



Beyond Scholar Activism: Making Strategic Interventions Inside and Outside the Neoliberal University

The Autonomous Geographies Collective^{1,2}

Abstract

This paper is an honest, reflexive account of action research with activists. Through a two year project called ‘Autonomous Geographies’, a team of researchers undertook case studies with three groups: self-managed social centres, tenants resisting housing privatisation, and eco-pioneers setting up a Low Impact Development. The original aim was to explore the everyday lives of activists as they attempted to resist life under capitalism and build more autonomous ways of living. The paper reflects on the messy, difficult and personally challenging research process of the project, with the failures being more instructive than the successes. By recounting this experience we provide lessons for the complex but necessary process of doing what is known as scholar activism in what we see as difficult, neo-liberal times. In particular we focus on how we can better formulate and implement strategic interventions with activists and social movements. We need to reject the false distinction between academia and wider society in conceptualisations of valid sites of struggle and knowledge production, and to find ways to research and engage collectively and politically, rather than individually.

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To this end, the paper offers seven principles for scholar activism that can be applied inside and outside the neo-liberal university.

Introduction

Many academics have long sought to place their teaching and research at the service of radical social change. In Geography, the post-1968 radicalisation saw the likes of Richard Peet (1969), David Harvey (1974) and Bill Bunge (1973) imploring geographers and other social scientists to address key social questions and problems. Journals such as *Antipode* and groups like the *Union of Socialist Geographers* (founded in Toronto in 1974) were born in a context of social struggle with an explicit radicalising agenda. Such debates continue to expand in Geography across a number of topics including ethics and justice (Harvey, 1996; Proctor and Smith, 1999; Sayer and Storper, 1997), war and security (Graham, 2006), privatisation (Mansfield, 2007), indigenous struggles (Wright, 2008), and the future of Left Geography (Amin and Thrift, 2005, 2007; Castree, 1999, 2000; Chouinard, 1994; Smith, 2005; Harvey, 2006; Mitchell, 2006). The International Critical Geography Group has also opened up key avenues of debate in an ever expanding sub-discipline of Critical Geography (see for example, Desbiens and Smith, 1999).

Although, or perhaps, *because*, the ascendancy of neo-liberal globalisation has increasingly shut down the spaces for scholar activism, in the last few years a new generation of human geographers have returned to issues of political relevance with an outpouring of special collections, disciplinary networks and conference panels debating how to make geography more ‘public’, ‘activist’, ‘moral’, ‘radical’, and ‘participatory’, and less dominated by the current Anglo-American hegemony¹. What unites past and present generations of scholar activists is their desire to bring together their academic work with their political ideals to further social change and work directly with marginal groups or those in struggle. This work goes beyond simply trying to understand the politics of our research and argues that our work is political.

For the past two years, we have engaged in such a process on a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) called ‘Autonomous Geographies: Activism and Everyday Life’. Our motivation as originally conceived was to enable us to work closer with the social movements we support and belong to. Using our privileged position to access research funding we resolved to engage in participatory research alongside the everyday struggles of a number of anti-capitalist or ‘autonomous’ political groups, networks and spaces in the UK. The experience has been fascinating, but it has also been extremely messy and politically challenging. Despite our activist and action research backgrounds it proved an exceptionally difficult journey that has made us think long and hard about what we, as people committed to and involved in the global justice movement, can and should do as academics. We have therefore written this paper

as an open and self-reflexive post-mortem of our motives, methods and experiences in order to provide some insights and guidance to others involved in similar projects.

The paper is structured in three parts. We start with a review of the scholar activist tradition, arguing that while the literature offers tremendous insights, it also suffers from the 'ivory tower' syndrome of creating a false distinction between academia and wider society in terms of sites for social struggle and knowledge production. We then explore our own research experience, charting the transformation of our original 'good intentions' into a messy and contested methodology. We end with a series of propositions, based on our experiences, about what we think the role and approach of today's scholar activism might be, concluding that the most important principle for academics committed to social change is to make strategic interventions collectively with the social movements we belong to. We acknowledge that these kinds of messy research experiences are not unique to us, and that many fellow action researchers are also taking forward these kinds of strategic interventions that we outline here and have equally written about these problems (see Maxey, 1999; Lees, 1999; Routledge, 2003; Pain and Francis, 2003).

Debating Scholar Activism in Difficult Times

CVs of contemporary human geographers might reveal a discipline riddled with hunt saboteurs, anti-road protesters, green activists, charity workers and homeless advocates (not to mention local councillors, community representatives and magistrates). But it appears that most seek to maintain a scholarly 'distance' between their activism and their teaching, research and publishing activities, and do not incorporate such activist concerns into their 'disciplinary' life (Kitchin and Hubbard, 1999:193)

Relatively few academics in geography overtly fuse together their intellectual or pedagogical work with their politics, and even fewer directly engage with social movements. While journals, seminars and e-lists forever bristle with polemics on the state of 'critical' geography and the growing marketisation of education, the all-consuming competitive working lives of academics become the excuse for leaving activism to the evenings and weekends. More worryingly, too many academics are happy to build their careers on the backs of researching the oppressed "but, paradoxically, they rarely join with them in their 'struggle'" (Kitchin and Hubbard 1999: 196).

In recent years, human geographers have sought to challenge this inertia by showcasing their own activist engagements as scholar activists, while at the same time holding a mirror up to their engagements in highly reflexive accounts. Pain (2003) usefully categorises these and reflects that there are at least three ways to

engage beyond the academy. The first approach, combining activism and research, fuses politics and academic research agendas into one coherent strategy and methodology working closely with resisting others and social movements. Recent engagements here include stopping road building, airport expansion, and new incinerators (Maxey, 2004; Wall, 1999), building Low Impact Developments and eco-villages (Pickerill and Maxey, 2009), squatting (Plows, 1998; Chatterton, 2002), fighting gentrification (Lees, 1999), creating and defending autonomous spaces (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006), and Local Economic Trading Schemes (LETS) (North, 2007), engaging in cultural activism (Fenton, 2004), backing Indigenous and anti-imperialist struggles (Featherstone, 2003; Routledge, 2003; Wolford, 2004; Wright, 2008), and taking on academic complicity in the arms trade (Chatterton and Featherstone, 2007). Perhaps unsurprisingly, some have also produced valuable insights into the often torturous psyche of the academic-activist, forever caught between two worlds and sets of people with competing priorities, expectations, and pressures. These authors bring out the necessity of academics' attempts to make their teaching and research fit together with their desire for social change, with all the obstacles, dilemmas, and challenges this poses.

