



Academics and Social Movements: Knowing Our Place, Making Our Space

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Abstract

This paper considers the place of academics in social movements, not as (predominantly) researchers or individuals but as activists acting collectively (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). The notions of militant particularism and convergence space (Routledge, 2003; Cumbers et al. 2008) are deployed in relation to global justice networks, to analyze the discussions between academics planning direct action collectively and potentially with the network Climate Justice Action during the UN COP15 climate change summit in Copenhagen in December 2009. A notable tension in these debates centered on ‘radical’ versus ‘reformist’ action and how either might contribute to transformative social change. The discussions ultimately led to the action of an academic seminar blockade, analyzed as a form of constructive resistance based on mutable particularisms flowing between shifting scales of convergence space. The paper concludes with the proposal that scholar activists should make a long-term commitment to act collectively, develop our own militant particularisms, and bring these to the convergence spaces of global justice networks.

Introduction: Building (up to) the seminar blockade

In the build up to an academic seminar blockade that took place during the COP 15 summit in Copenhagen in December 2009, some potential participants engaged in e-mail exchanges to discuss approaches. A dominant strand of the



debate centered on the most appropriate form(s) of action: How to act, where and when to act... Underpinning these discussions, though, was the larger question: *What is the 'proper place' of academics in social movements?* In posing this question, moreover, academics were considering themselves not as individuals but as a group. The principal direct action network in Copenhagen was Climate Justice Action (CJA). A critique of CJA's plans emerged in the email discussions with some academics proposing alternative forms of action. Others argued that this was an arrogance on the part of the emerging affinity group² which, if pursued, could undermine the solidarity of the movement. So, before taking collective action as scholars in the public domain, we academics had our own politics to contest, construct and commit to.

In this paper, from my own perspective as co-convenor of and participant in the academic seminar blockade, I first review some scholarly takes on the place of academics in social movements. As a provisional analytical framework for the case of the seminar blockade and our relation to CJA I propose the notions of 'militant particularism' and 'convergence space'. After presenting an example of a seminar/conference blockade, I discuss the COP 15 blockade specifically: how it was conceptualized and how that conceptualization was interrogated, initially from an activist viewpoint, resulting in its formulation as a recognizable militant particularism. Discussion among potential seminar blockade participants about the form of our collective action and our relationship to social movements active in Copenhagen is then summarized and discussed. Finally, theories of militant particularism and convergence space are expanded and applied to an analysis of the COP 15 seminar blockade. This paper, then, attempts to chart and make sense of an often unpredictable and hazardous collective journey into direct mass action.

Academics in social movements

Numerous academics, not least geographers focusing on space relations, have theorized their role as researchers in social movements (see for instance Routledge, 1996, 2003ab; Anderson, 2002, 2004; Chatterton, 2006, 2008; Routledge et al, 2007; Juris, 2007; Bello 2008; Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). Gavin Brown switches the identity and so revises the role of the researcher by turning on its head the notion of participant observation (2007). Brown's research is carried out as an observant participator: He is an activist in a social movement who also researches that movement. Extending Brown's inspiring inversion, I will consider constructing a practice of activism within the academy.

Following Rachel Pain's taxonomy (2003), the Autonomous Geographies Collective (AGC) visit three possible ways of being a scholar-activist (2010): (i)

² An affinity group is a group who band together to take political action, typically direct action. The group will have – or consciously develop – an affinity. Affinity groups 'developed as an organizing structure during the Spanish Civil war and have been used with amazing success over the last thirty years of feminist, anti-nuclear, environmental and social justice movements around the world' (Starhawk, 2010)

The academic-activist fuses research and activism, a process imbued with spatial tensions; (ii) Participatory research, a broad field which typically has as its goals the co-production of knowledge and practical outcomes - even social transformation - but which is prone to accusations of exploitation by researchers (however, see Kindon et al, 2007); (iii) Policy research, which is regarded as attempting to progressively influence policy but wherein lies a prominent tendency not to engage with the research public, the people affected by that policy.

The AGC extend the conception of ‘scholar activism’ to acknowledge the researcher as *engaged*, *proactive* and, crucially, as part of a wider academic *collective*, proposing a political hybridization of academia/society discourses:

‘(W)e 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 a wider society in conceptualizations of valid sites of struggle and knowledge production, and to find ways to research and engage collectively and politically, rather than individually* (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010, p. 245, emphasis added).

