

Article

FROM 'HERE' TO 'THERE': SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, THE ACADEMY AND SOLIDARITY RESEARCH

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of social movement scholars now advocate participatory and collaborative research approaches. These are often premised upon the assertion of a convergence between movement and researcher that implicates the latter in the struggles of the former. Naming this approach "solidarity research", in this article I identify the components that provide the rationale for its pursuit. As well as affirming movement-researcher solidarity, this rationale also comprises a situated epistemology that asks academics to think reflexively about their research practice, the roles they play, and the interests they serve. This reveals the diverging positionality, of knowledge and interests, that often exists between movements and academics. Such concerns give rise to specific methodological and ethical principles that indicate the importance of

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negotiating this positionality to successful collaboration. Reflecting on my own experiences trying and sometimes failing to conduct participatory research with transnational agrarian movements, I identify dynamics that enable and constrain the pursuit of such collaborative research within commitments to broader methodological and ethical principles of solidarity.

Key Words

Solidarity, Situated Epistemology, Positionality, Methodology, La Vía Campesina

Introduction

Recent years have seen a steady increase, with periodic explosions, in the number of social movement scholars advocating the integration of social movements' interests and knowledge into academic processes of knowledge production. In reflecting upon their experiences attempting such research, these scholars offer useful insights into the limits, possibilities, and 'best practices' for such collaboration. As much an outcome of increasing numbers of activists coming into the academy as it is of previously established academics undergoing epistemological and methodological broadening, two recent bursts of activity communicate this fecundity well: a 2008 special edition² of *Anthropological Quarterly* anchored around contributions from the Social Movements Working Group at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (Kurzman *et al.* 2008); and a 2012 special edition of *Social Movement Studies* featuring contributions from a diversely located group of social movement scholars negotiating, in different ways, the movement-academy interface (Gillan and Pickerill *et al.* 2012).³

This group of scholars can be situated in relation to an ongoing trajectory of critical reflection and practice that challenges, in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways, the scholar-movement boundary (e.g., Friere 1972; Touraine 1981; Flacks 2004; Routledge 2004; Croteau 2005; Escobar, 2008). One important trait that provides a unifying reference for these scholars is a critique of conventional or dominant attitudes within the academy towards such issues as the appropriate degree of distance between movement and researcher. This critique leads to their affirmation of a number of alternative, participatory approaches, purposively eschewing notions of 'impartiality' or 'objectivity', including: 'movement-relevant theory' (Bevington and Dixon 2005), 'militant ethnography' (Juris 2007), 'queer public sociology' (Santos 2012), 'Participatory Action Research' (Kapoor and Jordan 2009), 'activist research' (Hale 2006), 'politically engaged ethnography' (Juris and Khasnabish *et al.* 2013), and so on.

³ The launch of the online journal *Interface*, the mission statement of which asserts its founders' aspirations to include within the journal 'material that can be used in concrete ways by movements' is also important in this regard (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/who-we-are/mission-statement/>).

The rationales behind these various approaches are another integral feature of this new participatory movement scholarship. These are founded upon a number of different elements, including a situated epistemology which, in various different ways, asks academics to think reflexively about their research practices. Of crucial importance, is an assertion of academic researcher and movement *solidarity*. Indeed, much of this recent output seeks to identify and explore the practices, methodological and ethical principles for, and structural constraints to, the realisation of this solidarity. Negotiating *positionality* (of academics on the one hand, and movements on the other) is recognised as crucial in this regard (Routledge 2004; Dawson and Sinwell 2012). Given both the centrality of movement-academic solidarity to the rationale behind these participatory approaches, and the focus of much of this recent literature I have elected to refer to this group of scholars as practicing or attempting to practice *solidarity research*.

In this article I am doing two things. First of all, I am making the case for solidarity research as a distinctive set of concerns and principles by identifying, amongst the work of those who pursue it:

- a) the different components of the rationale (a situated epistemology and affirmation of movement-academic solidarity) that informs the call for and practice of these participatory research approaches; and,
- b) the methodological and ethical principles that these gives rise to.

Secondly, again drawing from this literature, I am identifying the importance of *positionality* to the attainment of these methodological and ethical principles, moving the focus to my own experiences conducting and attempting participatory research with transnational agrarian movements (La Vía Campesina) and their allies. As I will demonstrate, these experiences both confirm the importance and validity of the previously identified methodological and ethical principles, and lay bare some of the challenges to their realisation.