The second approach is participatory research which in general aims to "improve practice rather than to produce knowledge" (Elliot, 1991: 49) and gives the 'subject' far greater involvement in the research (see for example, England, 1994; Pain, 2003; Hayward *et al.*, 2004; Kitchen and Hubbard, 1999; Cahill, 2007; Pain and Francis, 2003; Pain and Kindon, 2007; Kindon *et al.*, 2007). Within participatory research and development there is a strong critique of exploitative and unaccountable research, especially "externally imposed and expert-oriented forms of research and planning" (Cooke and Kothari, 2001:5) which are most concerned with extracting knowledge. In response, most forms of participatory research aim to place people at the centre of research agendas.

Participatory research, however, is a broad field. It includes Participatory Appraisal which Pain and Francis (2003) found useful but ultimately somewhat partial and limited, as well as Participatory Action Research (PAR), which is more concerned with achieving the multiple aims of participation, practical outcomes (perhaps even transformation) and knowledge production. This latter approach can be hard to do well and many have documented their struggle with it. This has been compounded by the institutionalisation, but poor execution, of some participatory approaches. Thus some participatory research has suffered from expert-subject divisions, the limitations imposed by artificial boundaries of the research objectives, lack of enthusiasm and cooperation from participants, and the constant temptation to resort to traditional academic outputs and elite-level ways of influencing policy when change does not happen organically from below. Participatory research and development have also come under increasing criticism for the way it has become a new form of "tyranny" in which participatory practices

are used to mask power relations and outside agendas (Cook and Kothari, 2001; Kesby 2007).

What these debates highlight is that participatory research is not *inherently* progressive; much work and thought is needed if participation is to lead to empowerment and transformation. This work is being done, for example Cameron and Gibson's (2005) poststructuralist take on PAR enables their work to move beyond searching for deep fixed identities, to acknowledge multiple representations (and that at times local knowledge needs to be challenged), and to value the micropolitics of self-transformation as an important part of social change. Thus, we need to accept the messiness and multiple realities, the complexity, of participation for all its faults, because ultimately such approaches can enable more emancipatory geographies. Indeed, "participatory research is explicitly about the openness, emergence, surprise, tensions, and irreconcilability that often make up the process of coresearching with nonacademics" (Pain and Kindon, 2007, 2809). Just because it can be hard to do well does not mean we should abandon it.

Finally, Pain (2003) argues that 'policy research' might be traditionally seen as 'top-down' and 'reactionary' but it "can also be a viable strategy in critical action research" (655) (see also Pollard *et al.*, 2000; Burgess, 2005). Many geographers do get involved in policy-oriented research (see for example Dorling *et al.* 2007; Parkinson, 2006; Pike and Tomany, 2008). Clearly, it is difficult to assess the impact of this kind of work on pushing policy in a more progressive direction and much of it remains inside the epistemic community of policy-makers and academics, rarely belonging to, or coming from, engagement with those affected on the ground. As Dorling and Shaw (2002) pointed out, many geographers simply comment on debates without actually being part of them. Of greater concern is that much work in human geography remains an irrelevance to policy debates (see Martin, 2001; Massey, 2000).

These three main approaches to scholar activism offer work that is thought-provoking and insightful to the job of social transformation, and should not be seen as mutually exclusive of each other. Indeed, we would position ourselves as 'academic activists' who use principally participatory methods without eschewing the occasional importance of engaging at the 'policy level'. At the same time, however, our own experience in the Autonomous Geographies project has left us dissatisfied with certain aspects of the debates on scholar activism and the engagements they produce. We want to focus on three areas of contention here. First is the question of boundaries and borders. While we sympathise with those who think academics should do *more* action-orientated research with marginalised groups outside the academy, we believe that apart from confusing 'quantity' with 'quality' such calls only reproduce and reinforce the false distinction between academics and wider society, or between intellectuals and social movements, or between 'inside' and 'outside' (see for example Giroux, 1997; hooks, 2004; Cook,

2000). It implies, wrongly, that as academics we are still the main foci for the production of knowledge, and specially placed to assist the social and political struggles of others. It appeals to academics ‘as professionals’ to do their bit for those less fortunate, rather than as citizens jointly challenging the broader social system.

Second, this ‘ivory tower syndrome’ identified above is reflected in the serious lack of action-orientated research on the neo-liberal shift of the university and wider education system. Although there is a growing body of literature on the topicⁱⁱ, and despite our own acute and firsthand knowledge of the university workplace as wage labourers within it, there is a collective failure to address the ‘university’ as a site of production, alienated labour and corporate power. Instead, academic-activists – present authors included – continue to focus on supporting and writing about the struggles of ‘others’, usually making no connection with how ‘we’ uncritically support the university, and are small but significant actors in creating that injustice. As Castree (2002:18) argues, changing the outside world requires challenging the current neoliberal restructuring of higher education by doing academic work that “makes universities less sausage factories and more institutions where critical thinking is not grist for the next peer reviewed article”. But we would go further than that: challenging the imposition of the ‘law of value’ within higher education and its colonisation of our labour time is necessary if we are to defend and reclaim our academic freedom to carry out long-term, collective political work. To that end, it is not enough to reclaim the surplus value produced through publishing, but to claim as legitimate those aspects of academic work produced through activist-academic engagement in the first place, such as changes in subjects or the organisation of transformation. Thus we must claim value beyond publishable outputsⁱⁱⁱ.