How would an academic seminar blockade fit with Pain’s taxonomy? Some, but not the majority, of participants in our particular action would regard themselves as academic-activists and the blockade could be seen as an extension of that engagement. Participants may have engaged in forms of participatory research but the seminar blockade does not involve participation with a research public. Although the work presented at a seminar blockade might be policy research, the action itself is plainly transgressive. Following the AGC conception of scholar activism, conceiving the seminar blockade involves discussions of just how to engage with social movements. The blockade is not be an obvious rejection of the distinction between society and academia³; rather it is an action designed to *exploit the distinction*, at least in the mindset of what Alan Carter dubs the militaristic and coercive forces of the state (2004). Certainly the blockade is a collective political engagement by academics. Of the seven principles for scholar activism proposed by the AGC, two are particularly pertinent: (i) Organize ourselves into collective action networks; (ii) Make collective strategic interventions which are accountable and relevant to social movements.

Academics have also considered our role as *public scholars* (for example Fuller & Askins, 2007; Eagleton, 2008). In this vein, Katharyne Mitchell asks *What does it mean to be political in academic life?* And she offers an intuitive answer, which she immediately interrogates:

³ We should be clear that, as well as participation in the seminar blockade being encouraged via all the usual academic means, activists and a wider public were also actively encouraged and welcomed, and indeed a small number did participate.

‘(W)hat creates a public scholar is related to a profound urge to participate and intervene in the political practices of the world.... to try to make the world a better place, corny as that sounds. But is this desire compatible with an academic project? Does it necessarily involve selling out, either intellectually, personally or politically?’ (Mitchell, 2007, p. 346).

A preliminary analytical framework

The discussion presented in this paper has at its heart similar questions. Potential blockaders and supporters were concerned about the nature of our participation, whether our action would involve any conception of sell-out, and ultimately whether it would serve to make the world a better place. Such questions are neither objective nor sequential but engaged and intimately, inextricably entangled. Blockaders are academics who will act *collectively* in the public domain, putting our academic projects – and specifically our collective practices – at the very centre of our intervention.

As an analytical framework for considering our participation in a social movement, I will deploy the notion of convergence space: ‘a heterogeneous affinity – ‘a world made of many worlds’ (Marcos, 2001, 10) – between various social formations, such as social movements’ (Routledge, 2003b, p. 345). The characteristics of convergence spaces identified by Paul Routledge include: creating ‘sufficient common ground to generate a politics of solidarity’; and being ‘*comprised of contested social relations*, because of the very different militant particularisms that are articulated by participant movements’ (Routledge, 2003b, p. 345 – 346). Routledge presents David Harvey’s elaboration of Raymond Williams’ term militant particularism to denote the ideas of resistance emanating from place-based action (see also Featherstone, 1998, 2005). In convergence spaces, ‘movements need to develop a politics of solidarity capable of reaching across space without abandoning their militant particularist base(s)’; convergence spaces may be where working models are developed ‘for a new form of society that will benefit all humanity’ (Routledge, 2003, p. 337).

An example of an academic blockade action

The previous academic blockade I had been involved with at Faslane, the Trident nuclear submarine base in Scotland, was organized as a ‘conference’, predominantly by two academics who would also participate in Copenhagen (see Vinthagen et al, *pending*). That action fit into a year long rota of blockades of the base by affinity groups ‘signing up’ to the Faslane 365 campaign (Zelter, 2008), its guiding principles, strategy and tactics⁴. In short, we academics knew in advance what we were getting into, especially as a good number of blockades had taken place before our own actions. We had a space-relational model, one which included

⁴ See <http://www.faslane365.org/>

a range of reasonably predictable possibilities with respect to our own risk, from Police ‘indulgence’ to arrest typically followed by quite prompt release⁵. Moreover, we knew that for that day the space of action ‘belonged’ to us, i.e. we were not acting in immediate interdependent complicity with other groups. The space-relational model was also physically place-based and located in time: All activists knew exactly where and when they would take action.

Anticipating the fuller discussion of militant particularisms and convergence space that will follow in this paper, I observe that we academics participating in Faslane 365 did develop our own space-relational militant particularism, but in a sense there was no convergence space in which to contest this idea/identity: We could act collectively and in solidarity with the wider peace movement, accepting but not constructing the strategy and tactics; rather than being occupied coextensively, common-ground had been delineated into distinct plots on a chronological basis.

The COP 15 seminar blockade

Although we appreciated there would be differences, we conveners of the COP 15 action (Kye Askins, Justin Kenrick and myself) took the Faslane academic blockade as our provisional model. We then looked to CJA for the enveloping and enabling equivalent of the 365 campaign. An international network of Camp for Climate Action and other anti-capitalist groups from many different places, CJA came together in Copenhagen around the efforts of local groups, in particular the Danish network Klimakollektivet (The Climate Collective). As a long-term participant in UK Climate Camps and latterly in the organization of Climate Camp Cymru⁶ earlier in 2009, Wales’ first such action, I trusted the processes of CJA, the network’s commitment to openness, justice and, indeed, dissensus:

‘Because we are such a broad network we do not have identical policies or all share unified positions.... But we do share a common concern about false solutions to the climate crisis, an emphasis on climate justice (...the least privileged throughout the world are the most threatened by the economic, social, and ecological dangers of climate change!), and a willingness to take action’ (CJA, 2009a).