The Rationale for a Participatory, Engaged Movement Scholarship

As noted above, recent years have seen a steady increase (occasional explosion) in the scholarly affirmation of the need for an engaged, participatory movement scholarship. Whilst it is rare to find all of these explicitly invoked in the work of individual authors, it is possible to identify within this literature three core components to the rationale behind this call. These are: an epistemology which asserts that social movements carry and produce situated knowledge; an epistemology that asserts that knowledge practices – what we know, how we know it and why – are shaped by interests and ends; and, the assertion of a solidarity between scholar and

movement that implicates the scholar, in different ways, in the struggles of the movement. I will now discuss each of these in turn, before moving to a consideration of their mutual relationship and the methodological and ethical principles that they generate.

Situated Epistemology 1: Recognising Social Movements as (Situated) Knowers

The first component of the rationale behind the call for a solidarity based, participatory social movements research is a situated epistemology that asserts a) that social movements produce and carry knowledge and b) that this knowledge is, in different ways, situated (Escobar 2008; Choudry and Kapoor 2010).

Here we find recognised at least two interrelated dimensions of the knowledge that is produced and carried by social movements: subjective knowledge, and knowledge of an external field of relations. The first dimension refers to that knowledge which in various different ways is associated with the experiences, identities, and capacities, for example, of a particular subject (position) or group of subjects. These range from, for example, the experiences of a gay community in mourning (Engel 2001) to activists planning direct action (Juris 2007) to even humanity, whose latent capacity for radical agency is embodied the slogan 'Another World is Possible' (Chesters 2012). The second dimension, meanwhile, refers to knowledge of an external field, from the local to the planetary. In this second dimension is recognised the role of social movements in transmitting knowledge of (social and ecological) dysfunctions; in formulating new lenses that reveal previously unacknowledged relations of violence or oppression; or even in expanding the sphere of 'the political' by – amongst others - invoking and establishing new forms of political organisation and practice, contesting with formal political institutions, and introducing new or neglected issues onto the public policy agenda (Cox and Fominaya 2009, 1; Casas-Cortés *et al.* 2008, 20; Graeber 2009; Chesters 2012, 153). As suggested above, this knowledge of the external field carried and produced by social movements contains information regarding often hidden or nascent potentials for social, political and economic transformation. Social movements, in other words, 'announce new possibilities to the rest of society.' (Melucci 1996, 185, quoted by Conway 2004, 14).

Whether related to the external field of relations, or to the specific experiences of actors within that field, amongst those advocating participatory and engaged approaches to social movement research, recognising the *situated* or *embodied* nature of social movement knowledge is regarded as crucial. This knowledge is situated in at least two ways. Firstly, by virtue of its materiality, which is to say its being contained and transmitted in the practices and experiences of the movement, through affective ties, solidarity events, shared struggles, strategic and tactical planning, and so on. And secondly, this knowledge is regarded as being situated in relation to its being connected - via status and emergence - to movements' and their members' positionality vis-à-vis the fields of relation in which they are active. Sometimes the elucidation of this positionality is preceded by an invocation of feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding 2004;

Santos 2012) or by the commensurate assertion that society is complex ‘who we are becomes a matter of asking the question’ (Melucci 1996, 50, quoted in Chesters 2008). Often, this position is one of subalternity – of coming ‘from below’ (Cox and Fominaya 2009, 1) - in relation to hegemonic, dominant, and expert identities, discourses, experiences, interpretations and knowledges. This can endow both the knowledge that social movements produce and the recognition of their status as knowers with a contentious or political quality, as it is often ‘difficult’ for – and therefore resisted by - experts, political authorities and other elites (Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Casas-Cortés *et al.* 2008; Cox and Fominaya 2009; Chesters 2012). The situatedness of the knowledge produced and held by movements and their members is of course often connected to their positionality as defined by race, class, gender, culture, age, employment status, religiosity, geographical location, and so on. And because movements are not homogenous, this means that *intra-movement* differences in positionality can be significant too.

As I will discuss, the recognition of movement knowledge – in conjunction with other components of the rationale discussed below - precedes the attempt to integrate that knowledge into academic processes of knowledge production. Before moving to this discussion, however, I will address the second component of the rationale behind a participatory, engaged movement scholarship: the assertion of the implicit relationship between interests and knowledge production.

Situated Epistemology 2: The Relationship Between Interests and Knowledge

The recognition that academic processes of knowledge production are not insulated from the interests of the researcher, provides for some social movement scholars an integral part of their rationale for collaborative social movement research. In this understanding, the type of knowledge that we produce is directly shaped by our motivations and ends.

