver favorable results. Optimistic new movements that seek to transform fundamental values, expectations, relationships, and ways of life are now arising outside of the conventional political sphere.

Transition is one such movement. Globally networked but comprised of autonomous local initiatives, Transition aims to cultivate community resilience in the face of climate change and resource depletion (Heinberg 2004; Transition US 2011; Fleming 2016). Among other unique features, detailed below, Transition posits systemic change as both necessary and inevitable. Inspired by the movement's explicit call to transform and generate culture, participants endeavor to "move from one ideology to another" and encourage others to do the same (Polk 2015, 92). Since shortly after its establishment, academic observers and movement leaders alike have questioned Transition's political status and contemplated the value of overt political engagement (e.g., Chatterton and Cutler 2008). Here, I seek to transcend these debates. Rather than asking *if* the movement is political, I take inspiration from social theorists who elucidate political action in unexpected domains. Adopting a broad definition of politics that includes "all the activities of cooperation and conflict, within and between societies, whereby the human species goes about obtaining, using, producing and distributing resources in the course of the production and reproduction of its social and biological life" (Leftwich 1983, 11), I situate Transition within the dynamic landscape of contemporary environmental social movements.[1] Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 29 individuals, I explore how transpolitical engagement is experienced and understood by current Transition participants, as revealed through their diverse views of the movement's approach to structural change and their perceptions of themselves as engaged social actors.

While contemporary social movement scholarship tends to approach climate action as an explicitly political phenomenon undertaken by self-proclaimed activists (e.g., Méndez 2020; Rahm 2023), this article synthesizes a wide range of theoretical and applied anthropological and sociological literature surrounding what I have come to refer to as politics and activism *otherwise* in order to suggest alternative processes and possibilities for catalyzing change. Transition offers a compelling example of a contemporary social movement committed to deep systemic change that identifies working outside of conventional political and activist channels as the best hope for achieving it. Although they often proceed

[1] Resources, here, includes a wide range of tangible and intangible assets, ranging from land, capital, and raw materials to less commonly considered things like "time education, status, influence, health and knowledge" (Leftwich 1983, 12).

quietly and attract little media attention, such movements pose significant threats to the status quo because they "def[y] business as usual by initiating, developing, and actualizing alternatives that inspire and sustain long-term transformations" (O'Brien et al. 2018, 42). In the face of macropolitical stagnation and neoliberal domination, embracing a broad definition of political engagement sheds new light on how change happens, what social movements can accomplish, and where affirmative alternatives might be sought. This article begins by introducing the Transition movement and what differentiates it from other environmental social movements. It then reviews recent scholarship on forms of politics and activism that play out beyond the conventional sphere, outlines my unique research context, and summarizes what I learned about Transition participants' transpolitical perspectives and experiences. Ultimately, I suggest that Transition is an effective conduit for transformative change. Whether politics and activism are broadly or restrictively defined, the potency of quiet revolutions should not be underestimated.

The transition movement for climate change resilience

Transition is both a named movement and an array of independently unfolding processes that promote resilient communities and cultivate courageous new narratives about human trajectories and options. While this article is informed by work among individuals associated with the Transition Network (https://transitionnetwork.org/) and Transition US (https://www.transitionus.org/), ideas and undertakings associated with transition can be identified in a wide range of places and practices. In the global North, movements promoting biophilic design (Kellert et al. 2011), local food (Robinson and Farmer 2017), degrowth (Kallis 2018), and voluntary simplicity (Rebouças and Soares 2021) encourage people to make changes in their own lives that align with the broader changes they wish to see. In the global South, transition thinking is expressed in calls for post-development, post-extractivism, *buen vivir* (a South American movement and social philosophy advocating good living through collectivity, decolonization, and harmonious coexistence (Chuji et al. 2019)) and *eco-swaraj* (an Indian call for personal empowerment rooted in a holistic vision of human wellbeing (Kothari 2018)). At the same time, Indigenous communities around the world are building alliances to defend their lands from fossil fuel extraction and striving to realize their visions of sustainable, self-determined futures (e.g., Coryat and Lavinas Picq 2016; Estes 2019).

The Transition movement began in 2005-2006 with efforts to proactively design local municipalities' recovery from fossil fuel dependency (Hopkins 2011). From initial efforts in Kinsale, Ireland and Totnes, England, the idea spread rapidly. Today, Transition is an international movement with over one thousand official registered groups (and countless unofficial ones) in forty-three countries around the world (with concentrations in Europe, North America, and Australia). Like other social movements, Transition is a collective enterprise driven by participants' dissatisfaction with present circumstances (Scott-Cato and Hillier 2010). It reflects environmentalist concerns that "the environment should be

protected, particularly from the harmful effects of human activities" (Milton 1996, 27), but also goes beyond ecological concerns to call for systemic social justice and prepare communities to survive the turmoil that climate change and resource depletion will bring.

Several paradoxical qualities combine to set Transition apart from other environmental social movements. First of all, although Transition is a global network, it possesses a deliberately nonhierarchical administrative structure. Rather than a top-down organization with local subsidiaries, the movement is designed to expand organically and horizontally.[2] Individual initiatives develop independently and reflect the cultural, material, economic, and educational diversity of the communities that host them (Felicetti 2017). Even as Transition celebrates relocalization and emplacement, however, participants around the world are connected by shared texts, internet documents, and social-media posts (Feola and Nunes 2014; Biddau et al. 2016). It can thus be described as a "movement of movements" united by the common desire to build an equitable low-carbon future (Interview 13, May 2, 2022). Second, Transition echoes intentional community members' desire to coalesce around mutual social values and goals (see Brown 2002), but its initiatives are built *within* existing communities rather than geographically or socially separated from them. This attempt to catalyze change while surrounded by mainstream society engenders a sense of liminality among many participants, as they continuously oscillate between "conventional and alternative lifestyles and social contexts" (Van de Grift et al. 2017, 10). Third, although Transition participants accept the decline of industrial civilization as we know it as inevitable, the movement is distinguished by its positive tone and generative stance. Rather than facing the certainty of hard times with doom-and-gloom, Transition regards the crisis "not as a cause for despair but as a transformational opportunity, a prospective change for the better that should be embraced rather than feared" (Alexander and Gleeson 2019, 106). This "applied optimism" (Hopkins 2008, 15) emboldens participants to cultivate positive change at individual, community, and cultural levels.

Finally, Transition seeks to catalyze comprehensive systemic change, but does so primarily by generating and disseminating more fulfilling alternatives rather than attempting to sway decision-makers in currently dominant political, economic, and social institutions. Skeptical of what marches, petitions, electoral campaigns, and boycotts can achieve, Transition promotes pragmatic personal experimentation with better ways to live. The list of Transition-related activities catalogued by the participants I spoke with is remarkably long. In various combinations, they promote renewable energy at home and in their communities; drive less (and walk, bike, and use public transportation more); build backyard and community gardens; oversee community supported agriculture (CSA) programs; install edible orchards and pollinator patches; organize repair cafe workshops and tool libraries; steward regional land and watersheds; and reduce/reuse/recycle to eliminate waste. They compost food scraps; buy local; eat

[2] While a horizontal organizational approach is a common element of radical movements for social change, it is unusual in the arena of environmental and climate activism.

less meat; strengthen their communities; "reskill" for self-sufficiency; and create music and art that expresses their vision of a better world (see also Willow 2022). Transition, therefore, is not a protest movement in any conventional sense but instead empowers participants to determine their communities' destiny through practical here-and-now action (Henfrey and Kendrick 2015). Participants lead by example, while hoping that others will reproduce or "scale up" their modest projects, thereby making monumental change appear tangible and feasible (Martindale 2015). Because of its do-it-yourself approach to fostering change, discussion (and sometimes heated debate) has long surrounded whether or not Transition should be viewed as a political movement.