In consultation with my co-conveners, I set about determining how our blockade could fit in to CJA’s program of action. There were two main possibilities: (i) Organising our seminar blockade discretely, i.e. identifying a ‘target’ ourselves, deciding a place and time etc. (ii) Coordinating with a specific action planned by

⁵ This is not to downplay either the courage of the blockaders, the hardships some suffered, or the coercion of the Police but merely to highlight the difference of participating in a relatively delineated convergence space of protest.

⁶ On Climate Justice Action’s website Climate Camp Cymru were listed as a participant organisation. In late August 2010, the CJA website was not accessible.

CJA. Using our academic network, we established contact with someone working with CJA in Copenhagen in the lead up to COP 15, an activist who was also an academic. Let us call our contact ‘Ganesha’ after the Indian deity who removes obstacles and brings knowledge⁷. Ganesha’s presence ‘in-place’ greatly facilitated our engagement with CJA, enabling the development of our own academic militant particularism and entrance into convergence space⁸.

Elaborating the academic blockade as militant particularism

Reporting back from CJA meetings, Ganesha suggested that our best bet might be to participate in the *Hit Production* day of action on Sunday 13 December. *Hit Production* aimed to shut down the harbor through a mass action, highlighting that ‘Our economic system, the way it produces goods, and the way they are transported and finally consumed is the root of climate change’ (CJA, 2009b). Simultaneous with the mass action, CJA encouraged affinity groups to take actions against other symbolic targets in Copenhagen. On 1 November, though, Ganesha wrote:

‘Well - I’m still not sure what the academic blockade is going to be discussing/format etc - and what gives it the privilege of being ‘academic’? Besides that... I think we can expect arrests to happen on both the Saturday and Sunday, so I’d be tempted to think carefully about when and how we can have an impact. There is potential for including it, or finding a way for it to feed into, the ‘peoples summit for climate justice’ on the 16th?’

Justin Kenrick and I sought to address Ganesha’s concerns about the academic seminar blockade. While I explained that, in my view, an academic seminar blockade was the same as any affinity group taking direct action under the network umbrella, Justin highlighted his personal commitment to political action ahead of any academic privilege. Moreover, he elaborated the academic seminar blockade:

‘A seminar blockade is a form of direct action where we simply engage in the professional work we do as academics, by giving a scientific seminar. The special thing is that the seminar is simultaneously a blockade of that which we oppose (nuclear weapons at Faslane, politicians’ refusal to dismantle the machine driving climate change in Copenhagen)... It is a blockade in which an aspect of our lives which we value – academic enquiry - blocks the aspect of the status quo we oppose – the system threatening life on earth. It is a form of action in

⁷ Anonymity is necessitated by Ganesha’s own account of 10 November 2010: ‘I’m a little wary of publicly associating myself with events at the moment – myself and others were stopped under the antiterrorism act a month ago, highlighting the fact that we are being monitored re all this.’

⁸ We should note here that other participants in organizing the seminar blockade who were in Copenhagen were unable to fully enter the convergence space of the CJA partly because of the network’s dauntingly unfamiliar meeting and decision-making processes.

which our theoretical discussion is our political practice, in which we literally pit our bodies and our profession against the logic and powers that are destroying the world.

'This is not just the usual sit-down and get arrested blockade, it is an out-door seminar of scholars concerned that there is a future for life, including a future for scientific enquiry. The seminar blockade uses the normal equipment of a university seminar - papers, tables, name-tags, conference folders with copies of papers and a mobile white-board. The main difference is that the seminar happens outside rather than in a conference room inside a University building. As with other conferences⁹ there is an academic theme. In time we would hope that such conferences could be recognised by our institutions, travel and expenses be paid for, and conference fees be paid in order to make the process sustainable.

'The academic seminar blockade is not just about "making a statement" but about transforming words into deeds without losing the capacity of words and discussion to open out the space for us to think deeper about the problem we are confronting and about a range of possible solutions and responses.'

Justin's elaboration is the first detailed articulation of the militant particularism emerging in our collective. The ideas of resistance emanating from our corner of academia are, then, progressive and involve contrariness and creativity, evoking an ethics of care at a distance, a hybridization of academic theory and activist practice, turning words into deeds, and putting our vulnerable bodies on the line in direct action. We will, without apology, not just retain but actually *underscore* our professional identities, taking responsibility for privilege and at the same time subverting it, an act of *détournement* (Debord, 1968/1992). Our performance of resistance will parody our normal place of professional activity so completely as to transcend parody, daring anyone to challenge our right to be doing what we are doing and our choice of location for doing it. Justin seems to speak directly to Katharyne Mitchell's concerns about selling out either intellectually, personally or politically.