Essentially, this epistemological insight asks academics to think reflexively about the interests that they pursue in their research, and the influence these have on their attitudes towards the movements they seek to research. Like the knowledge that is produced and carried by social movements, discussed above, these interests are also regarded as being situated. For example, many have argued that the positionality of the traditional academic – outside of the struggles of the movements that they research – leads to a preoccupation with interpretive knowledge or abstract theorising at the expense of more concrete, practical task-solving (Juris 2008, quoting Wacquant 1992, 39; Routledge 2004, 81, quoting Bauman 1992). Theoretical revision and career advancement are other interests that have been identified as leading to the production of knowledge that is at best irrelevant – and often even antagonistic – to social movements (Flacks 2004; Bevington and Dixon 2005; Federici 2009; Chesters 2012). Whilst arriving at the recognition that conventional academic approaches do not often serve the interests of social movements can be a bumpy process (Dawson and Sinwell 2012, 182), for those researchers, therefore, seeking to make their work more relevant to such movements, an

epistemological recognition of the inherent utility of knowledge – its being for someone or something – leads to a concern with the production of knowledge that is *practically useful* for movements. This stands in contrast to research driven by abstract theorising, interpretive knowledge, or even knowledge harnessed for the purposes of enhancing an academic's career (Barker and Cox 2002; Juris 2008; Cox and Fominaya 2009; Santos 2012; Chesters 2012; Lewis 2012, 230). And again, once we invoke the notion of knowledge that is useful for movements, we have to be mindful of intra-movement variations in positionality (along lines of race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, and others) that may affect what counts as 'useful' knowledge.

As I will shortly discuss, recognising both that movements produce knowledge (that often contains information regarding society's hidden potential for transformation) and that knowledge production is driven by interests, leads to a recognition of the academy as a site – through, amongst others, the different, relevant *roles* that can be adopted by academics collaborating with social movements - for the potential integration of movement interests and knowledge. The actual attempt, however, to integrate movement knowledge and interests into academically positioned processes of knowledge production is often inspired by the final component of the rationale: the affirmation of solidarity between the movement and the academically positioned researcher.

The Basis of Movement-Researcher Solidarity

The basis of the solidarity asserted by academics seeking to integrate movement knowledge and interests into their processes of knowledge production takes different forms. For Chesters, for instance, it is founded upon the recognition that harnessing the knowledge that is being produced by social movements is essential if we are to address the multiple converging crises that confront humanity at this time (2012, 146-147). This, in other words, is the affirmation of an *interest-based* solidarity, in which researcher and movement interests converge by virtue of their common humanity and planetary location. For others, however, the basis of this solidarity shifts from interests to the ties of obligation and responsibility that become visible when the researcher – mediated by implicit and explicit *norms* and *values* of inclusion, non-violence and social justice – brings power and violence into their understanding of their field of relations (Routledge 2004; De Jong 2012; Santos 2012). Doing so simultaneously reveals the relative privilege of the academic and subalternity of the movement, prompting recognition of the need for the academic to 'interact politically with a world whose realities of social exclusion and inequality demand a proactive role' (Santos 2012, 142). And for others - still emphasising ties of obligation and responsibility - the basis of the solidarity is *ontological*, as affirmed, for instance, in the holistic and relational worldviews of indigenous peoples. Through alignment with these worldviews the researcher identifies their connection with and accountability to indigenous peoples, and their corresponding obligation to stand with them 'in solidarity against colonialism and all forms of oppression and domination' (Lewis 2012, 228). Relatedly, others

have asserted the basis of this solidarity in *identity*, especially the self-identification of the researcher with the movement (Cancian 1993; Croteau 2005; Dawson and Sinwell 2012), such as that affirmed, for instance, when a Black researcher engages with an *anti-racism* movement or a feminist academic engages with a women's social movement (Sefa Dei and Johal, 2005).

The Rationale for Solidarity Research: Two Key Insights

Thus far I have identified three components of the rationale behind the call for a participatory, engaged movement scholarship. These components combine to generate two key insights: Firstly, the potential of the academy as a site for the integration of movement knowledge and interests; and secondly, the necessity of negotiating positionality – of the academic on the one side and the movement on the other – to the realisation of this potential.