Hoping to cast an attractive and inclusive net, Transition's founders initially endorsed a nonconfrontational, nonpartisan approach (see Hopkins 2008). It was not long, however, before critical voices weighed in. A report by the Trapese Collective—a UK-based radical action and education group—charged that Transition's "agreement 'not to rock the boat' will not help [the movement's] long term viability, as it would mean not really changing anything" and that only talking honestly about the political and economic forces influencing people's lives "will build true momentum for change" (Chatterton and Cutler 2008, 7). Others have similarly problematized Transition's post-political orientation and disdain for divisive debate as a "discursive concealment of contingency, conflict and power" (Kenis 2019, 834). True change, such arguments claim, will come not from disparate individual and community ventures but from changing the rules of the game (Mason and Whitehead 2011). Transition's spokesperson, Rob Hopkins, countered by situating the movement as one of many necessary responses rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. "Transition is not about a retreat from our need for engaged and visionary government; rather, it is designed to inspire that leadership," he declared, "Transition is increasingly creating a culture where currently unelectable policies can become electable" (Hopkins 2011, 53). Transition is thus posited as both different from and complementary to more overtly political approaches.

Because cultural change begets political change, one could conclude that Transition has been indisputably political all along. Even while avoiding adversarial ("us versus them") logic and relationships, the movement enthusiastically tackles politically-charged topics ranging from atmospheric emissions to economic justice. Studies of local Transition initiatives confirm that participants' lack of conventional protest indicates neither an acceptance of the existing state of affairs nor an inability to influence proximate decision-making (e.g., Felicetti 2017). Taking this reasoning one step further invites exciting possibilities for theoretical exploration. Shifting from perceiving Transition as *apolitical* to viewing it as *differently political* positions Transition as a location from which to reconsider how we think about politics and political engagement. What if engaged scholars accepted community development as a political act? What if we explored the capacity of local programs to change the status quo and shift the balance of power in and beyond our regions of residence (Connors and McDonald 2011)? What if we celebrated the radical potential of pragmatic action to "reorient the objectives of material and immaterial production" (Scott-Cato

and Hillier 2010, 878)? What if we recognized imagining and achieving visions of a positive future in the here-and-now as profoundly political processes (North 2010; Kenis and Mathjis 2014)?

Politics otherwise: infrapolitics / micropolitics / subpolitics

Three independently developed but complementary concepts encourage us to explore political processes that unfold in unexpected places and ways. Infrapolitics, micropolitics, and subpolitics are founded upon the shared premise that political agency can be conveyed in multiple manners and proceed outside of conventional political spheres.

James C. Scott uses the term *infrapolitics* to denote political struggles that occur "beyond the visible end of the spectrum" (1990, 183). "Infrapolitics," summarizes Guillaume Marche "is to politics what infrared is to light" (2012, 3). While low-profile, undeclared forms of resistance have often been ignored by social analysts and are difficult to discern through a narrow definitional lens, they play an important role in shaping social, economic, and ecological realities. Infrapolitical acts that seem individually insignificant sometimes combine to produce dramatic effects; given the right circumstances, Scott observes, "the accumulation of petty acts can, rather like snowflakes on a steep mountainside, set off an avalanche" (1990, 192). Over time, political engagement that is categorically covert, understated, and informal "can corrode the status quo by generating options and alternatives that dilute the reach of the dominant ideology, without directly or openly challenging it" (O'Brien et al. 2018, 3). Scott and others thus insist that we accept infrapolitics as a real—even foundational—type of politics. As he puts it, to "confin[e] our conception of the political to activity that is openly declared…is to focus on the visible coastline of politics and miss the continent that lies beyond" (Scott 1990, 199). More simply stated, overlooking infrapolitics means missing out on a vast array of political possibilities and obscuring vital intersections between power structures and everyday experience.

While Scott's classic examples involve subordinated groups (slaves, serfs, and laborers) for whom open resistance is obviously precluded, others who feel left behind and/or disempowered by the existing system and the opportunities it affords for resistance also elect to pursue politics beyond the conventional range. For example, infrapolitics has recently been evoked to make sense of urban gardens as a "form of resistance against the dominant order" that challenges urban design and actively forges new relationships between nature and the built environments of cities (Baudry 2012, 45). Even more relevant, Karen O'Brien and colleagues characterize movements like Transition and Degrowth as infrapolitical, coining the phrase *dangerous dissent* to describe movements that challenge existing paradigms by generating "new and alternative systems, new ways of doing things, new types of economic relationships, and new ways of organizing society" (O'Brien et al. 2018, 6). Far from insignificant, such movements plant the seeds of revolution by serenely realizing more just, fulfilling, and sustainable ways to live.

Emerging from the French academic tradition, the notion of *micropolitics* refers to power negotiations that transpire in realms not usually perceived as political. Michel Foucault (1998 [1976]) famously observed that resistance exists wherever systems of power are present. As extrapolated by Peter North, "the effects of power are everywhere, but, consequently, so is resistance to it" (2007, 34). The human condition thus implies an ongoing process of resisting the local systems of domination in which we are entrapped. But because systems of domination are multiple and varied, so too are the options for challenging them. While dramatic revolutions occasionally transpire, the majority of resistance is carried out in relatively restrained and transitory ways. Answering unfulfilling systems with local food, renewable energy, and alternative currency (North 2007), Transition encapsulates countless opportunities for micropolitical resistance.

Subpolitics offers an additional option for contemplating unconventional politics. As articulated by German sociologist Ulrich Beck, *subpolitics* indicates "new ways of conducting politics at social "sites" that we previously considered unpolitical" (1997, 53). There is no reason, in this view, that ideas and actions deemed political should be confined to formal political/governmental spheres. In the contemporary world, Beck argues, "opportunities for alternative actions are opening up in all fields of action—technology, medicine, law, the organization of work—under the pressure of changed challenges and fundamental convictions" (Beck 1997, 52). These changes are integral to life in the "risk society" Beck (1992) describes, marked as it is both by preoccupation with the ever-present threat of anthropogenic catastrophe and (un)natural disaster and by a progressively weakening state and concomitant loss of trust in customary processes to effect change. As Nick Stevenson notes, "subpolitics emerges when the state becomes weakened and in the context of the relative empowerment of civil society" (2012, 66). As they seek and create alternative spaces within the dominant culture, subpolitical actors interrupt politics as usual, politicizing topics typically regarded as outside the political purview. With its emphasis on cultural transformation through pragmatic action and its eschewing of conventional protest and political pressure, the Transition movement mounts a striking subpolitical critique of neoliberal, consumerist, and industrial ways of life (Stevenson 2012).

I use the term *transpolitical* here to encompass all these possibilities. Modified by a prefix that indicates movement across, beyond, and into a different state, such engagements not only proceed outside the realm of conventional politics but also consciously transfer activities of cooperation and conflict into alternative arenas that participants perceive as more promising. Transpolitics transcends politics both by overcoming accepted political divisions and assumptions and by demonstrating how political negotiations play out elsewhere.