The academic seminar blockade as elaborated by Justin conjures an ancient, pre-verbal ontology that celebrates life, love, joy and freedom, prefiguring anarchist resistances. It echoes 'the spirit of the 1960s', particularly the uprisings of 1968 and political street theatre: happenings, the Diggers of Haight Ashbury, Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2008), the Situationists (see for instance Pinder, 2008), the activist theatre of *Solvoguen* (The Sun Chariot) in Denmark... It finds antecedents in the 1990's protest culture of carnival, creating

⁹ Here Justin means to write 'seminars'. We chose to make the distinction so that our *seminar* blockade would not be confused or conflated in any way with the COP15 conference.

the space you wish to defend (and extend) as an act of resistance. This culture, inspired by the philosophy of Bakhtin and fuelled by the praxis of the Zapatistas, particularly as articulated by their spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, was enacted most memorably in the Carnival Against Capital in Seattle during the World Trade Organization conference of 1999 (see Expósito, 2004). The academic seminar blockade also resonates with the tactics of groups such as The Yes Men and the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA).

(Counter) Proposals for direct action

With both the politics and logistics of our action subject to uncertainty, the moment was ripe for we academics to add a little spice to the *problématique*! On 7th November two of our number proposed (by email) ‘an action strategy’ to a group of people whom they knew to be involved in demonstrations against/around COP15, a group that did not (unfortunately) include all would-be participants in the seminar blockade. The action strategy was not intended as an alternative to the seminar blockade, although there was initially some confusion, but rather as an alternative to CJA’s *Reclaim Power* mass action planned for 16th December. The tactic of *Reclaim Power* was to be that:

‘(W)e, the movements for global justice, will take over the conference for one day and transform it into a Peoples Assembly.... Reclaim Power! is a confrontational mass action of non-violent civil disobedience. We will overcome any physical barriers that stand in our way – but we will not respond with violence if the police try to escalate the situation, nor create unsafe situations; we will be there to make our voices heard!’ (CJA, 2009c).

Although acknowledged by its authors as more a chance to share strategic thinking than a realistic option, in summary their action strategy proposed as an alternative to *Reclaim Power*:

‘The Pope model, built on the cardinals’ election of the new Pope: A radical Climate Treaty is essential for human survival. It is urgent and at the UN Conference in Copenhagen (COP-15) we need a treaty that transforms our contemporary exploitative and unregulated economy into one that is fundamentally different, one that is focused on the needs of all people and nature. But politicians are already now announcing that we will not get one, only a non-binding agreement on targets.... It would be very counter-productive if also we try to “stop the meeting” and contribute to a collapse of the deal (i.e. a strategy of making Copenhagen into a new “Battle of Seattle”)....

‘We suggest that we formulate a draft of The People’s Climate Charter with our fundamental demands, give it to the politicians before the meeting, and then lock them in through massive blockades and demonstrations making a circle-blockade around the huge Bella Center

area¹⁰. We don't let them out until they have formulated a deal and signed it, in the same way as during the papal election in Rome.... When the politicians at Bella Center have reached an agreement, we demand that it is read out for the waiting crowd.... In such a circle-blockade we send a much different and politically consistent message: No Politician is Allowed to Leave Without Doing Their Job! We Demand a Radical and Just Deal on Climate Now!

Responses and reservations

The email discussion that ensued in the wake of this alternative proposal ran for almost two weeks until the 20th of November 2009 and so must be summarized here. The discussion represents part of the process of developing our militant particularism and a politics of solidarity with other groups in the convergence space of CJA.

The first response to *the Pope model* suggestion contested that there was no possibility that COP15 could produce a meaningful 'deal' on cutting carbon emissions. This response conjured 'the eco-left' as a political force and claimed that COP15 (by following the *Reclaim Power* CJA proposal) was a requisite of the action, while 'Seattleing' Copenhagen was not undesirable. The next contribution labeled the alternative proposals 'reformist', appealing to politicians to act for us, and radical, unilaterally reclaiming power, albeit for a limited space-time. Thence, a third alternative, the ambition of which exceeded either *the Pope model* or *Reclaim Power*, was proposed: 'insisting they (politicians) side with humanity rather than the machine, by adopting key clear policies that completely turn on their head the current world order.'

Acknowledging the potential for academics to make a unique contribution in Copenhagen, the next reaction to the proposals being discussed quoted CJA. First, though, it suggested that who we acted with was more important than how we acted, i.e. that solidarity with CJA should be our dominant consideration: '*we*, the global justice movement, already have a strategy on which we have agreed though a process of months of meetings; and I, at least, have supported and trust that process. If you remember the G8 in Scotland, with 'competing' socialist (G8 Alternatives) and anarchist (Dissent!) network agendas plus Make Poverty History and even the execrable Live 8, the movement's strategy was fragmented and weakened¹¹.'