The academy: a potential site for the integration of movement knowledge and interests

The affirmation of a solidarity between movement and academic can lead, in the first instance, to – said without implication of status or efficacy – a non-academic specific action-response (i.e., direct action, letter writing, boycott, protest). This is, in other words, a response that can be undertaken by anyone in the shared field of the movement. It is the situated epistemology that brings the action response *home*, as it were, to the knowledge production practices of academics. It does this by revealing, amongst others, the different roles that can be performed by academics as professional knowledge producers seeking to integrate movement knowledge and interests (Gillan and Pickerill 2012, 135-136).

For example, some, asserting the importance of collaborative, mutually productive relations between movements and academics, have asserted their role as teasing out the implicit principles of movement (radical) practice, for the movements themselves and to generate new visions (Graeber 2009, 112). Others have argued for the contribution of the movement-oriented academic in analysing the internal dynamics of the movement and offering strategic, conceptual and theoretical reflection (Cox and Barker 2002; Juris 2007; Lewis 2012). Others, moreover, have identified their role as finding ways of articulating movement knowledge with formal processes of public policy-making (Chesters 2012). And others, finally, have recognised that there are more 'traditional' roles that can be performed by movement-sympathetic academics, which don't integrate movement knowledge *per se*, but do definitely integrate movement interests. These include conducting 'positivistic' research projects for movements, or providing movements with reliable and accurate knowledge of their field(s) of relation (Smeltzer 2012; Hale, 2006).

The situated epistemology reveals therefore that under the general theme of 'co-production of knowledge' there is a diverse range of roles that can be performed by academics wishing to stand in solidarity with social movements. Whilst some solidarity researchers have sought to predefine the exact role that ought to be adopted by academics in their work with movements, it is reasonably obvious that, once we invoke the idea of movement interests, such

roles should ideally be defined in conversation with the movements themselves. Thus, as I shall capture below, ongoing processes of *dialogue* between researcher and movement to, in part, identify the role that should be performed by the former in support of the latter, is identified in other parts of this literature as a key methodological and ethical principle (Smeltzer 2012; Hale 2006).

Diverging positionality between academic and movement

The different components discussed above combine to provide a rationale for solidarity research, which can be undertaken via a number of a different potential roles performed by the academically positioned researcher. Whatever the roles adopted, however, and the degree of dialogue that is both attained and feasible in their determination, the components of the rationale also combine to reveal another key dynamic in solidarity research. This concerns the potential, and, more often than not, actual divergence in *positionality* between movement and researcher.

For example, as established, the recognition that movements produce situated knowledge leads to an elucidation of the different roles that can be undertaken by academics seeking to support and recognise social movement knowledge-production. These roles may include facilitating social movements' processes of knowledge production; capturing/recording that knowledge; and communicating it more widely for instance, in the social, academic, scientific, cultural, and/or political fields. The insight that knowledge is situated also leads, however, to an appreciation of the potential divergences in epistemological geography that may have to be traversed by the researcher seeking access to the specificity of a particular movement's knowledge. An example of this from my own experience as a suburbanite, secure, fully-funded PhD student conducting research on and with a transnational agrarian movement representing smallscale food producers, is discussed below.

In a similar vein, the recognition of the inherent utility of knowledge, whilst leading to an appreciation of the different ways in which academic knowledge production can work for movements, also leads to an awareness of the extent to which movement interests must compete with various private and structurally determined incentives and motivations that shape the activity of the academic. For some, as above, these diverging incentives are captured in the distinction between the 'interpretive' project of the academic and the 'practical' project of the movements. For others they are revealed in the challenge confronting those who would enter into movement-oriented postures presented by strategic and externally determined evaluative frameworks that privilege traditional academic publishing, or grant-raising, leading to the instrumentalising of movement relations and potential trade-offs between career progress and the exigencies of collaboration (Chesters 2012; Dawson and Sinwell 2012; Federici 2009; Juris 2007; Routledge 1996; De Certeau 1984).

Whether interests are personally, or structurally determined, they provide part of the context of diverging positionality that must be overcome by researchers seeking to realise collaborative relations with social movements. This context, which has been characterised as

their ‘dual responsibility’ to the academy and a particular political struggle (Smeltzer 2012, 262, referencing Hale 2006), has given rise to a number of specific methodological and ethical principles, observation of which is crucial to their endeavour.