Third, the literature is overwhelmingly dominated by individualised accounts of the academic ‘in the field’. While we have learned much from such contributions and would hope they continue, it seems to suggest that many academics are operating, largely autonomously, as individuals pursuing their own personal activist interests, and not *collectively* deciding on research priorities with social movements and other activist scholars in order to address the wider strategic issues of this engagement for achieving radical change. There is a need then to pursue a more strategic approach to scholar activism.

The Autonomous Geographies Project: a paragon of good intentions?

From honourable beginnings...

The original aim of the project was to explore and support, through writing, research and participation, different aspects of what we had coined ‘autonomous geographies’ – spaces where there is a questioning of the laws and social norms of society and a creative desire to constitute non-capitalist, collective forms of

politics, identity, and citizenship (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). In the UK, we saw these spaces as strongest in three areas: the *virtual*, through online, DIY news providers like Indymedia (Pickerill 2004, 2007); the *local*, through legal and occupied social centres (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006); and the *translocal*, through anticapitalist networks like Dissent! and Peoples Global Action. We wanted to understand how these autonomous geographies were created and recreated by activists in the everyday whilst living in capitalist, individualised and consumption-oriented cities.

We had met through activism and now wanted to reconcile our passions of research and anti-capitalist direct action to promote a broader understanding of and interest in ‘autonomous politics’. Our approach fitted both of Pain’s categories of academic-activism and participatory research: we valued interactive rather than extractive research so participants would be involved in the planning, development and dissemination of the research, and an advisory group would be established of activists and academics from different backgrounds. While we believed in academic writing as a source of power and influence, we also saw the need to produce as much non-academic writing and other outputs as possible in collaboration with participants.

...and down to earth with a bang

Disappointingly, but not surprisingly, we soon learned that our ‘good intentions’ were not generating the same level of excitement in the anti-capitalist/activist community. While we received praise from fellow academic-activists, a number of critical comments about our project started to appear in our inboxes and on activist websites like Indymedia, Urban 75 and LibCom. The main opposition centred on our dual roles as academics and activists, which these commentators believed to be mutually exclusive. Instead, they viewed us as exploitative, unaccountable, managerialist, and compromised by our academic status. Below are two examples:

...at least one academic in Leeds who is also involved in ‘radical’ projects was awarded quite a sum of money in government funding to study Leeds ARC and Dissent! ...I am afraid that I am uncomfortable with this situation. Firstly, with the idea of people capitalising on my unpaid activity for their own career development. Secondly, the creation of a class of highly paid activist/intellectuals who ... are highly paid, mobile, powerful and following academic agendas. Thirdly, it is my experience that due to the level of commitment such people devote to their professional work, they are often less able to do the ‘grunt work’ required (Kirsty, Leeds-Bradford Indymedia posting, 3 June 2005)

You flaunt a large sum of money, but promise very little ‘social change’ potential from your proposed uses of this money... Political transformation [is] a by-product of your careers not the other way around ... it is actually totally disgusting for me to see [you]... becoming an ‘expert on the subject’ in the eyes of the academy, and taking a salary for it, yet operating in a parasitical relationship to those who are doing the real work and have made financial/lifestyle sacrifices (anonymous activist email to authors, February 2006).

Although we had always expected some hostility from activists, when it came, we felt uneasy and uncertain. We knew that some of the criticism was actually personal, and others advised us to ignore it, but we were troubled by these comments because they contained elements of truth, and so we began to rethink our motives, ethics, and intensions.

A messy and evolving methodology

It was immediately clear to us that we should have consulted far more widely among activists about the purpose and needs of the project. We had, in truth, reproduced the dichotomy between academics and activists, or intellectuals and the movement, which we had always been critical of. We should have set up an advisory board *before* composing the bid to the ESRC, a conviction strengthened by the incredible help we received from the five academic-activists and five social movement participants we eventually appointed. Through discussion and much reworking of our original ideas, we retained only one of the original case studies – on social centres – and adopted two new case studies on Low Impact Development and tenants’ struggles against housing privatisation.

As we started to discuss how we would engage with the groups, however, we quickly became divided by our very different methodological understandings of PAR. One of us was proposing a more traditional academic study using participatory methods to extract data, which would eventually be used in publications sympathetic and useful to activist participants. In contrast, the other two project members were more interested in what they distinguished as ‘solidarity action research’ (SAR), an approach strongly influenced by traditions of research militancy coming out of the Italian and Argentinian autonomist struggles^{iv}, working horizontally and in solidarity with groups in struggle, co-producing outputs relevant to that resistance movement and not to academia, funders or our careers.

We had created our own quandary by being awarded funds by the ESRC, a funding council which demands a well-developed academic-led initial proposal in order to get funds, and which then demands academic publications as the key outcome of the grant. The source of funding, of course, shapes the types of participatory engagements attempted. Clearly other non-academic funding sources might have given us greater flexibility in doing collaborative work and this is a

continuing tension in attempting participatory research. As young academics we had been conscious of the status of securing ESRC support – succumbing to one of the pressures of the neoliberalisation of university research. For all the faults in our project, however, we did produce a number of non-academic outcomes which were subsequently praised by the ESRC reviewers as exemplars of project dissemination. While still problematic, as we will discuss, the acknowledgment by an institution such as the ESRC that these outcomes were important does raise the prospect that we might yet be able to shape funding councils agendas further towards supporting participatory projects. These differences – accentuated by the particular dynamics of our three very different case studies and by own strong personalities – became an increasing tension within project meetings. Matters came to a head in the summer of 2006 when one team member came close to walking off the project, only to stay on with the understanding that they could pursue the methodology that they felt comfortable and able to do. Project meetings were reduced and personal relations became polite but frosty. Ironically, as we discuss below, it was arguably this project member more than any other who pursued a SAR approach, while another began to return to a more traditional academic approach fused with interventions in the statutory and local policy process.

The case study experience

Despite the many problems, each case study produced its own specific lessons and insights into the questions of action research and scholar activism that we describe briefly below.