Activism otherwise: everyday / indirect / prefigurative / nowtopian

While activism is most typically associated with public protest and strident dissent, it is more usefully understood as a broad spectrum of activities. For social change researcher Silas Harrebye, an activist is any "non-profit-oriented, active citizen engaging socially in the civic sphere to change society for the better by communicating conflict and/or solutions" (2011, 411). This broad definition acknowledges that activism***s*** (in the plural) represent a wide range of ideologies and actions. Indeed, the activism spectrum includes radical activists who are prepared to use violence to achieve their aims; confrontational activists who use civil disobedience to influence laws and policies; creative activists who challenge customary ways of thinking through alternative modes of communication; professional activists who work part- or full- time toward their goals; occasional activists eager for social connection and a chance to be heard; and everyday makers who transform daily life (Harrebye 2011). Thus, while some activists *are* oppositional and engage readily in civil disobedience, others are content to accept a plurality of views and catalyze change in more subtle ways (Neumayer and Svensson 2016).[3]

Beyond its diverse forms, activism varies over time, space, and circumstance. This is true at both individual and collective levels. For instance, how people participate in activism and whether or not they self-identify as activists often fluctuates throughout the life course, reflecting the influence of family, community, and work. For this reason, it is useful to consider participation in social movements not as separate from everyday life but as profoundly integrated into and inspired by it (Roth 2016). Although civil disobedience and direct action may be the most alluring activist forms, they are far from the only—or most effective—varieties. Rather, different—but equally valid—activism***s*** greet discontinuous life demands (Roth 2016). Changes in activist expression are also broadly discernable in longitudinal societal trends. For example, although overt environmental political activity and conservation behavior are distinct types of activism underlain by analogous beliefs, participation in one does not always correlate to participation in the other. In fact, Russell Dalton found that although political activity associated with environmentalism decreased between 1993 and 2010, conservation behavior increased markedly during the same period as a result of a changed policy environment and altered array of opportunities (Dalton 2015).

While participation in electoral/party politics, political persuasion, and direct action protest are important mechanisms of social change, Transition movement participants choose to engage otherwise, pursuing change through everyday, indirect, prefigurative, and nowtopian activist forms. As described by political scientist Jayne Mansbridge, *everyday activism* consists of "talk and action in

[3] Those who equate activism with radical and confrontational tactics are apt to attach a stigma to the term, which can have negative implications for activists who choose to work in less confrontational ways.

everyday life that is not consciously coordinated with the actions of others but is (1) to some degree caused (inspired, encouraged) by a social movement and (2) consciously intended to change others' ideas or behavior in directions advocated by the movement" (2012, 437-438). Everyday activists express their desire for change within the context of quotidian conversations and mundane activities, often adjusting the company and schedules they keep to match the transformations they hope to see. Compared to more typical varieties, everyday activism is less antagonistic, both in its relationship to the present condition and in the non-exclusionary strategy adopted by its adherents. Rather than simply opposing the status quo, everyday activists take a positive, pragmatic stance designed to entice a broad base of support. Working to enact an "accessible set of practices and policies that can resonate and influence the political mainstream rather than existing on the political fringe," they reject a militant identity and do not always view themselves as activists (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010, 480).

Like the prefigurative activism described below, everyday activism "attempts to build the future in the present" by developing essential competencies for resilience and adapting to profound socioecological challenges (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010, 487). Embodying what David Schlosberg and Romand Coles call an *environmentalism of everyday life*, Transition movement participants "confront power by stepping out of existing flows of materials and capital…by reconfiguring the flow of food, energy, and other basic needs" (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, 178; see also Staggenborg and Ogrodnik 2015). In common—and overlapping—with food justice and crafting movements, they work at the juncture of individual resistance and institutional reconstruction.

The term *indirect activism* similarly describes activism that seeks to persuade and mobilize by offering "living examples and experiential education rather than by public demonstration and disruption" (Pink 2009, 462). According to Othon Alexandrakis, it is a mode of resistance in which participants "attempt to bring about their ambitions and visions by activating other groups to undertake resistance of their own" (2016, 275). Instead of confronting the structures they oppose directly, indirect activists complete modest local actions that they concomitantly link to significant societal issues. Like everyday activism, indirect activism is rooted in the quotidian but offers considerable potential for critical expression and systemic reconstruction. As Sarah Pink points out, everyday life "is where we make our worlds and where our worlds make us" (2012, 5). Thus, indirect activists express their transformative agency by, for example, installing community gardens (Pink 2012), joining Slow Food networks (Pink 2009), and creating graffiti that calls others to action (Alexandrakis 2016). In all of these instances, indirect activism consists of hands-on mundane activities that nevertheless speak to broader concerns and contributions.

Prefigurative movements involve the intentional construction of alternative social and ecological relationships that reflect the worlds their participants would like to realize (Maeckelbergh 2009; Yates 2015). In her study of the alterglobalization movement, political anthropologist Marianne Maeckelbergh discovered that prefigurative activists bring means and ends together so that the

structures they develop to organize the quest for change parallel the structures they ultimately desire. The individuals she worked with create their preferred version of the future in the here-and-now, thereby "removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the present and a goal in the future" (Maeckelbergh 2011, 4). Transition has also been recognized as a prefigurative movement—one that offers a uniquely hopeful vision of a sustainable future (Biddau et al. 2016). Transition participants experiment with diverse economic and social arrangements and continually "prefigure alternatives to development and to forms of growth-oriented economies and societies" (Nicolosi and Feola 2016, 154). In Transition and elsewhere, the creation of viable options not only energizes participants but concurrently undermines the power of the present order by demonstrating that real change is possible (Maeckelbergh 2011, 14).

By pragmatically extending prefigurative principals, *nowtopian* activists endeavor to bring pieces of an imagined utopia into the present. They purposefully reclaim their time and energy from the logic of money and markets, thereby mounting a potent critique of dominant patterns of thinking and ascribing value but, as Chris Carlsson explains in his seminal text on the topic, "instead of traditional political forms like unions or parties, [nowtopian activists come] together in practical projects" (Carlsson 2008, 3). Nowtopias are tangible world-creation schemes in which work is done "for social and ecological reasons and explicitly *not* for the proliferation of capital" (Carlsson and Manning 2010, 928). This type of activism entails creating and facilitating "forms of living, working and producing together which sit outside of capital exchange and instead generate new commons and new forms of relationality" (Gearey and Ravenscroft 2019, 454).

While diverse, nowtopian projects almost always involve hands-on work that is unpaid, essential, and genuinely fulfilling. Quietly proceeding in countless "invisible corners of daily life" (Carlsson 2008, 235), such efforts can be observed in many segments of society and range from vacant-lot/guerilla gardening, to bicycle clubs and repair centers, to open source software networks. Refusing to bide their time or beg others to bring change, Transition participants and other nowtopians nourish alternatives that already exist in their heads, hearts, and hands (Carlsson 2008; Hopkins 2008). Like everyday, indirect, and prefigurative activists, nowtopians channel the ability of infrapolitical, micropolitical, and subpolitical action to challenge the status quo and build an environmentally sustainable and socially cohesive world. As we will soon see, these theories are made tangible in Transition participants' visions, choices, and lived realities.

Research context and methods

Ours is not a hopeful time. Extreme weather events are already impacting many regions, and future warming and sea level rise are likely to unleash future waves of migration and global sociopolitical instability. Habitat loss, climate change, and other anthropogenic factors are driving a mass extinction so intense that half the Earth's species stand to be lost by the end of the century (Kolbert 2014). And

economic, regional, and racial inequities persist despite decades of amelioratory efforts. Young people carry the greatest psychological burden. In a 2019 survey of American teens, 57 percent said they were scared about climate change and 52 percent reported feeling angry about it (Plautz 2020). In the same year, a survey in the UK revealed that nearly one in five young people do not feel that life is worth living—double the rate recorded a decade earlier (Booth 2019). In the intervening years, the pace of change and the prevalence of despair—exacerbated by the isolation and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic—has only increased. This is the disconcerting reality that Transition participants seek to transcend. In this context, the search for hope is as urgent as the search for solutions.