Climate Justice Action tactic for 16th December: 'Our goal is not to shut down the entire summit. But this day will be ours, it will be the day

¹⁰ I note here the similarity with the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army's operation HAHAHA (Helping Authorities House Arrest Half-witted Authoritarian Androids) at the G8 summit at Gleneagles in Scotland in 2005 (see Kolonel Klepto & Major Up-Evil, 2005).

¹¹ See Harvie, D., K. Milburn, B. Trott & D. Watts (2005) *Shut Them Down!* The G8, Gleneagles 2005 and the Movement of Movements. Leeds. Dissent!

we speak for ourselves and set the agenda: climate justice now! We cannot trust the market with our future, nor put our faith in unsafe, unproven and unsustainable technologies. We know that on a finite planet, it is impossible to have infinite economic growth – ‘green’ or otherwise. Instead of trying to fix a destructive system, we are advancing alternatives that provide real and just solutions to the climate crisis: leaving fossil fuels in the ground; reasserting peoples’ and community control over resources; relocating food production; reducing overconsumption, particularly in the North; recognizing the ecological and climate debt owed to the peoples of the South and making reparations; and respecting indigenous and forest peoples’ rights’ (CJA, 2009d).

While there was general agreement among academics participating in the email discussion that COP15 was doomed to failure and that the causal structures driving climate change needed to be dismantled, doubts about the efficacy of *Reclaim Power* persisted, with one contributor asking: ‘Doesn't invading the negotiations simply strengthen the hand of the status quo, enabling them to appear the rational reasonable ones? (while CJA is branded ‘hooligans’)’. On the other hand, demanding that politicians make a meaningful deal, in the full knowledge that they would and could not, would leave them exposed to the public as the unreasonable ones: ‘They will of course do the make-believe of lies and PR that is supposed to make the public assured that COP15 is a success, that we make a lot of progress towards a (future) deal that will work (although we know that it will just be a replay of Bali 2007 with non-binding goals).’

On the 19th of November an article by Naomi Kline was circulated among those academics involved in the email discussion. An extract from that article is reproduced below as it indicates a more widespread perception of a maturing global justice movement; Klein also signals a need for more creative direct action:

‘There is certainly a Seattle quality to the Copenhagen mobilization: the huge range of groups¹² that will be there; the diverse tactics¹³ that will be on display; and the developing-country governments ready to bring activist demands into the summit. But Copenhagen is not merely a Seattle do-over. It feels, instead, as though the progressive tectonic plates are shifting, creating a movement that builds on the strengths of an earlier era but also learns from its mistakes....

‘Unlike at previous summits, where alternatives seemed like an afterthought, in Copenhagen the alternatives will take center stage. For instance, the direct-action coalition Climate Justice Action has called on activists to storm the conference center on December 16.... The goal

¹² See <http://www.klimaforum09.org/?lang=da>

¹³ See <http://http.noblogs.org/>

of the action is not to shut down the summit, Seattle-style, but to open it up, transforming it into "a space to talk about our agenda, an agenda from below, an agenda of climate justice, of real solutions against their false ones"

'In addition to the coherent narrative and the focus on alternatives, there are plenty of other changes too: a more thoughtful approach to direct action, one that recognizes the urgency to do more than just talk but is determined not to play into the tired scripts of cops-versus-protesters' (Klein, 2009).

With the email discussion moving on to how academics might respond to the post COP15 'disaster' and contribute positively to the strategies of social movements, the democratic validity of the CJA process in which our affinity group was beginning to invest its trust was queried. The criticism hinged on the decision-making culture of British movements involved in CJA. A contributor to the email discussion suggested that this culture had been imposed on Scandinavian movements in the network to the detriment of critical thought and consensus. Though this contribution called into question whether the same orthodoxy had, by association through the call for solidarity with CJA, been imposed on our affinity group, there was no time to discuss this vital issue at sufficient length: The logistics of the seminar blockade became our urgent priority.

Militant particularisms and convergence space

In offering an analysis of the discussion between academics in the lead-up to the seminar blockade, my main interest is in the collective construction of our particular academic militant particularism; how we develop a politics of solidarity capable of reaching across space without abandoning our militant particularism; and the politics of solidarity circulating in the convergence space of CJA.

Cumbers et al reconceive the notion of convergence space to consider how local practices enact the global character of transnational networks of resistance (Cumbers et al, 2008). Critically thinking though the spatialities of Global Justice Networks (GJNs), conceived of as 'a series of overlapping interacting and differently placed and resourced networks' rather than as 'a coherent global movement' (Cumbers et al, p. 184), Cumbers et al propose key characteristics of convergence spaces, which are then:

- (i) Comprised of place-based, but not necessarily place bound, movements;
- (ii) Articulating certain collective visions that are representative of a prefigurative, participatory politics;
- (iii) Relational achievements that shape political identities;

- (iv) Facilitating spatially extensive political action by participant movements;
- (v) Grounded in ‘grassrooting vectors’, most significantly imagineers – activists who organize convergence spaces;
- (vi) Characterized by a range of operational logics, from horizontal, de-centered and non-hierarchical to more vertical, centered and hierarchical;
- (vii) Sites of contested social and power relations.