Case study 1: Social Centres: Resisting, Creating and Embedding Alternatives

Social centres are legal or illegal, temporary or permanent spaces intended to facilitate the exchange, development and praxis of ‘autonomous politics’. They arguably first emerged in the mid-1970s in Italy through the occupation of unused or condemned public buildings and factories by a youth movement seeking to improve their social conditions but rejecting both capitalist work and socialist parties. These militants transformed abandoned urban spaces into nodes of self-organized cultural and political organisation. The social centre idea has gradually spread across Western Europe where they now form part of a network of autonomous spaces including info-shops, resource centres, land squats, and housing co-operatives (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006).

The prior involvement of some project members in the UK social centres suggested to us that supporting this network of anti-capitalist place-based projects in the UK could play a crucial role, especially in the context of the gentrification and privatisation of city centres and the loss of community facilities. But were less sure how to undertake this case study because there had not been a direct request from social centres for research input, nor was there a clear problem collectively identified that needed addressing through action research. From our perspective it

seemed there was a need to understand the nature of the social centres network, develop our anti-capitalist ideas together, and strengthen networks of support. There were constant, if vaguely articulated, debates in the background about what social centres were for, what they were trying to achieve, and what anti-capitalism meant. We had some initial conversations with a couple of social centres about the possibilities of an action research project and they seemed genuinely interested. In spite of our doubts, we took this as a cue that this case study was needed. However, overall, the drive behind our involvement came from us and our passions, rather than from collaborative dialogue.

The greater problem came when we attempted to connect with the emerging network of social centres in the UK. In an effort to help build momentum, we organised a UK wide gathering of social centre projects at our own social centre in Leeds in January 2006 (see Figure 1). It was extremely well attended and plans were made for websites, network-wide leaflets, and better sharing of resources and events. Although we provided much impetus for this event, we felt uncomfortable explicitly connecting it with the research project. Social centre participants are extremely active, resourceful and engaged people, and the more we tried to connect with the movement, the more we became unclear about what exactly we, as university researchers, could offer.

Figure 1: Left to right: The Common Place Social Centre, Leeds – the location of the first gathering for social centre projects (photo: Jenny Pickerill), ‘Social Centres Network’ banner at Russell Square squat, London (photo: Stuart Hodkinson), and Kebele Social Centre, Bristol – which hosted an exhibition of social centre photographs taken by the project (photo: Jenny Pickerill)



Despite our concerns, we began to plan what else we could contribute to this developing movement. Early on, we were aware of numerous previous studies on squats and social centres and one task we undertook was to produce a reader compiling these and give one to each social centre. As part of our ongoing interest in social centres, we visited about a dozen of them, relatively informally,

throughout 2006 and from this wrote a 'how to set up a social centre guide' for an edited book as well as a small accessibly written pamphlet (Chatterton and Hodkinson, 2006), that we later expanded into an academic publication (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006). We distributed 1000 copies of the pamphlet to social centres, bookshops and cafes for free and to this day we still find them in the strangest of places. But again, although they were extremely well received, none of these emerged from direct requests. We also helped to organise a subsequent social centres meeting at the annual London Anarchist Bookfair and the second UK social centres gathering in Bradford in early 2007. From this second meeting, more concrete plans emerged and a website was finalised. At this stage, we were more comfortable and explicit about offering the direct help and resources of the research project. The idea emerged to channel these resources into a booklet, 'What's this Place?', telling the story of these autonomously run centres in their own words. We offered editorial support and money to design and print it (see www.socialcentrestories.org.uk).

Throughout, our drive was to get social centres into a conversation with each other about what we, as a community of projects, were trying to achieve. Our intentions were poorly conveyed, mainly due to our hesitancy of coming out as university researchers, when in fact we felt more like activists within our own movement. An important lesson that we learnt is that academic-activists should think carefully about the pitfalls and sensibilities of collaborating closely with a network or group with which one has already invested much emotional and political energy and time. The case study became confused between our own personal hopes and aims, those of the wider network, and our desire to be seen as *useful* activists as well as useful researchers in front of our activist peers. Although we do not believe that we should only become involved in issues and projects from which we were previously disengaged as this simply reinforces the academic and activist divide, we felt more comfortable working with social centres with which we had had no previous ties. A major inhibiting factor was also the strong anti-intellectualism within some anarchist circles that made us extremely self-conscious. With hindsight, a better conceived, articulated and more honest programme of militant co-enquiry (Malo, 2005), into the scale, nature, pitfalls and potentials of social centres would have been extremely useful. This has been partially started by other UK social centre activists in the form of a survey and could be taken forward further.

Case study 2: Sustainable Living and Living Autonomously: the Lammas Low Impact Settlement Project

Following the input of the project's advisory group, we decided to include a case study on Low Impact Development (LID) in order to reflect on the problems and potentials of living autonomously within the system, of being 'interstitial' or 'in-between'. An opportunity arose in the form of Lammas, a project based in south

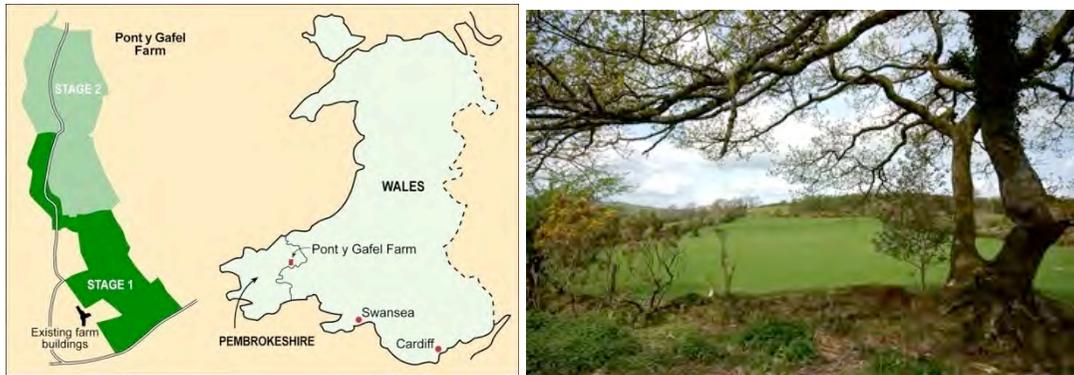
west Wales that needed support and was proactively seeking links with education professionals to aid in research and outreach. Lammas was proposing to create a new large-scale low impact settlement of up to 25 eco-smallholdings. The settlement was going to be autonomous by providing for all its renewable energy, sanitation, and water needs and the majority of its food and income from the land. It intended to become an exemplar for the possibilities of sustainable living in the UK.