The perception that political leaders are unable—or simply unwilling—to respond adequately to the monumental challenges we face was intensified in the US by the 2016 election of a flagrant climate change denier. It was tempered only slightly by the passage of the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act under the Biden Administration, which will support the nation's shift to renewable energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions but is seen by many in the environmental community as a case of too little, too late (Isaacs-Thomas 2022). Increasingly, concerned citizens recognize that they cannot count on the government to step in and solve their problems. Indeed, this is a common refrain in the Transition movement: In today's new normal, no one is coming to rescue us or our communities; there is no "silver bullet" or "magic solution" (Hopkins 2013, 36).

Given the failure of neoliberal government and market forces to tackle the conjoined problems of climate change, resource depletion, and the inevitable social turmoil that will result, growing numbers of citizens accept that they are on their own. Instead of waiting for someone to save them, they now realize that they must save themselves. This has opened new doors to "the possibility for liberated political action" that solves problems through "micropolitical community processes, rather than via normal, macropolitical channels" (Scott-Cato and Hillier 2010, 879). Relatedly, Transition movement participants cite already-in-motion climatic and ecological changes as underlying their shared stance that change is inevitable and imminent. "Change is happening," declares movement literature, "our choice is between a future we want and one which happens to us" (Transition US 2011, 8). Far beyond simply changing lightbulbs and installing solar panels, we need "a profound shift in what we do and how we do it; a complete adjustment of what we imagine to be lying in front of us, of our expectations of the future" (Hopkins 2011, 32).

The interconnections between Transition participants' assessments of politics as usual, their perceptions of ongoing processes of change, and their approach to political engagement became clear over the course of ethnographic interviews with 29 individuals.[4] The bulk of this research was conducted between February and September of 2022. Twenty-five in-depth interviews took place online during

[4] While all interviewees gave me permission to use their names, I opted to preserve anonymity for the purposes of this article because of the possibility that differing views regarding politics and activism in Transition could prove contentious in future contexts.

this period using the Zoom teleconferencing platform. Guided by my goal of better understanding how Transition participants conceptualize the future, their relationships within their local communities, and their strategies for creating change, I asked interviewees to answer ten open-ended questions.[5] Conversational interviews ranging from 43 to 85 minutes in duration were recorded, transcribed, and coded based on themes that rose to prominence during the qualitative data analysis process. Four earlier interviews with Transition participants in my own Midwestern US Transition initiative (conducted in 2019 and early 2020) were also re-coded and included. Conducted by a native anthropologist who shares the broad goals of the Transition movement, this research embodies a critically engaged activist approach that endeavors to unite academic, applied, and reflexive scholarship in one dynamic undertaking (Chari and Donner 2010; Speed 2006).[6]

The vast majority of interviewees resided in communities across the United States (eleven in western states, eleven in central states, and five in eastern states), although individuals from Brazil and Canada also took part. Interviewees included eighteen women and eleven men who ranged in age from their early

[5] Questions included the following:

1) Why did you get involved in the Transition movement? What makes it interesting or special to you? How would you describe Transition's goals?

2) What kinds of Transition activities do you participate in? What other activities do you do to support its larger goals?

3) When you think about the direction society is moving today, what do you see as the key challenges? What would you like to change? Do you feel that you are able to shape the direction the future takes? In what ways?

4) Take a moment to envision your community 20 years from now. Envision a positive future in which we have managed to overcome fossil fuel addiction and are adapting successfully to a changed climate. (It doesn't have to be a utopia, and you are not expected to have fully formulated ideas. Your job is simply to brainstorm what life in your future community is like.) What is your community like in the future you imagine? What stands out first and foremost in your vision?

5) How would you describe the community you live in? When you walk/drive/bike through town, what kinds of things do you tend to notice? What thoughts, memories, and associations go through your mind? Do you have a strong sense of community?

6) What do you like about your community? What would you like to change?

7) How do you see your own role within your community? How important is working locally, as opposed to a larger regional, national, or global levels?

8) Do you see Transition as a political movement? In what ways is it political? How is it non-political? Thinking about your role in Transition, do you see yourself as an activist or as something else?

9) What do you see as the best ways to make change?

10) Is there anything else I should have asked but didn't? Is there anything else you'd like to share?

[6] The phrase *native anthropologist* is used to describe someone who conducts research within their own community of origin.

twenties to their eighties, although most were middle-aged or recently retired. Almost all held a middle or upper-middle class economic status and higher than average educational attainment, and only four individuals claimed a non-white identity. While my interviews open an exceptional window into the lived experience of those who participate in the North American Transition movement, the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, residents of the global South, and other marginalized communities who partake in diverse transition processes apart from the eponymous movement are beyond this project's necessarily limited scope.

This research took methodological impetus from the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, I anticipated conducting multi-sited research on Transition groups operating in North America, Europe, and Australia. With this opportunity precluded by unforeseen travel and budgetary restrictions, I decided to conduct interviews via Zoom instead. This allowed me to quickly reach a larger number of individuals involved in a greater diversity of Transition groups. In addition, it enabled me to conduct my research in a nearly carbon-neutral manner (powering my laptop instead of boarding multiple airline flights). Given the topic of this research, this decision was as ethical as it was practical. While online interviews cannot dissolve distance or provide a full multi-sensory immersion into an interviewee's locale, they are increasingly accepted as a valid and legitimate way to conduct qualitative research and raise important questions about what it means to enter the field and conduct fieldwork (Howlett 2022). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the chasm between offline and online life has narrowed considerably, with experiences as diverse as business meetings and family reunions entering the realm of cyberspace. After months of practice and timely improvements in teleconferencing technology, most people now feel comfortable engaging openly in online conversation. Given their involvement in a locally focused but globally networked movement, this is especially true for the Transition participants I spoke with.

Transition in politics / politics in transition

Transition participants' responses to my queries about the political nature of the movement were surprisingly diverse. Despite agreeing on the need for broad collaboration, local action, and transformative change, some interviewees insisted that Transition is (and should remain) apolitical while others enthusiastically embraced (and elucidated) the movement's political dimensions. In some cases, interviewees offered opinions that appeared diametrically opposed: One individual stated that, as a 501(c)(3) [nonprofit] organization, Transition is "absolutely nonpolitical and it can't be" (Interview 10, March 15, 2022), even as another declared that "any movement that is trying to achieve the goals of transition has to be political" (Interview 21, July 7, 2022). On closer inspection, I found that whether one characterizes Transition as political or not hinges upon different definitions of and assumptions about politics rather than different understandings of the movement's philosophy, strategy, and advocated activities. In fact, all of the individuals I spoke with endeavor to catalyze systemic

change from outside of the conventional political arena. Those who equate politics with partisanship and antagonism position their work apart from a realm they see as problematically divisive and ineffectual. Those who view building relationships, developing sustainable ways to meet physical and social needs, and imagining alternative futures as political acts more readily adopt this designation.

Recalling Transition's adaptability as one of its defining characteristics, some participants adjust their perceptions and descriptions of the movement accordingly. Given that many North American initiatives are established in conservative areas, Transition leaders sometimes "soft-pedal" the movement's message in order to "meet communities where they are at in terms of political climate and dominant values" (Poland et al. 2019, 185). For some participants, the ability of Transition to exist in both liberal and conservative settings is among its main attractions (Interview 23, July 13, 2022). As one midwestern movement leader put it, "you can't go into these little towns and rural areas, which are deep red [i.e., conservative/Republican], and get into the politics. You have to be ecologically focused and practically focused about what the assets are and what the needs are in the community. So, to me, hyperlocal means not political" (Interview 6, February 23, 2022). Another leader lamented the "fundamental divisiveness that is tearing this country apart." Reflecting on his successful introduction of sustainability programs in conservative areas, he added, "I don't care who they vote for as long as they have an interest in their community" (Interview 12, April 8, 2022).