Methodological and Ethical Principles^{4,5}

Active Engagement and Identification

Like each of the methodological and ethical principles affirmed by solidarity researchers, the principle of *active engagement and identification* by researcher with social movement is – in relation to the rationales and subsequent insights discussed above – overdetermined. From an epistemological perspective, for instance, such a posture is identified as being essential to access the knowledge produced and carried within movements’ positionality, both as it relates to their subject positions and their knowledge of their field(s) of relation(s). This assertion is premised upon the recognition of the *situated* nature of movement knowledge – its materiality, positionality, and sometimes ‘tacit’ or ‘hidden’ nature (Chesters 2012; Graeber 2009). Thus, from this perspective, active engagement and identification is considered necessary to bridge the divergent positionality of researcher and movement. In so doing, this approach is regarded as uniquely ‘generative’ (Hale 2006, 98), i.e., yielding data that would otherwise be unavailable (Santos 2012; Wylie 2004). For the researcher seeking to stand in solidarity with movements, moreover, active engagement and identification – and the situated knowledge that this gives access to – by helping the researcher to better understand movements’ positionality, also helps them to understand movements’ *interests*, leading to research that is more aligned to movement needs (Dawson and Sinwell 2012; Smeltzer 2012, 267). Decoupling from this epistemological dimension, however, active identification and engagement is also affirmed as a necessary correlate to the assertion of solidarity – in its various different forms – between academics and movements. It is a way, in other words, of communicating one’s solidarity with movements to other actors within the shared field (Santos 2012). Active engagement and identification is therefore – reflecting its overdetermination – both methodological principle *and* political commitment.

⁴ I define methodology here as the means through which research objectives are linked to research outcomes. Conventional academic research seeks primarily to produce knowledge, and so methodological dynamics include such questions as how to conceptualise the knowledge object, how to define the sample, how to operationalise core concepts and theories, and so forth. However, there are also a range of research practices which seek not just to produce knowledge but to achieve positive social transformation. For these approaches – e.g., Action Research – methodology addresses the question of how to relate researcher intervention/engagement with positive social change. Solidarity research can be located in this latter category of research.

⁵ For slightly different interpretations of these ethical and methodological principles see: Santos 2012: 250-251; Chesters 2012: 146; and Lewis 2012: 234 (referencing Doxtater 2004; Simpson 2004; and Louis 2007: 133).

Theoretical Openness/Suspension

Two main rationales inform the principle of *theoretical openness* (coming to the movement and its field without any prior theoretical framework and subsequently theorising from the movement's positionality). Firstly, the suspension of a theoretical framework – and the subsequent research objectives that it generates and conditions – is necessary in order to integrate movement interests into the activities of the academic. Working deductively from theory to research objectives > research questions > data collection > and so forth, closes down the possibility for collaboration with movements. Secondly, and probably more importantly, given the recognition of the fact that movements are producing knowledge - knowledge which both expands the sphere of the political and societal/field self-awareness of its own potential for progressive transformation⁶ - to be able to capture this knowledge it is essential for the researcher not to be attempting from the outset of the engagement to be imposing pre-defined theoretical horizons or 'strictures' (Chesters 2012; Graeber 2009; Casas-Cortés et al. 2008).

Dialogue and Reciprocity

The situated epistemology reveals that it is possible for researchers to stand in solidarity with movements in a variety of ways. These are reflected in the range of roles that those wanting to privilege/integrate movement interests and knowledge can potentially adopt. The situated epistemology also reveals, moreover, the potential for movement scholarship to be either irrelevant or even antagonistic to movements themselves. These insights provide the basis for the inclusion of *dialogue* as a key methodological and ethical principle for solidarity research. Dialogue is the means through which the researcher brings movement interests into his or her knowledge production process so as to allow them to shape 'each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results' (Hale 2006, 97, quoted by Smeltzer 2012, 262; Lewis 2012). And as well as facilitating the inclusion of movement interests, ongoing dialogue between movement and researcher can also facilitate access to movement knowledge.⁷

Ongoing dialogue is of course a means through which to negotiate the diverging positionality of movement and researcher. Whatever the degree to which movement interests have successfully been integrated into the knowledge production projects of academics, however, given the always potentially diverging positionality of academic and movement – and the likelihood that, whatever the final utility of the collaborative project to the movement itself, the

⁶ '[S]ocial movements [mobilising on a range of 'new' issues] became 'indicative of what Melucci termed 'frontier land', the open space which reveals the contingency of any existing order.' (Chesters 2012: 151, referencing Melucci 1992: 239).