Our collaboration began in February 2006 with a two day visit to Swansea where the group was based. The core group was small, voluntary, under resourced, and had multiple needs. We quickly negotiated full access to Lammas in return for playing a supporting role to their aspirations, although in practice we had little understanding of what Lammas was or how it worked, and they had little understanding of our project's resources or capacities. We had joined Lammas just six months after its launch, and the group was moving at a fast pace (Figure 2). They had just found a potential plot of land which created an added sense of urgency and their needs quickly outweighed both our capacity and purpose (see Figure 3). As choices of meeting dates and timeframes were necessarily set by the group, there were inevitable clashes of commitments, personal dilemmas, and lots time spent travelling to and fro.

Figure 2: Public launch of Lammas, Narbeth, Pembrokeshire, 6th May 2006. (photo: Jenny Pickerill)



Figure 3: Pont y Gafel farm, Glandwr, Pembrokeshire – the proposed site for Lammas (photo: Jenny Pickerill)



Core to these problems was pressure from inside the research project team that we should engage with every aspect of Lammas and be part of their struggle. The reality of a full-time job with many competing demands meant that only partial commitment was possible and this was messy, fractured and the source of many misunderstandings and constant negotiations over what we could contribute. There was perhaps an early assumption by Lammas that we were being funded to help them, and thus had the capacity to do so, when in reality our time input was much more limited. This was further complicated by the different ways in which we viewed our capacities. As activists, many in Lammas equated capacity with commitment, investing as much energy as possible in their project. For us, capacity was time left in the working week, and any unwillingness to work longer than that was seen by some as a lack of commitment. Moreover, it was hard to not let the relatively privileged position of being an academic (full wage, resources, support staff, equipment, and mobility) jar against the reality of the resource-poor activist (low wage, voluntary, little equipment), especially when we suggested we could not respond to all their needs. We return to this paradox later in the paper.

Although we very much supported Lammas' ambitions and shared their vision of an autonomous anti-capitalist world, Lammas clearly did not need us to help 'empower them' or facilitate discussions on autonomy. Instead, they needed very specific data to be collected, tasks arranged and reports written that would support their planning application. One such task was finding out local people's views of their proposal. Lammas asked us to run a public consultation meeting. It did not really go to plan. We had little knowledge of the area, were outsiders, and had no experience of public consultations. The meeting hall was packed with locals who wished to vent their anger at the proposal, some literally screaming at us. In hindsight the meeting was a very useful vent for local feeling and critical in shaping Lammas' next step. But at the time it felt unproductive. Further problems

arose in the co-production of material. Lammas requested that we write magazine articles publicising their proposal to gain wider support, however, they subsequently edited out critical reflection leaving just positive affirmations. They needed support, not analysis of their internal dynamics, and yet this critical reflection is a core part of any academic research project. Not surprisingly they were far less interested in writing any academic articles and such outputs were sidelined by other pressing needs. In exchange for access to Lammas, we had become their market researchers.

It took 18 months of working together just to start to get to know and trust each other. We have been able to show solidarity for Lammas in numerous ways through public reports submitted as part of their planning application, magazine articles, redesign of their website, flyers to advertise their share sale, a film about LIDs and a collectively written booklet (Pickerill and Maxey, 2009). In spite of the problems, there were plenty of moments of listening and learning from each other. In return for access, we shared stories of other LID examples we had visited, shared interesting reading material, and tentatively questioned some of their internal dynamics. However, the journey to understanding each other, and to really get under the skin of what Lammas is trying to achieve is a much longer and ongoing journey and one that we, at the end of the project, are only just beginning to comprehend. Lammas continue to build their project, in spite of planning set backs, and they remain one of the true pioneering examples of a group seeking greater autonomy. Although the research process was complex, it was ultimately far more rewarding, both personally and academically, than more traditional approaches.

Case study 3: Enclosure and Resistance in the Inner City: Housing Privatisation and Community Activism in Little London, Leeds

This aim of this engagement was to support community opposition to a housing regeneration scheme in an inner city estate called Little London in Leeds. For many years, the local authority, Leeds City Council, had been trying to kickstart regeneration in this run down neighbourhood right on the edge of Leeds' booming city centre. Although there had not been any investment in the housing for more than two decades, many local tenants were fiercely opposed to the regeneration plans because hundreds of low-rent public housing units were threatened with demolition or privatisation. Some tenants were also opposed to the way the scheme would be procured under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), a scheme notorious for escalating project costs and delays, poor quality building work, service failure, worker exploitation, a lack of accountability and corporate profiteering.

Our involvement began in January 2006 as the Council was gearing up for its final push – a 'consultation' exercise on whether local people wanted the 'comprehensive regeneration' scheme worth £85 million using PFI, or a more modest £20 million refurbishment programme under the government's Decent

Homes repair scheme. Although it did not initially seem to fit the project's focus on autonomous DIY politics, we soon realised this was a key struggle for autonomy – to save public housing from privatisation and thus more collective, non-capitalist spaces from enclosure. It also brought up another central issue of autonomous politics – supporting self-organised resistance among working class communities.

Events rapidly snowballed. We started to attend and minute meetings of the Save Little London Campaign in the local pub, helped to organise a public lobby of the Council, arranged banner-making sessions, held an alternative consultation of tenants as the Council undertook theirs, hosted public meetings and got good media coverage through writing press releases and using our contacts (see Figure 4). We also set up a blog-style website (www.savelittlelondon.org.uk).