Relatedly, Transition emphasizes collaboration, boundary crossing, and "respectful dialogue between the extremes" (Interview 10, March 15, 2022). Conversation and common ground were frequent interview themes. As one individual noted, it is crucial that we "speak in a calm voice and recognize that there are conversations that need to happen" (Interview 6, February 23, 2022). "We look at what the shared values are and try to build bridges," explained another, "rather than trying to identify with a political party" (Interview 15, May 12, 2022). Indeed, compared to other environmental social movements, Transition offers exceptional opportunities for overcoming long-standing societal divisions. Although it highlights climate resilience and social justice, it has "the power to attract people on the [conservative] side of the political spectrum, because it is also about self-reliance, not depending on government, looking after your neighbors, and leaving behind a better legacy for future generations" (Interview 13, May 2, 2022). For some Transition participants—such as the woman who (after careful consideration) declared Transition to be apolitical in nature because of its insistence on hearing all voices (Interview 18, May 24, 2022)—this inclusive philosophy is at odds with expectations about what a political movement looks like.

These sentiments suggest that Transition participants who shy away from a political designation tend to equate politics with partisan division and unilateral campaigns, both which are broadly eschewed within the movement. Some interviewees made this contrast clear before they were willing to discuss the possibility of politics in Transition. As one woman stated, "I think it's important

to be nonpartisan. You may disagree with people of a certain party, but they're still part of this community so we have to find ways that we can work together" (Interview 24, July 13, 2022). Since its inception, another explained, Transition has never been about politics, yet paradoxically, "the idea of engaging in local municipalities was [always] a big piece of it because you don't do things in isolation…so I think its intent is to be politically involved, but not in partisan politics. That's a whole different thing." (Interview 25, July 18, 2022).

Several interviewees presented astute analyses of the distinction between electoral/partisan involvement (which they avoid) and influencing policies/confronting power structures (which they advocate). For instance, one man drew upon his own definition of politics to elucidate how he envisions its role in Transition. "Politics is the art of compromise. Politics is the art of actually getting things done," he said. Transition, therefore, "is inherently political, but it doesn't have to be inherently partisan…because the changes we need involve the interests of everyone across the political divide" (Interview 11, April 4, 2022). Another likewise declared that "politics can't be avoided, even in organizations, because politics has to do with the workings of group dynamics. People who have political office have a certain kind of power and those who elect them in our society would like to influence how that power is used" (Interview 26, July 19, 2022). Reflecting at length on the matter, one Transition participant I spoke with argued for an expansive vision of what politics can encompass. As she elaborated:

> I think that most everything is political. Most every action that people do or view that they hold has implications for political policy in terms of governing bodies and in terms of political parties. Transition is not partisan politically. Instead of supporting a particular candidate…[we] educate and try to bring dialogue forward, which is a political act in the larger sense because it goes against the silencing and the powerlessness myth of 'business as usual' that the largest political forces continue to impose on us. [We] invite everybody to do these life-saving actions, without regard for who they vote for or what their positions may be" (Interview 14, May 6, 2022).

In her view, inclusive nonpartisan efforts that seek to catalyze change and challenge existing circumstances constitute political acts.

Carrying the conversation in a different direction, several interviewees suggested that the issues Transition takes on are not intrinsically political, but rather have become politic*ized* in our ideologically discordant era. For example, one woman asserted that Transition should not be considered political, but also acknowledged that "there are so many elements that can be viewed as such. And that messaging really distracts from the purpose. I feel like Transition is about our common humanity and about the house that we all live in" (Interview 8, March 4, 2022). Transition participants consistently identified the politicization of issues like climate change as a serious problem. People "have politicized something that isn't a political issue," lamented another interviewee, and a huge

challenge moving forward will be to "welcome all voices around the table and really have conversations" (Interview 1, July 15, 2019). Transition participants agree that planetary health, human health, and meeting people's basic needs should not be up for political debate. Nevertheless, these have become hot-button issues, with engaged citizens under considerable pressure to choose sides (Interview 5, February 13, 2022; Interview 28, September 16, 2022).

Transition's political dimensions were most enthusiastically discussed in reference to how citizens can influence local policies and how personal actions can be "scaled up" to catalyze widespread transformative change. Interestingly, even interviewees who characterized Transition as apolitical often exempted nonpartisan local civic involvement from the divisive political realm they deride, noting the distinction between polarized national politics and more personal and productive local interactions. Only at the local level, one interviewee stated, might politics "still be worth the effort" (Interview 19, May 25, 2022). At the same time, participants who embrace the movement's political nature often sited Transition groups' efforts to influence local policies as a reason for their position. As one woman explained, Transition is political "because we have to work with the municipality to change things" (Interview 27, August 19, 2022). In her experience, individuals who manage community vegetable gardens or bicycle to work can only expand on their ideals and actions if they get municipalities on board. By attending meetings and supporting local ordinances to reduce plastic waste or increase renewable energy (among other things), Transition participants are "doing politics at the local level, one city at a time" (Interview 20, June 30, 2022). Indeed, at this scale, the experiential divide between personal action, community action, and political action readily dissolves: Transition participants adopt a change they would like to see (e.g., home composting is initiated). Through passionate role modeling and instruction, the practice spreads to friends, colleagues, and neighbors (e.g., multiple people begin home composting or develop a communal compost site). Eventually, the Transition group decides to take the issue to the city council, which in small and medium-sized communities often includes friends, colleagues, and neighbors (e.g., a municipal composting program is established). In such cases, there is no sense of rupture as Transition-related activities spread from profoundly personal to ostensibly political realms.

Many interviewees talked openly about their local political involvement. For example, one woman declared that her Transition group is seeking to do politics differently. At the local level, she affirmed, "we're working with government agencies and councils, so we're definitely political. I think politics has gotten a bad name in a lot of ways, and it means something really negative to a lot of people. The thing that we're doing differently is making it a positive thing" (Interview 17, May 19, 2022). Another interviewee described how her group had convinced their local government to minimize its ecological footprint (in this case by using renewable energy for government buildings). "I guess you call that political," she stated, "but it's very nonpartisan" (Interview 24, July 13, 2022). Others talked about finding ways to ensure that positive changes undertaken by individuals continue and expand over time. Drawing a historical analogy to the

abolition of slavery, one interviewee pointed out that even though some individual slave owners decided to do the right thing of their own accord, ending the practice required putting laws and regulations in place. In other words, although "a lot of it has to come from the people…[to] make things actually stick sometimes you're going to need policies" (Interview 1, July 15, 2019). Thus, even while they avoid large-scale political campaigns, working with municipalities offers an attractive way for Transitioners to "institutionalize the changes they are working toward" (Interview 16, May 18, 2022).

While Transition is rarely depicted as a resistance movement, the vast majority of participants believe they are expediting "a profound break with current society" (Kenis and Mathjis 2014, 182). Instead of confrontation, protest, and political pressure, they catalyze change from below, outside, and beyond conventional politics. Instead of leveling explicit critiques against business/politics as usual, they challenge existing systems by creating alternatives or, as Rob Hopkins succinctly puts it, by "just doing stuff" (Hopkins 2013). As one interviewee summarized:

> Politics will have to change to make the bigger structural changes that have to happen, but Transition itself is a little bit subversive of that because it's saying, 'let's do this at the grassroots level, let people start making these changes individually.' And then that spreads and you influence more people. These changes can ripple through society. And I don't think it's going to take a majority of people to feel this way. If we can get ten to twenty percent of the culture to start thinking along these lines, there may be a possibility of that rippling out much broader. The idea of Transition is to *get around* politics (Interview 9, March 7, 2022).

In Transition, the goal of political change is not abandoned—it is just pursued differently.