I am compelled to contest any simplistic interpretation of the first of these otherwise seemingly sound characteristics as it tends to contradict our earliest observations in this paper. Judging by the emerging academic affinity group, as well as from participants as diverse as Trade Unions and the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) (see Routledge, 2005, Klepto & Up-Evil, 2005, Mason, *pending*), *convergence spaces are not comprised exclusively of place-based movements*. Such participating groups are formed from smaller place-based groups and individuals coming together as a collective in convergence spaces such as the CJA network. Certain groups evidently come together under principles derived in relational space rather than in place. There is not, though, a binary between space-relational and place-based movements. It would be difficult to conceive of any contemporary resistance movement that did not extend beyond the local, either intentionally or contingently. Similarly, apart from the fact that each activist is ultimately place-based and requires some degree of spatial fixedness in order to function, every space-relational resistance will inevitably mobilize place and the local, whether it be the ancient garden or the contemporary localized community of academia, the collective memory of place in Trade Union and labor struggles, the fantasy-land of CIRCA, that everywhere place ‘in-between order and chaos’¹⁴ where the Buffoon is King, or a symbolic place, mythic or real, for, say, a faith-based group.

Cumbers et al cite David Harvey’s argument that ‘it is only when relationality connects to the absolute spaces and times of material and social life that politics comes alive. To neglect that connectivity is to court political irrelevance’ (Harvey 2006, p. 293, Cumbers et al, 2008, p. 193). That argument acknowledged, it may be that space-relational resistances conceived and enacted beyond the materiality of place and the local are at least *imaginable*, whereas place-based resistance that are impermeably local are almost inconceivable. The academic seminar blockade is space-relational resistance conceived by a non-local collective based in diverse places. That process of conception is surely a politically relevant act of resistance even before the participants come together materially to physically enact the seminar blockade *in situ* at an agreed time.

¹⁴ About the Army <http://www.clownarmy.org/about/about.html> (Accessed 30 August 2010)

Cumbers et al do seem to present a ‘permissive’ view of what constitutes a place-based movement, writing that for activists: ‘it is in their own locality, sense of community, or even national or ethnic collective consciousness that remain the most important (but not necessarily only) source of collective and individual identities’ (p. 192 - 193). The conception of place and of territory deployed by Cumbers et al seems wholly spatialized throughout their geographical analysis of GJNs. Indeed, they offer a conclusion that seems to thoroughly hybridize place-based and space-relational conceptions of social movements. Accepting that understanding GJNs requires space-relational thinking, in deploying the concept of convergence space as an analytical framework, Cumbers et al also assert that:

‘Without essentializing place, it is critical in this respect to recognize the importance of territorially based, historically constructed, social identities, which are at the same time themselves always contingent and in some senses temporary social constructions, in facilitating struggles and collective resistance’ (Cumbers et al, 2008, p. 198).

Combining the notions of militant particularism and convergence space with the Autonomous Geographies Collective’s strategic proposals to organize ourselves into collective action networks and make collective strategic interventions which are accountable and relevant to social movements, frames our email discussion in the lead-up to the seminar blockade in Copenhagen. If academia, or at least a critical corner of it, can be conceived of as relational spaces wherein militant particularisms are constructed, then perhaps we can critically re-imagine and re-extend the notion beyond its place-based origin. We may also further our understanding of convergence spaces, their scales and mergings, and what it means to develop a politics of solidarity.

Protest tactics and conceptions of crises and power

Tactically, the choices discussed centered on taking over the COP15 conference for one day versus encircling it until politicians reach a deal that ‘we’ can agree with. Explicit in the CJA tactic is a rejection of both capitalism and market-based ‘solutions’ to climate change and of nation-state governments as agents capable of distinguishing themselves from capitalism and protecting global resources. Alan Carter’s State Primacy Theory views the linkage between capitalism, contemporary nation-state governments and environmental destructions as insoluble: ‘Centralized, pseudo-representative, quasi-democratic political structures chose for stabilization highly competitive inegalitarian economic relations, which develop non-convivial environmentally damaging technologies’ (Carter, 2004, p. 316). The alternative, Carter proposes, is decentralized, participatory democracy, which chooses more self-sufficient egalitarian economic relations and develops soft convivial technologies (Carter, 2004, p. 320). While CJA’s action is symbolic, it is also constructive, not apparently seeking the intensification of crisis but rather, as Naomi Kline discerns, proposing radical alternatives.