Figure 4: The Little London estate, Leeds, and one of the many campaign banners (photo: Stuart Hodkinson)



Within a short space of time we had become full campaign members, but we were conscious that the campaign was marginal on the estate and could potentially clash with the official Little London Tenants and Residents Association (LLTRA), which did not oppose PFI *per se*, just its consequences. Our aim was to bring different groups and forces together and stop them working in isolation, which worked to a limited extent. While LLTRA welcomed our offer to help them in their fight to stop the regeneration scheme, they were also confused about our motivations and what we wanted in return.

There is no doubt that our involvement helped to both boost the public profile of the Save Little London Campaign, and also uncover evidence of the Council's manifestly biased consultation exercise and the inefficient and unjust nature of its regeneration plans that were utilised by LLTRA in its efforts to stop the scheme going ahead (see Hodkinson, forthcoming). We also injected a bit more strategic thinking and analysis into discussions and introduced some new campaigning ideas and tactics we had learned from our own personal activist experience. However, despite our commitment to co-research through participation, it became obvious that we had ended up effectively running the Save Little London Campaign. For a while we thought this was a temporary problem that would pass with time. But

once the Council decided, in May 2006, to ignore a 500-signature petition from local tenants and sympathetic media coverage, and go ahead with the PFI regeneration scheme, efforts to further politically mobilise tenants on the issue proved impossible and the campaign ran out of steam.

Some of the obstacles were embedded in the history of the community: the appalling behaviour of local politicians in misleading tenants about the nature and scope of regeneration, and in failing to adequately represent their concerns and grievances to council officers and government ministers; cynicism and division on the estate; and the failure of LLTRA to build a campaign or hold open discussions. But some of the obstacles also lay with us. We created a structure of dependency through our role and resources. We realised that a sustained and organic intervention over many years was required, a problem confounded by the fact that these were not our homes.

As the regeneration process evolved, so did our role, from campaigning activists looking to support a militant struggle, to academic researchers working quietly and painstakingly with the tenants association. LLTRA then formally appointed us as their community advisor, and this led to the production of a new report into the entire process of regeneration and consultation since 2001 that was submitted to the Local Government Ombudsman as part of LLTRA's complaint against Leeds City Council. Although the Save Little London Campaign has effectively disappeared, the contacts and relationships made have since developed into a city-wide housing campaign, Hands Off Our Homes, which brings together tenants and residents of all affected regeneration areas of Leeds with trade unionists and academic researchers.

The complexity of interventions

There is no doubt that we managed to work closely with several groups, supported them in their daily struggles against neo-liberal capitalism through a variety of acts (such as mobilising campaigns, facilitating network meetings and working on planning applications), and many useful publications were also produced^v. At the same time, however, our three projects had to negotiate a messy complexity of ideas, emotions, ethics, positions, boundaries, uncertainties and inconsistencies that led to flaws in both our methodological approaches and in our actual engagements. These included: unrealistic expectations about what could be achieved; a lack of consultation with activists prior to formulating the project's aims and scope; and a failure to fully appreciate and deal with the actually existing pressures on us as academics within a neoliberal context; and the actually existing boundaries between academia and activism, however much we would wish them away.

However, a major problem was our inability to pursue a collective research approach due to very different understandings of the project's aims and

methodology between the research team. We had simply not spent enough time trying to understand where each other was coming from politically, emotionally, and methodologically, and part of this study is about the failings of our own ambitions for a research collective. In fact, we never really defined what ‘working collectively’ would actually mean, either between ourselves or with the groups involved in our case studies. Moreover, we continually failed to acknowledge, let alone deal with, the tensions and dynamics caused by hierarchy within the project team based on age, gender, and academic position. We never achieved the ideal of jointly developing needs with social movement struggles. In retrospect, we can now see how our engagement was itself contaminated by the ‘Ivory Tower Syndrome’ we identified earlier in the paper.

The project was affected early on by our response to the strong anti-academic sentiments embedded in the more autonomous/anarchist wings of the anti-capitalist movement. Activists have had countless experiences of academic exploitation and misrepresentation, as well as infiltration under the cover of research. They also have a healthy critique of institutions like universities and the academic profession. But they too are guilty of creating a false division between themselves and activist-minded academics, a dichotomy which we also reproduced throughout the project. We could never get away from the fact that this was our ‘job’ and not ‘our immediate struggle’. We always had one eye on the publications, on gathering the data, and on re-telling the stories that were unfolding. Crucially, there is a wider structural point that more politicised and collaborative work with social movements, campaigners and activists can never easily fit into the rhythms, constraints and priorities of research council funding.

Seven principles towards a strategy for scholar activism

The goal of research is not the interpretation of the world, but the organization of transformation. (Conti, 2005)

We have written this piece to continually question and critique scholar activism and participatory research and what they are trying to achieve. We want to take these critiques in new, uncomfortable directions. We believe that a deeper problem with scholar activism is the often individualised and de-politicised nature of our work. This is a double reflection of the current global political crisis of anticapitalist/antiauthoritarian/left movements (and academics in them), and the intensifying commodification and neo-conservative direction of the neo-liberal university. Despite enduring outside perceptions of ‘privilege’ and ‘security’, academic labour is not immune from the law of value, becoming ever more exploited, segmented and precarious (see Bauder, 2006); research and teaching are being consciously designed to serve corporate interests as well as increasingly commercialised in order to attract more income and investment; and critical thinkers are being reduced to “academic functionaries” engaged in “compiling and redacting received knowledge” and teaching students “transferable skills” for the

labour market (Shukaitis and Graeber, 2007, 15). And we, in some way or other, are all complicit in supplying the meat and fat to the academic “sausage factory” (Smith, 2000). What the Autonomous Geographies Project has taught us is that we cannot avoid confronting this overarching structuration of our capacities if we want to be scholar activists that ‘walk the talk’ of radical action.