Moving beyond conventional political engagement does not mean giving up on transforming existing power structures or relinquishing decision-making authority. On the contrary, Transition participants trade conventional engagement for strategies they deem more likely to result in real change; rather than refusing politics altogether, they do politics otherwise. In this context, transpolitical action takes several forms. For one thing, Transition participants disregard dominant but divisive norms that prevent people from talking to one another and instead subvert the status quo by rebuilding relationships across political boundaries. Significantly, they also develop and disseminate local practices that put systemic change within the realm of possibility, illustrating how patterns of resource procurement could be more sustainable, just, and fulfilling. Finally, the simple but radical belief that things could be different can be seen as a potent political act. Instead of fighting to claim a larger portion of the pie, Transition encourages people to turn down the pie and bake a cake instead. By combining an implicit rejection of current circumstances with an explicit

demonstration of alternatives, Transition develops vibrant possibilities for long-term transformation.

Doing (and defining) activism differently

Transition attracts individuals with identities and interests that go far beyond those typically claimed by environmentalists and other self-proclaimed activists. Paralleling their diverse assessments of politics in Transition, interviewees expressed considerable variability in their appraisals of activism and their willingness to affiliate with it. As we will see, some Transition participants accept the label unequivocally, others accept it with qualifiers, and still others reject it altogether. When I asked people who engage in a comparable array of Transition-related activities if they saw themselves as activists, answers ranged from "completely, that is why I live" (Interview 20, June 30, 2022) to "we've shied away from all that as much as possible" (Interview 17, May 19, 2022). It thus appears that movement participants' relationships with activism hinge neither on how they view the goals of the movement nor on the activities they undertake as part of it but rather on how they define activism. While not all Transitioners describe themselves as activists, all work diligently to promote positive change through practical, local action for environmental and social sustainability. Furthermore, even those who avoid the label see involvement in the Transition movement and being "in transition" toward a resilient future as important aspects of their identity (Biddau et al. 2016, 153). Regardless of how it is categorized, their work evokes the everyday, indirect, prefigurative, and nowtopian undertakings outlined above.

Some Transition participants unreservedly proclaimed an activist identity. Although he hadn't previously pondered the meaning of the term, one interviewee matter-of-factly stated that he sees himself as an activist because he "encourages things to get done and does those things" (Interview 26, July 19, 2022). For other individuals, contemplating their association with activism prompted personal reflection. As one organizer put it, "I resonate with it as one of many aspects of my identity. I'm an activist. I see myself as a systems thinker, a holistic visionary…I am putting myself out there and trying to *live* this change as much as I possibly can" (Interview 16, May 18, 2022). Others considered activism a lifelong calling. "I do strongly identify as an activist. That's probably my main identity," reflected one woman, "I have to stand up against injustice. It's been in my blood since I was a kid. So that's what it means, to me, to be an activist" (Interview 15, May 12, 2022). Similarly, another Transitioner told me, "I think it's just my calling. Ever since I learned about climate change…I just care about people's health, making sure that everyone has their needs met, and making sure we work on this together" (Interview 28, September 16, 2022). Because Transitions' inclusive and pragmatic approach is commensurate with these individuals' understandings of activism, they view the movement as an attractive arena for activist expression and a promising place to do meaningful work.

Quite a few interviewees were willing to adopt an activist label but felt that caveats were in order. Several were comfortable using the term to describe themselves, so long as it was clear that *political* activism was not included (e.g., Interview 6, February 23, 2022). One man contrasted his approach with political activism, stating that what he does with Transition "*is* activism but of a different nature" (Interview 2, July 15, 2019). Another took the time to unpack the differences he observed between conventional activism and Transition's approach which, he explained:

> [Transition] springs from a deeper analysis; it's not just reactionary. It is based on a positive vision of the more just and regenerative society that we can create together rather than just saying we don't want that. It is inclusive. It's not something that we're trying to ram down people's throats. We're trying to build consensus from the grassroots to take in a wide diversity of perspectives and create a future that works for everyone. I think it's holistic; it's not looking at things in [a] siloed, single-issue way. And I think it's creative. It's humble. It's iterative. It's continually evolving (Interview 13, May 2, 2022).

Others saw the avoidance of protest as a key feature that sets Transition apart from conventional activism. One woman noted that although she never protests, she still sees herself "as an activist in life." Reflecting further on what constitutes an activist, she added, "I think that we all are [activists], because we believe in something and we want people to feel that" (Interview 27, August 19, 2022).

For several people I spoke with, explaining what made their version of activism unique prompted discussion about alternative terminologies. *Change agent* is a preferable self-designation for some individuals who prioritize private over public actions and do-it-yourself projects over civil society politics (Harrebye 2011, 420). For instance, one woman said she saw herself as a "change agent [who is] definitely situated on the front edge of change" (Interview 18, May 24, 2022). Another pondered possible designations, eventually arriving at change as a key aspect of her identity. "Is a change agent the same thing as an activist?" she asked. "I want to bring about change…there are just so many different ways to go about it. And I always think of activism, rightly or wrongly, as being more in your face, more aggressive" (Interview 1, July 15, 2019). Conversely, another interviewee claimed to be content with a "lazy" use of the term activist and said she often refers to herself as a *community organizer* but shies away from the change agent designation because so many people she encounters fear change (Interview 29, September 16, 2022).

One woman I spoke with preferred to describe herself as a *solutions innovator*, a term she saw as transcending political action. "The word activist is too politically wrought," she explained:

> when I picture an activist, it is picketing on the streets and denouncing the ways that society is running. You have to front that with a message. [Being] a solutions innovator [means] leading by example and showing people the benefits and the beauty to what it is that you're doing and living within your message (Interview 8, March 4, 2022).

Indeed, most Transition participants acknowledge that there are many ways to be an activist, some which suit their proclivities far better than others. While conceding that she probably is "an activist of sorts," one interviewee discussed the importance of avoiding coming off as outrageous and was very conscious of the line between promoting positive change and protesting what one sees as wrong. "It's a conversation about how we can get better," she said, and "I think we will be able to achieve a lot more by being friends than by protesting or screaming, [although] I'm sure there's a time and place for that" (Interview 4, March 27, 2020). As this statement suggests, Transition participants often acknowledge protest as a valid strategy, but see it as deviating considerably from their own approach. While a handful of interviewees did report partaking in public protest events (e.g., the 2014 People's Climate March, 2017 Women's March, or regional spin-offs), these activities tend to be held apart from their Transition-related roles.

Interestingly, several interviewees told me that they were formerly heavily engaged in public protest but had become disillusioned about what this kind of action can accomplish. For example, one woman said she used to attend protest events frequently but realized that "protests aren't working anymore. I think we have to be a lot more strategic." For her, this means

> talking about the benefits of making the changes that we need to make in our world to have a livable, sustainable, resilient future. The positives. Make it more attractive for people to come and join the party (Interview 23, July 13, 2022).

Another interviewee thought back to her youthful involvement in protests against the Vietnam War, noting that she "got disenchanted with it back then. It seemed to me to be more theater than actually getting something accomplished" (Interview 17, May 19, 2022). While her desire for change remains consistent with activism, her approach to problem-solving has taken a different tack. Another interviewee got his start in conventional anti-war, anti-globalization, and social justice activism in the early 2000s. He described experiencing a "growing feeling" that the kind of activism he was used to was too aggressive and too eager to play on people's fears and guilt. Problematically, it was "not offering any particular solutions, not doing a lot of in-depth education for people to really understand the root causes. And that was becoming less and less satisfying to me" (Interview 13, May 2, 2022).