⁷ As I communicate below reflecting on my own experiences conducting participatory research with the transnational agrarian movement La Vía Campesina.

academic will often benefit from the exchange (by – as I am doing here – rendering their experiences into an academic publication) – *reciprocity* has been identified as another key methodological and ethical principle for academics seeking to stand in solidarity with social movements (Routledge 2004; Bailey 2001).

Reflexivity

Invoking the situated epistemology, becoming conscious of one's positionality in the field of relations, and, again, reflecting as to the interests that are served in one's research practice – before the engagement and ongoing – are all examples of *reflexivity* (Sultana 2007). Following from the discussion above, reflexivity can be understood as a coming to self-awareness through a series of ongoing questions: Who am I? What do/don't I understand/know? What interests does my work serve? How does my gender/class/age/sexual orientation/identity affect my processes of knowledge production? The virtue of reflexivity as a methodological principle in solidarity research is that it enables the researcher to firstly become aware of, and then secondly negotiate, the ongoing ethical challenges that are inevitably generated by negotiating positionality in the pursuit of solidarity research. Such challenges involve such questions as the appropriate degree of criticality of the researcher, the specificity/blindness inherent in the researcher's own positionality, the appropriateness of certain material for publication, and so on (Sultana 2007; Routledge 2004). As in the case of Engel (2001), reflexivity brings the academic to an awareness of the relationship between their work and the interests that it serves, which can lead to the assertion of solidarity between researcher and movement and the attempt to make the former's work meaningful for the latter. Having made this commitment, however, reflexivity also enables a coming to self-understanding regarding the different ways in which diverging positionality has to be negotiated in order to realise this commitment.

These, then, are the methodological principles that are generated by the three components of the rationale identified above and the subsequent insights that they generate. The negotiation of positionality is central to the dynamics that they address. In the remainder of the article I will describe two of my own experiences conducting and attempting to conduct participatory research with social movements – one more positive than the other. These two examples both confirm the validity of the principles affirmed above and identify enabling and constraining dynamics relevant to the pursuit of solidarity research.

Two Case Studies: Negotiating Positionality in the Pursuit of Solidarity Research

Conducting doctoral research in collaboration with the transnational agrarian movement - La Vía Campesina

In 2006 I began my PhD at the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, UK, proposing, on the basis of a value commitment to *inclusivity*, to examine the relationship between the global social movement La Vía Campesina and the global governance body the

World Trade Organisation (WTO). Specifically I wanted to identify to extent to which new hybrid forms of global governance were emerging - which included civil society non-elites - to be theorised as Complex Global Governance (O'Brien et al. 2001). Though my initial attempts to establish communication with La Vía - I had no prior relationship with the movement - were fairly clumsy, within a few months I had submitted, via Canadian academic and ex-technical support for La Vía, Annette Desmarais, a research proposal to their International Coordinating Committee (ICC). This outlined the research's objectives, its potential benefits (as I saw them) for La Vía Campesina, and the demands it would make upon them.

The ICC only met once or twice a year so there was a delay whilst I awaited their decision, but when it came (spring 2007) the news was not good: they had rejected my proposal. This was of course a major blow, but it forced me to examine the assumptions with which I had approached this relationship, bringing me to a sudden and stark awareness of the relationship between interests and research practice. Suspending my research interests, I re-engaged with La Vía, communicating to them - via another proposal submitted (in Jan 2008) at the suggestion of Annette Desmarais - my willingness and availability to work collaboratively with them. Responding to this overture, La Vía Campesina then presented me with two possible lines of inquiry (areas that they had a strategic interest in knowing more about), the second of which - developments in the domain of UN food and agricultural governance and policy - was closest to my original proposal and research interest.

Following my elaboration of this interest into a research proposal - accompanied by two documents communicating both the theoretical and conceptual analysis that I would be looking to conduct, and my understanding of La Vía's policy positions - by late May 2008 (17 months after I had submitted my original proposal) we had arrived at agreement that I would conduct research for the movement on a topic of mutual interest (UN food governance), the findings of which would be disseminated back to them via written reports and, subsequently, a training session for La Vía leaders. In return, I would get access to La Vía members and personnel, internal documents, the movement's network of allies and sympathetic experts, and various civil society and UN spaces (plus the advantage of being able to contact diplomats and UN officials conducting research 'on behalf' of La Vía Campesina).