One solution lies in moving away from seeing such contradictions in the personal and instead placing them in their wider political context and in a more collective research practice. In other words, while it is messy we should see the complexity of such work not as a personal dilemma (of balancing the demands on us), but as a political problem of the disjuncture between academia and activism, and the pressures of an increasingly neo-liberal university system. But what do we mean by ‘collective’? We began our project by employing a language of solidarity – activism for the benefit of differently situated others (Passy, 2001). As Sundberg (2007) has noted, however, such activism must be embodied through experiences and mutuality to have most effect and meaning. This form of mutuality “blurs the distinction between providers and beneficiaries” (Olesen, 2005, 109). Here there is an emphasis not just on working from our own experiences and critically reflecting upon our situations, but also negotiating practices so that rather than one group acting on behalf of another, “all act on their own behalf in the interest of creating a better world for all” (Sundberg, 2007, 148).

This search for equality has more resonance with concepts of collectivity than traditionally of solidarity. Drawing upon more anarchist and libertarian socialist interpretations of collectivism (the acceptance of human interdependence and the belief that society will be bettered through the achievement of collective goals rather than individual aspirations, and the importance of the commons), for us there is a need to approach our working practices with more desire for horizontality in organisation, an emphasis upon sharing and co-operation, more consensual decision-making, an awareness of inherent unequal power relations, and finally a fundamental acceptance of freedom as individuals within a collective. It is upon these broad and ambiguous fundamentals that we wish to suggest seven principles towards a strategy for scholar activism.

1. In and against the neo-liberal university

A starting point for today’s scholar activism must be, as Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias (2007, 113) assert, “rethinking the university as a site of production and not as an ivory tower for the contemplation of the outside world”. This means recognising that universities, like other workplaces, have labour processes that are exploitative, hierarchical and precarious, and produce knowledge outputs that are increasingly designed to be useful to contemporary capitalism, corporations and elites. Universities are also powerful agents of neo-liberal globalisation and corporate power, climate change, the commodification of education, the militarisation of society and local gentrification (see Shelton *et al.*, 2001; Muttitt,

2003; Street and Beale, 2007). By only focusing on struggles and activism ‘out there’ and neglecting how the real world is shaped by what goes on ‘in here’, academics become part of the problem, not the solution. The university should not be seen as somehow better than any other employer or vested interest just because of the relative (but increasingly pressurised) privileges of academics, and is arguably more important than most to target given its essential, and paradoxical, roles in the reproduction of capitalism and class society. Indeed, many political struggles do flourish from issues on campus.^{vi}

2. Recognise the emancipatory potential of education, research and publications

We often forget just how pivotal academics are in the production of commonsense and hegemonic ideas. Our work can re-write public debates, or challenge dominant ideas and laws. Work from the academy, then, still carries an immense societal weight and influence with it, albeit weight which can be used for different ends. As Don Mitchell has persuasively argued, “to make a difference beyond the academy it is necessary to do good and important, and committed work *within the academy*” (2004, p.23).

The importance of the use of academic knowledge to social movements was recently illustrated perfectly by activists at the Heathrow Camp for Climate Action in August 2007 in their use of ‘peer-reviewed science’ to legitimise their direct action (Figure 5). The trick is to get more policy relevant research produced which is co-defined and useful to those struggling on the frontline of issues.

Figure 5: Activists using academics at the Climate Camp (source: <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2007/08/378986.html>)



Further, at times, critical distance can be a useful tool which can be used to help groups we work with challenge particular readings of events or shortcomings of tactics. This articulation of contentious perspectives is difficult in action-research,

but often opens new mutually-beneficial avenues of discussion and debate for participants.

3. Create a global knowledge commons

Academics can contribute to a global knowledge commons, where knowledge is freely produced and circulated for the common good. However, the production of knowledge is increasingly subject to corporate gatekeepers, mainly through an evolving system of metrics based assessment and ranking of academic work. Three big publishing houses (Wiley-Blackwell; Informa, formerly Taylor and Francis; and Elsevier) now dominate academic publishing of journals and books and extract a huge amount of surplus value from academic labour (see for example, Mitchell, 1999; Blomley, 2006). However, there are many ways to challenge such processes: championing open source, copy left and creative commons licensing agreements, promoting and using online open access publishing, working pro-bono for social movements, putting resources online, and making accessible summaries of our research findings (Pickerill, 2008).

4. Be aware of our own action research footprint

As Roseneil (1993) noted of her activism at Greenham Common, problems of objectification do not disappear simply because we share experiences through participation. Action research raises serious questions of inequality over resources (intellectual and material), capacity, experience, outcome, stake, responsibility, ownership, and power. We need to understand these hierarchies. It is vital that we do not see our roles as imposing agendas from outside or above, even if this will sometimes happen. Crucially, we need to reflect upon the ways in which we seek to derive academic and financial value from the life experiences of others. Although ideally action research functions through the co-production of ideas and knowledge what does co-production actually mean in practice? We must seek ways to not speak *for* others, but still seek to communicate the ideas of others. Sometimes this will be just listening and shadowing, at other times it will be engaging, stimulating, or acting.

5. Organise ourselves into collective action networks

As we have argued in this paper, the life of the scholar activist can often be a lonely one, with extremely individualised engagements and a lack of support among fellow academics. One way to counter this is for radical academics to collectively organise, strategise and act. This means, for example, committing to our trade unions, and also organising among ourselves in 'scholar activist networks', both electronic and face to face. These networks can allow us to: debate and mutually aid each others understanding of relevant issues; develop common tactics and strategies; engage in joint actions and campaigns; intervene collectively in

workplace and societal debates; and engage in long-term, international action research projects with social movements.

6. Be the change we want to see

It goes without saying that if we are serious about changing the world and emancipating ourselves from capitalism, then we have to be prefigurative: practice the principles we espouse in our everyday working lives, and persuade others to do so too. Our work as academics should be socially and ecologically responsible. Our work should not be implicated in the displacement, exploitation or oppression of peoples nor support neo-liberal policies of privatisation, resource theft, or corporate expansion. Finally, our research must enable knowledge investment back to the grassroots, and recognise and respect Indigenous knowledge rights.