Some Transition participants are more uncomfortable than others wearing an activist label. Several individuals brought up the topic of protest in order to contrast it with their own (very different) ways of working, seeking self-definition by articulating what they clearly are not: They are not mainstream, not confrontational, not loud. They instead see themselves as intellectuals, educators, and role models. Citing his lack of participation in protests, one man said, "I don't view myself as an activist…I'm more of an intellectual radical, thinking through the issues, writing papers" (Interview 10, March 15, 2022). Similarly, another affirmed, "I'm more on the intellectual side of activism. I'm not somebody who leads protest demonstrations or goes door to door or anything like that" (Interview 11, April 3, 2022). One Transition leader voiced a particularly negative view of protest and conventional activism, which he associated with divisiveness and an inability to generate solutions. "Instead of protest," he proudly proclaimed, "we put together an educational program" for our community (Interview 12, April 8, 2022). Highlighting the significance of learning and doing, another interviewee talked about how she'd previously considered participating in protests at her state capital but decided against it. "I'm not sure that is the best way to spend my time," she said, "Am I really going to be heard there?" What she now encourages—and enacts—are changes to the fundamental systems that inform our lives. "We distribute our energy. We grow and distribute our food" (Interview 22, July 13, 2022). As these examples illustrate, Transition works not by criticizing the status quo but by changing it, little by little, and inviting others along for the ride.

As Transition participants see it, conventional activism is not the most effective path toward the changes they wish to achieve. They choose to do activism otherwise, recognizing the coexistence of myriad viable alternatives. As in other environmental social movements, individuals involved in Transition play different roles—some are visionaries; others are builders. As one man eloquently stated, "I want to teach as I fight and I want to learn as I lead…I'm trying to play my role…I'm trying to get into a new way of thinking" (Interview 21, July 2, 2022). The practical, local actions Transitioners undertake to promote environmental and social sustainability transcend the terms they select to describe themselves and the identities they claim. Moving beyond acts that are customarily accorded an activist label, Transition participants are building

> the new Gaian structures that are going to support a livable world. All the food production, distribution changes, and ideas about business and how it has to be structured [to] meet needs in a non-extractive and regenerative way. Economies that fit the way that living systems work. And then another dimension is the shift in consciousness that's needed to support those new structures. That's activist too…And there's [another] dimension of activism now: Nurturing life. All the care work, everything we do. Parenting and caring for one another in every way and caring for the earth and regenerating the soil. All of it (Interview 14, May 6, 2022).

Armed with applied optimism and perseverance, one interviewee explained, Transitioners act locally rather than "waiting around for government or business to do something." Transition, he said, works best "in areas where we don't need anybody's permission to make a change. We can do it ourselves" (Interview 13, May 2, 2022). Doing activism differently implies that transformative change can transpire away from the spotlight and defy conventional expectations. It signals a quiet revolution comprised of simple daily acts that change how people think and live, setting in motion cumulative changes with the power to alter fundamental social, political, and ecological realities.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Transition participants' relationships to politics and activism are complex and diverse. Yet their transpolitical approach to catalyzing change often transcends the terms they use to describe their activities. Whether such labels instill a sense of pride, inevitability, ambivalence, or disdain, Transitioners work to create a more sustainable and cohesive world not by appealing to leaders of the dominant system through political pressure and public protest but by undertaking pragmatic yet potentially transformative action outside of the conventional political sphere. They grow food, install solar panels, and connect with neighbors (and so much more) because they believe activism otherwise is more likely to yield positive, tangible change than more customary political paths.

While individuals may think about politics and activism however they wish, inclusive definitions capable of encompassing the actions Transition participants take and the changes they hope to make help to guide considerations of what Transition might imply for our understanding of social movements and processes of change. Transition is not about partisanship, division, or protest. But its participants do seek to renegotiate patterns of cooperation and conflict over tangible and intangible resources (Leftwich 1983) and aim to shift "the discourses of power within communities and society and between individuals" (Connors and McDonald 2011, 560). In this sense, Transition is intrinsically (albeit differently) political. For scholars of social movements, taking transpolitical action seriously ensures that we do not discount quiet revolutions and what they can accomplish by illuminating subtle ways of working for change and their contemporary relevance. For activists and movement participants, this broad framing can serve as a motivating force, demonstrating transpolitical action's effectiveness and potential to catalyze change.

This study suggests several important (and interrelated) directions for social movement research. First, exploring transpolitical engagement in relation to the potential weakening of conventional political power is essential. Transition participants' disinclination to do politics as usual indicates both a "radical change and break with the past [and] a response to political inaction and stagnation" (Biddau et al. 2016, 157). Pointing to widespread systemic corruption and public disinformation campaigns, one individual I interviewed didn't mince words; at all but the most local levels, he said, "politics is worthless now" (Interview 19, May

25, 2022). Transpolitical engagement represents a reaction to the failures of conventional politics. But it simultaneously serves to further weaken conventional politics' hold; by enacting change elsewhere, the determinative capacity of the formal political arena is progressively undermined. This positive feedback loop reveals how everyday acts can accumulate to diminish the potency of conventional politics while concurrently transforming social, ecological, and economic systems.

Second, it behooves us to seek out and learn from additional instances of political engagement in unexpected places. As increasing numbers and types of citizens lose faith in conventional politics, we are likely to witness a cascade of subsurface action—if we are willing to look for it. Such explorations will necessarily consider how complex intersections of race, class, and gender converge to shape transpolitical action in contexts of post-carbon transition. Actions deemed uncontroversial when undertaken by members of a privileged majority, for instance, may be flagged as activist (or even militant) when performed by marginalized minorities. Similarly, what qualifies as intentional transpolitical action for one group of people may in fact represent an imposed survival strategy for another. These—and many other—matters of political identity and power dynamics comprise valuable topics for future research and writing.[7]

Third, Transition reminds us to remain attentive to emergent strategies that bear little resemblance to established activist forms. As longstanding assumptions about linear cause and effect are replaced by more sophisticated understandings derived from complexity science, alternative ways of catalyzing change are likely to gain recognition and respect (Poland et al. 2019). While the personal is now more political than ever, the gulf between formal engagement and the work of change continues to widen; what plays out on the conventional political stage no longer reflects the beliefs and practices of those most committed to building a better world. As social movements change, so too must our ways of identifying and investigating them.

The implications for social movement participants are also significant. As we realize that explicit involvement in formal politics is not compulsory, we concomitantly comprehend that "we shape the world by living" in it (Purdy 2015, 22). From the food we eat to the steps that carry us between points, our daily choices inevitably influence the structures and systems in which we are enmeshed. Our everyday actions matter. Regardless of how we choose to describe ourselves, we become political actors when we appreciate our actions' entanglement with larger issues and causes. Through our diverse daily celebrations of sustainable alternatives and our (equally diverse) daily refusals to support a destructive status quo (Hopkins 2013), we take radical transformative action outside of and apart from conventional politics. By thinking and living differently, we launch a quiet revolution.

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Book review: Sabu Kohso, *Radiation and Revolution*

Alexander Brown

Sabu Kohso, 2020, *Radiation and Revolution*. Durham and London: Duke University Press (202; USD $25.95)

Sabu Kohso's *Radiation and Revolution*, published by Duke as part of its Thought in the Act series edited by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, is probably the first full-length book to bring a revolutionary perspective to the Fukushima disaster. Like my *Anti-nuclear Protest in Post-Fukushima Japan* and Azumi Tamura's *Post-Fukushima Activism*, it examines post-Fukushima activism from a perspective rooted in contemporary left theory. But Kohso goes beyond these academic analyses to deliver a searing critique of nuclear-state capitalism with an unwavering revolutionary commitment. This is a manifesto in the best sense of the term ranging across what the author describes as 'personal narrative, empirical description, theoretical analysis, and metaphysical speculation' (ix). Like any manifesto, it can be criticised for a lack of empirical detail and theoretical moderation. However, it successfully captures both the terror of the Fukushima disaster and the sense of possibility that social movement responses to it inspired within the radical left, both within and beyond Japan.