From June 2008 the research began, consisting of document analysis, interviews with a range of transnational food governance actors, and attendance at both UN and transnational civil society meetings, my attendance at the latter -in addition to my conducting research for La Vía- often being in exchange for my executing the role of rapporteur. Dialogue, therefore, was constant, and from the commencement of the research took the form of ongoing feedback from me to the movement - via my counterpart, Nico Verhagen, technical support to the International Operational Secretariat- including periodic reporting at critical junctures in the research process. By November 2009 I had produced three reports for them (on various aspects of UN food governance and policy), and in March 2010 I participated in a training session for La Vía European members, providing an introductory overview of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations. In August of 2010 I was commissioned by the transnational

civil society network the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, of which La Vía is a key member, to produce a civil society briefing paper on the recently reformed UN Committee on World Food Security (Brem-Wilson, 2010). I started writing up in Jan 2010, and by October 2011 submitted the relevant sections of my thesis to La Vía for their approval.

Reviewing this process, two themes provide analytical traction: *collaboration*, and *knowledge*.

Collaboration: Enablers and Challenges

When La Vía rejected my research proposal this – in conjunction with my value commitment to inclusivity – had the effect of jolting me from my attitude of *extraction* (seeing La Vía as simply an object to include into my preformed research plans to provide me with data) to one of *collaboration*. I realised with an almost equal degree of embarrassment and irony the total disconnect between the values that motivated me to do this research, and my actual research practice. Of course, my values were not the only influence at play. I also realised, obviously, that outside of a collaborative posture it would not be possible for me to develop the type of relationship with La Vía that would allow me to progress my PhD. Values and self-interests converged upon the same end.

Different elements combined to enable the collaboration. *Dialogue* and *reciprocity* were of course fundamental as means to both establishing and maintaining the relationship. It is also important, however, to underscore from my part the attitudinal components that supported the collaboration. For example, the protracted nature of the initial ‘negotiation’ with La Vía⁸, a willingness – beyond their initial rejection – to share with them control of the process and give them veto powers over my research output, and the uncertainty that comes from not really knowing what your PhD is about for over half of its duration all required a willingness to tolerate quite high degrees of discomfort throughout the research collaboration. At the least, they required my capacity to be comfortable with discomfort.

From a structural perspective there were three central dynamics at play. Firstly, having been awarded a full scholarship for my PhD I was able to enter into negotiations with La Vía from a position of financial strength and freedom. This was essential to both realising whatever collaborative project we agreed together, and, indeed, sustaining my participation in the negotiations to define this. Secondly, as a PhD student I was subject to departmental oversight, which took the form of periodic meetings for which I had to provide written submissions and was scrutinised for, primarily, my ‘contribution to the literature’. The support of my supervisor, Graeme Chesters, the third key structural factor, was crucial in, amongst others, helping me negotiate this process, minimizing its potentially disruptive impact – in terms of, for example, time demands – upon my collaborative endeavour with La Vía.

⁸ The time between my initial contact with La Vía Campesina and the point at which we had arrived at agreement on a mutually beneficial research project was – including an eighth month suspension in the process - 17 months.

Knowledge

It is clear that at the start of my research I did not set out to negotiate positionality in the pursuit of solidarity research. Indeed, I began my research without any awareness of the role of interests in knowledge production, or the specificities of my own positionality vis-à-vis the knowledge of La Vía Campesina. For example, as an (sub)urbanite food consumer from an industrialised country with virtually no experience of radical precarity, it took extended exposure to the testimony of La Vía members – through interviews, reading policy documents, and hearing their interventions in meetings – before I appreciated fully the ongoing sense of *crisis* that is an everyday part of the reality of rural peoples (particularly small-scale, peasant-, and family-farmers) the world over. Such understanding is crucial to appreciating the challenges that have to be overcome by rural constituencies seeking voice in transnational food governance, challenges that include adverse political and policy environments and (severe) resource constraints (Desmarais 2007). Coming into the research, I was blind to these challenges, and my assumptions and expectations of La Vía were largely informed by *my* experience and *my* (secure, reasonably affluent) positionality. And, no doubt, the specificity of my own positionality as a white, middle class, Northern European male blinded me to other significant issues and dynamics within the movement and beyond.