7. Make collective strategic interventions which are accountable and relevant to social movements

Ultimately, if we accept and understand that academics and educators have the power to either help or harm movements for social change, then this leads logically to the need to think and act *strategically* as scholar activists. Central to this is being accountable to the movements we claim to support and belong to. At its core, this is a rejection of the university as a privileged site of knowledge production, and of Research Councils as the privileged generator of research priorities. We need to collaborate with those on the frontline about what research is needed and on what solutions we are seeking. Making strategic interventions means orienting our educational and research agendas in ways that will decisively help those on the front line of campaigns and struggles. Submerging ourselves in the messy world of political organising where we don't call the shots is a brave move to make. This kind of strategic research planning involves longer-term commitments which can be very mundane and painstaking and whose benefits might not become apparent for years. This is often the timescale and reality of winning social struggles.

Conclusions

What we have presented here is an honest and messy account of our recent experiences in action research. Our intention in writing this paper was to collectively reflect on what went wrong in order to take forward the developing field of scholar activism. Much of what we have described are the problems of attempting to work collectively in an institutional setting which thrives from individualising our efforts. Thus although we are describing the practical problems of working in a collective with three string personalities and diverse activist' histories, we have come to understand that there was a broader, and more important, context to our problems. Previously we had successfully completed action research projects individually and it is tempting to return to these simpler methodologies. But it was the act of trying to work together which pushed us in

uncomfortable, but ultimately rewarding, directions and perhaps it was only by trying to work collectively that we saw more clearly our own contradictions and failings. We are no longer a collective and writing this article has been a painful if cathartic experience for us. But our case study experiences hopefully illuminate both the failures and successes of differing scholar activist attempts at collective research and we reflect on these hopeful that others will not repeat our mistakes. Given these experiences we would like to gently push scholar activism in three new directions. First, to overcome the false distinction between academia and wider society in terms of both sites of struggle and knowledge production. We urge this in recognition that we have struggled and continue to try and negotiate this enduring boundary. Second, to recognise the university as an important site of struggle, a fact which academics overlook at their peril. Third, to approach action research engagements on a collective and political basis, rather than on an individual whim, or those of our funders, and in doing so to recognise how much this changes everything about how we work.

We are committed to this kind of work, and this is why we have offered a number of principles for engaged scholar activism. Our intention is not to freeze the debate around these by outlining an ideal, but to generate much needed discussion on what we think we are doing, and what we think we can achieve. These are merely a starting point and perhaps we have jumped the gun. Really we needed to start by asking activists and academics what do we want scholar activism to be? However, if we are to take social and ecological challenges we face seriously, then we have to build research strategy and capacity that can meet them and for this to be sustainable in the long term. We fear that without more critical reflectivity scholar activism may undermine its own intentions by creating a cadre of professionalised, institutionalised activists whose potential is incorporated into the neo-liberal university. We have subjected ourselves to these rigorous criticisms and invite others to do the same. That way we can build meaningful research interventions as activists, inside or outside the academy, which understands and responds to the needs of those (of us) struggling against the tide of neo-liberalism, and for a better, more just and humane world.

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memory of Duncan Fuller – an advisory panel member of the Autonomous Geographies project, a friend and a fellow trouble-maker.

Notes

ⁱ See for example, Kathryn Mitchell's special issue in *Antipode* 'Becoming a public scholar' (2008, vol.30, no.3), the session at the 2006 at Royal Geographical Society conference 'Public Sociologies, Public Geographies?' the People's Geographies project led by Don Mitchell at Syracuse University (www.peoplesgeographies.org), the Participatory Geographies Working Group (PyGyWG) of the Royal Geographical Society, and the Activist-Geographers network in the USA. This is mirrored in other disciplines; for example the work of the Network of Activist Scholars in Politics and International Relations (www.naspir.net), the revival of anarchist studies (see Shennan; 2003; Gordon, 2008), debates on radical theory and movements for social change (see Shukaitis & Graeber, 2007), and debates on public sociologies (Buroway, 2004).

ⁱⁱ See Castree and Sparke 2000; Readings, 1996; Yates, 2000; Chase, 2003; Smith, 2000; and elsewhere Shukaitis & Graeber, 2007, and Cote *et al.*, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Our thanks to Jenna M Loyd for helping us to understand and express this point more clearly.

^{iv} The tradition of 'militant research' or 'workers self-enquiry' is largely associated with Italian autonomous Marxist intellectuals such as Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti. It emerged in the 1960s in Italy where researchers worked closely with workers in the factories to understand the structural origins of the labour process and jointly develop responses for a resumption of the class struggle. In Argentina the group *Colectivo Situaciones* has worked closely with the autonomous social movements in Argentina since the 2001 crisis to jointly document, promote and support autonomous movements outside previously constituted ways of understanding social change (See Malo, 2005, Holdren and Touza, 2005; Colectivo Situaciones, 2003; Leal, 2007). In essence, research militancy aims to expand people's capacity for self-empowerment and is a counter-hegemonic approach for facilitating radical social transformation rather than as an instrument for reforming institutional practice.

^v A full list of publications can be downloaded from the project website at: www.autonomousgeographies.org.uk and include Maxey *et al.*, 2006; Maxey and Pickerill, 2007; Pickerill and Maxey, 2006; Pickerill and Maxey, 2009; Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006; Hodkinson, *forthcoming*, and Social Centres Network, 2008. A video 'Eco-village Pioneers' was also produced by the video collective Undercurrents in July 2007 which we financially supported.

^{vi} Key campus struggles have emerged over the role of the military in university activist (Chatterton and Featherstone, 2006), and sweat shop labour and struggles for a living wage (Klein, 2000, Holgate and Wills, 2007) and campus activism has expanded through networks such as www.DemocratizingEducation.org and <http://www.campusactivism.org/>.

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