Sabu Kohso was born in Japan and grew up in the fire of the post-1968 revolutionary movement, becoming a student activist in high school. He moved to the United States in 1980 and has worked since at the interface of Anglo-European and Japanese intellectual, artistic, and political culture. In the 2000s, Kohso established a reputation as a translator of the work of Japanese intellectuals like literary critic Karatani Kōjin and architectural theorist Isozaki Arata. He contributed to the global intellectual ferment of the alter-globalisation movement, in particular through his collaboration with the Marxist intellectuals who write together as the Midnight Notes Collective. He is a translator and interpreter of David Graeber's work and has facilitated exchanges between radical intellectuals and activists in Japan and the English-speaking world as part of the VOL Collective, which produced a fascinating journal for Japanese publisher Ibunsha in the mid-2000s. These activities helped build the first major alter-globalisation counter-summit in Japan against the G8 meeting in Hokkaido in 2008. Kohso's 2009 book *Genealogy of the New Anarchism* (in Japanese), brought together this period of activism, writing, and translation, combining Graeber's 'New Anarchism' with a Deleuzian ontology.

When the Fukushima disaster struck in 2011, Kohso worked with revolutionary intellectuals in North America, Japan, and elsewhere to produce the blog *Japan: Fissures in the Planetary Apparatus*[1] and translated activism, citizen

[1] https://jfissures.wordpress.com/

science, and critical theory between English and Japanese. Contributors organised international solidarity and information sharing events in Japan and North America. Kohso wrote continuously, sharing his observations of the largest social movements in Japan since the 1960s. *Radiation and Revolution* is based on Kohso's activism and writing during this time. It builds upon the theoretical lines of flight developed in his earlier work and incorporates debates within the global current of activist intellectuals writing on the disaster in Japanese and English. His original and engaged reading of Fukushima and its aftermath also serves as a record of debates within the global left that emerged in response to the disaster.

Structured as a series of semi-independent essays, Kohso introduces a geophilosophical perspective as the central problematic of the book. He posits a tension between a universalist Kantian World, defined as 'the expanding and totalizing movement of capitalist nation-states,' and an Earth conceptualised as 'the assemblage of *lives-as-struggle* of planetary beings' (xii). Using a Deleuzian reading of the Book of Revelation, Kohso interpret the Fukushima disaster as the apocalypse, from which emerges a 'planetary crowd' made up of 'reverberating' struggles in different geographical and cultural locations. This crowd, he explains, is constituted by participants in locally-rooted struggles for survival in ecosystems damaged by the expansive techno-industrial development of the capitalist World.

Four substantial essays make up the body of the work. In Chapter 1, Kohso examines the cascading effects of the nuclear disaster and the way it dispersed nuclear refugees and radionuclides, blurring boundaries between inside and outside, affected and unaffected. This disruption to the smooth functioning of society also opened up space for resistance. Chapter 2 traces the relationship between Japanese nationalism and the nuclear industry. Kohso understands the rise of the modern Japanese nation-state as a foreclosure of Japan's expansive potential as an East Asian archipelago, whose island chains connect the Russian Far Eat with Taiwan, and Korea. This archipelagic potential was forestalled by an insularity that created hard borders defined by capitalist developmentalism and militarism. In their response to the Fukushima disaster, Japanese authorities doubled down on this insularity to contain the contradictions opened up by the disaster and staged a return to 'normality' to enable continued economic development, such as by hosting the Olympic Games in a contaminated northeast Japan.

In Chapter 3 Kohso zooms out, situating the Fukushima disaster in a long history of radical critiques of nuclear power that link the military and civilian uses of nuclear technology. Nuclear energy requires a regime of social control to contain the risks it poses and creates the potential, whether utilised or not, for states to build nuclear weapons. But nuclear technologies produce waste and radioactive fallout that become a 'masterless object' (*mushubutsu*). This is a term Kohso adapts from the legal argument desployed by the Fukushima nuclear power station operator Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) to evade responsibility for the radioactive contamination of land and sea beyond

the boundaries of the power station itself. The proliferation of nuclear technologies and uncontrollable wastes capture sand control the future, creating the need for an unending regime of nuclear governance.

In Chapter 4 Kohso gives a potted history of social movements in Japan between the 1968 uprising and the Fukushima disaster. In the 1960s, he suggests, activists maintained a belief in revolution as a discrete event that leads to victory or defeat. Today, he maintains, such revolutionary optimism is impossible. Paradoxically, however, this creates the potential for struggles better rooted in the material reality of life.

> This shift might be described as one from Politics with a capital *P* to the politics of everyday life: from macro- to micropolitics, citizens' and nation's movements to residents' and migrants' (inhabitants') movements, internationalism to transterritorial association. (114)

In his final Epilogue he enjoins us to 'Forget Japan' and embrace a diversity of archipelagic forms of life that reach beyond the insular nation-state. For Kohso, the decline of the nation and of the universalist World is inevitable. What matters is that we organise within local contexts, not to save the (Kantian) World but to inhabit the (Reculsian) Earth. Revolutionary democracy will require learning to 'reverberate' with one another across time and space, while developing a new relationship with the Earth.

It is possible to read movements against the Israeli genocide in Palestine (and now Lebanon) along these lines. Protests against Israel's war direct their demands to governments to take action, embodying a traditional understanding of power and enacting protest as supplication (within the World). But we can also see them as a movement for survival, both within Palestinian territories where they are subject to continuous Israeli bombardment but also in the struggles on university campuses, and in movements to blockade supply chains that provide weapons to the front. These struggles are not necessarily united formally (though elements of them are) but they do resonate in the way Kohso describes, 'reverberating' in territories across the Earth.

It is easy to find fault with *Radiation and Revolution*'s grand theoretical commitments. Kohso's sweeping generalisations are in constant danger of becoming caricatures. He tends to skip over the complexity and contradictions at work within structures and processes, portraying them as uncomplicated expressions of Japanese nationalism and global capitalism. This leads to serious errors. For all Japanese civil society's conservatism, since 1945 it has constructed a bulwark against the reemergence of the barely concealed fascist desires of the Japanese ruling class. Decades of work, often undertaken by women, in education, peace, anti-base, and residents movements – LeBlanc's (1999) 'bicycle citizens' – are largely absent from Kohso's account which focuses only on the most militant fringe. Were he to take these movements more seriously, his account might be both more nuanced and ultimately more

optimistic. Kohso also struggles to accept that the development of nuclear power might actually be a more chaotic process, one where the possibility of absolute domination by a 'nuclear state' threatens, but has arguably never been completely achieved. The totalising instincts of his revolutionary thought lead to an underestimation of the power of a multitude of struggles to disrupt the smooth operation of the capitalist order and overestimate the internal coherence of that order.

I think, however, that we can forgive Kohso these blind spots and read this work as a scream of outrage and a song of hope. For Kohso, it is necessary to understand the relationships between Japanese capitalism as a total system, and its alliance with nationalism and the state to fully comprehend the enormity of the Fukushima disaster. Despite the grandiosity of his narrative, Kohso's conclusions are modest and suggestive of the kind of hopefulness that can be maintained alongside widespread pessimism and despair. 'We want to achieve a future that is undetermined, a future that we can create' (165), he concludes, suggesting that there will be no salvation for the World but that we can continue to inhabit and co-create an archipelago of spaces on the Earth, no matter how difficult the circumstances. A future that we can create is a future worth fighting for.

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