Arguably, the tactic of encircling the blockade, which seeks to transcend symbolism, reflects two strands of environmentalist thought: millenarianism and managerialism (see for instance Pepper, 1999, Dobson, 2000). The view that climate change is apocalyptic can lead to a politics that prioritizes saving the planet (through regulation) over challenging capitalism, even where analyses may agree that capitalism is the root cause of the problem. This view is criticized by left-wing greens who fear the advent of (more) authoritarian ‘khaki green’ states (see for instance Shift, 2010, Chatterton, 2009). Even touching on debates like this in Left and Green movements highlights the extremely optimistic assumption at the heart of the encirclement proposal, i.e. that there could be any consensus by the assembled ‘we’ outside the Bella Centre on any ‘agreement’ proposed by politicians inside.

The collective construction of our militant particularism

Evidently in discussions of resistance, power relations, reform and revolution, we have the more explicitly space-relational militant particularism we argued for, with our source of collective identity being our sense of engaged academic community (see Cumbers et al, 2008, p. 184). Featherstone has rightly pointed out that militant particularisms need not necessarily be progressive (Featherstone, 1998), though in this case that intention is apparent.

Although the seminar blockade is an extension of our academic particularism in the sense of putting particular ‘local’ actions into action, our particularism is not born out of our struggles in academia: it is not directly about our wages, working conditions or the neo-liberalization of academic space. Rather our militant particularism is altruistic, concerned with care at a distance - about the threat of climate change to distant others in space and time, regardless of whether or not those others ‘inhabit’ academia. Though the global nature of climate change seems to thus suggest particular forms of activism that transcend place, the context may be key. Contesting the closure of a refugee support centre, for example, may be part of the same crisis paradigm, yet it appears to beg more local, place-based action. Bringing similar or sympathetic militant particularisms into action in a convergence space might well be an appropriate form of resistance, however, potentially transcending negation. As public scholars, it cannot only be ‘local’ conditions we wish to see improved, be that local read as place-based or spatial. As Katharyne Mitchell argues, we want to make the world a better place. And as Paul Routledge suggests, when we enter convergence space we may be participating in developing models for a new form of society that will benefit all humanity, indeed all nature.

A politics of solidarity capable of reaching across space

If we are to develop a politics of solidarity capable of reaching across space, we must, as the Autonomous Geographies Collective put it, reject the false distinction between academia and a wider society in conceptualizations of valid sites of struggle and knowledge production. To act collectively, we need to stop

assuming and being ashamed of the ‘privilege’ of being academics. Acting as individuals in social movements is one thing, owning our collective identity and negotiating our collective participation is another. Hence, we must contest the collective critiques we develop – our militant particularisms – in the convergence spaces of social movements. When a militant particularism is thus contested it must surely be open to change in the quest for mutual solidarity. As resistances are *always already* works in progress, moreover, it might be expected that contestation in convergence space will expose individual differences and perhaps produce factions in groups; issues will arise that may not have been previously considered ‘locally’.

In convergence space, then, militant particularisms may be subject to both negotiation and fracture. Moreover, if place-based or space-relational militant particularisms are contested and reconfigured in the convergence spaces of larger social movements, the representatives of the ‘local’ groups participating will surely take these reconfigurations ‘home’, where they will likely be subject to fresh rounds of contestation. Conceived of in this way, we can view militant particularisms as themselves convergence spaces, for surely no social formation can be wholly homogenous. So, we have mutable particularisms flowing between shifting scales of convergence space.

The politics of solidarity circulating in convergence space

In practice, convergence spaces such as CJA are not only comprised of negotiating groups committed to ‘the long haul’. ‘Imagineers’ will spend considerable time and effort negotiating mutual solidarity and thence conceiving and planning actions (Routledge, 1997, Cumbers et al 2009). Other groups and individuals will flow in and out of this convergence space unpredictably, one moment hotly contesting their own militant particularism, another absent and unrepresented. They will participate for one meeting, one action, one day, one week... CJA will even provide convergence space for environmental groups who do not share the analysis that capitalism is the root cause of climate change and is beyond reform. Resistance in Copenhagen was spread between at least three major, often complementary, sometimes antagonistic¹⁵, convergence spaces: CJA, Klimaforum, and Christiania’s ‘bottom meeting’ antidote to the UN’s ‘summit’ (literally translated into Danish as ‘top meeting’). Most academics taking part in the seminar blockade ‘dipped into’ these spaces without imagineering, i.e. contributing to their construction, either individually or, more pertinently, as collectives.

¹⁵ When Police tear-gassed a CJA party in Christiania, as just one instance, there followed a tension between the two particularisms about the form of resistance offered, specifically bringing the conflict into Christiania, a home space which residents endeavor to keep safe. More banally, Klimaforum scheduled workshops that clashed with the actions conceived by other groups and vice versa.

Our email discussion highlighted the tension produced in CJA as a result of the universalism of British movement models of participative decision-making being foisted onto the network: A colonialisation of consensus. And this tension was reproduced in the discussions between academics planning action in Copenhagen, particularly through the attempt to foster network solidarity at the expense of diversity and creative dissensus. As Paul Routledge points out: 'Such universalisms may in fact be particularisms that are deployed as universal which create homogenous activist environments that elide important issues of diversity' (Routledge, 2003, p. 345). Routledge contends there is an inevitable tension between mutual solidarity and militant particularism in convergence space, to which I would add that this may be particularly the case in spaces constructed for short-term interventions such as protests.

Any collective of scholar-activists must also be prepared to contribute not only to the strategies and tactics of social movements, but also to the politics of solidarity circulating in convergence spaces. We can not assume that this work has been done and that non-hierarchical consensus has been achieved; we must realize that this will always be a work in progress: 'The construction of mutual solidarities is therefore not a smooth process. It involves antagonisms (often born out of differences between collaborators) as well as agreements and is always, to a degree, fraught with political determinations' (Cumbers et al, 2008, p.196).

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to further develop the notions of militant particularism and convergence space outlined by Cumbers et al. For academic collectives, at least, I suggest that militant particularism may, in a sense, be more space-relational than place-based. I have also attempted to further our understanding of convergence spaces, their scales and mergings, and what it means to develop a politics of solidarity. Scholar-activists must continue the work of conceptualizing crises of environment, politics and meaning, along with resistance and 'solutions'.

What, then, is the 'proper place' of academics in social movements, or how do we make space for ourselves? Returning to the proposal of the Autonomous Geographies Collective, if we wish to foster mutual solidarity, scholar activists should make a long-term commitment to act collectively, develop our own militant particularisms, and bring these to the convergence spaces of the global justice network. However creative and effective our ideas of resistance may be, we cannot come to the party late and expect everyone to dance to our tune. There is much grist for the mills of future academic conference/seminar actions post COP15. How, crudely put, can academics assist social movements to capitalize on disaster and hasten radical change? How can we construct resistances that change the space of encounter that, following Naomi Kline, do not to play into the tired scripts of cops-versus-protesters? How can our proposals for alternatives be made politically relevant?

We must get serious about our politics of resistance: it must not be merely symbolic and our actions must not be mere performances of seriousness, appearance and essence must be distinguishable; resistance must not be constituent of a politics of simulation that sustains the unsustainable (see Blühdorn, 2007). The experience of organizing the seminar blockade in Copenhagen, along with that of participating in the different convergence spaces of resistance there, suggests to me that we – the global justice movement, including academic collectives - should stop following the caravan of capitalism to its climate conferences and other inane and immutable summits. In advance of future rounds of COP and the like, we could turn our backs, in theory and in practice, on the world of reason that sustains the unreasonable; we could construct our convergence space around a specific militant particularism, bringing all our considerable movement talents to bear ‘locally’ in favor of our comrades and their cause¹⁶, probably in a place other than that where the ‘official’ summit is held. Imagine, for instance, how twenty-thousand people could contribute during a week spent assisting a low-impact development, eco-village or that refugee centre threatened with closure; Imagine how that number could literally remodel the cycling culture of a regressive British or Spanish city.... Imagine the roles academics could play in such convergence spaces. And, if we dare, imagine how the climate justice movement might reconstruct academia therein; how negotiating mutual solidarity might transform our own militant particularisms.

Endnote

In the event, though there were tensions within CJA in the build up to the *Hit Production* day of action, our seminar blockade took place on Sunday 13th December. We blockaded the gates of a DONG coal-fired power station near the harbor. The police eventually allowed our action to proceed unhindered, seemingly because of the privileged status they conferred on us as academics. This status was conveyed to them principally via the name-tags we wore, even though these were reclaimed from previous academic events and bore a random selection of names (with apologies to any reader who is subsequently subject to arrest for no apparent reason!). On December 16th the Danish Police used force to prevent participants in *Reclaim Power* from entering the Bella Centre. Similarly, they prevented defecting delegates from the COP15 joining the CJA action. A People’s Congress was nevertheless held on the street outside the compound.

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¹⁶ I note here the World People’s Conference on Climate Change that took place in Bolivia as response to the desultory COP15 summit and the production of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth: The results of convergences need not be only physical.

legal observer and Sebastian Kotzé for providing medical support; to Lotte Reimer for assisting with logistics and helping keep blockade participants warm with some physical exercises, memorably ‘rubber chicken’; *to all participants and supporters*. Thanks too to Paul Routledge, Kye Askins and Rachel Pain for their reviews of this paper.

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