From the outset of the process three domains of knowledge were being simultaneously – and interconnectedly – operated upon: knowledge of myself and my positionality; knowledge of the movement and its positionality; and knowledge of the field (global food policy and governance). For instance, by assuming the positionality of La Vía (as subaltern actors seeking and exercising voice – *interlocutionary subjecthood* - in transnational food governance, and affirming and defending through their food sovereignty framework a distinctive set of food and agricultural-policy oriented rights, value and norms) I came to an understanding of the field - in terms of its dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and inherently contested nature - that is either completely lost or ignored by institutional actors (e.g. IEE, 2007). This positionality, moreover, arrived at by entering the field of relations along a trajectory defined by La Vía, and situating myself between their aspirations and struggles and the emerging dynamics of the field itself, allowed me to recognise that La Vía could be read as attempting to provoke, participate within, and constitute a transnational public sphere in food and agriculture (Brem-Wilson, 2012). This committed, active engagement, therefore, confirming its ‘generative’ value (Hale 2006, 98) both in terms of accessing the ‘hidden logics’ of social movement activism (Graeber 2009, 111) and the nascent and emerging politics inherent therein (Casas-Cortés *et al.* 2008; Chesters, 2012).

Notwithstanding the absence of a formal evaluation, comments from my counterparts within the movement and my own personal experience of it communicate that this collaborative experience was a success. An attempted follow-up project, however, still driven by the desire from my end to work collaboratively and negotiate positionality, was arguably less successful.

Attempting to Conduct Participatory Research on the Dynamics of Rural Constituency Participation in Transnational Policy Processes

During the course of my doctoral research the challenge confronting grassroots actors like La Vía Campesina trying to understand and interact with the complex terrain of transnational food security governance was resolved somewhat by reform processes launched therein following the food price crisis 2007-2008. This resulted in the elevation of a body – the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) – aspiring for political centrality and within which rural constituencies had won for themselves unprecedented formal participation rights (McKeon 2009; Brem-Wilson, 2010). Identifying, therefore, within this event the need for research to analyse and identify both the extent to which formal participation for rural constituencies was translating into substantive participation and the factors that enabled or constrained this, I began to conceive of a research project to explore these dynamics. Centering on a recently concluded (May 2012) FAO policy process – which in its inclusivity dynamics both preempted and ran parallel to the reformed CFS, into which it was eventually integrated – to formulate a set of international guidelines for natural resource tenure, I began to contact my counterparts amongst the movements and their allies to explore interest.

The initial response to the proposal was positive. Distributed through the International Facilitation Group (IFG) that had overseen the participation of civil society in this extensive three year policy process - participation that had included an autonomous civil society consultation that fed into the formal process - there was a sense that my plans would align with IFG members' own desires for an autonomous process of self evaluation. Breaking off, therefore, into a smaller group, I entered into a dialogue with two NGO members of the IFG with a view to formulating a proposal that we could take back to the main group. In parallel to this dialogue I also began working on a funding bid to leverage the resources that would be necessary to conduct such a potentially challenging piece of research. The dialogue with my counterparts from the IFG proceeded positively, and within a few weeks we had mapped out the contours of a 'Twin Track' research project that would see an autonomous, grassroots process of self evaluation running parallel to a more researcher-led process, both subsumed within the central overarching theme of provoking 'arena reflexivity', and overlapping in execution. However, it was at this point that the process more or less broke down. There were two principle reasons for this.

Firstly, upon arriving at this juncture we communicated back to the wider group, but nobody answered. A couple of weeks later a follow up email was sent, but this too went unanswered. The dialogue had ended. The reasons for this – communicated to me later by different members of the group – were straightforward. As potentially useful as this project may or may not have been for rural constituencies, given its suspended pay off (the delay between the dialogue, the possible resources that would be generated to pursue the research, and the concrete impacts of this) and the lack of any resources to help maintain the process in the interim, it was just not possible for rural constituency representatives and their allies – hard pressed both

materially and politically – to participate in a dialogue of this nature. The capacity, in other words, just wasn't there.

The second reason for the breakdown of this process concerned the attempt to leverage funds. In parallel with the elucidation of the 'twin track' approach, in conjunction with my research centre – the International Centre for Participation Studies which enjoyed a successful track record of academically rigorous, participatory research – we began the process of devising a funding bid for the primary funder of social science research in the UK, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The process was extensive, stretching over several months, but eventually we were ready to receive soft evaluation from the university's internal oversight, whose approval was a pre-requisite of submitting the bid. The response, however, was not positive, and we were informed that the ESRC would not fund such an open and inclusive process. The degree of openness that was a feature of my earlier research project and of solidarity research in general (with regard to research objectives and theoretical frameworks) would not, it was indirectly relayed, be tolerated by the UK's main funder of social science research. Given, by then, the breakdown in the dialogue with the IFG (and the collaborative viability of the research), it was at this point that the process was suspended.

Conclusion

In this article I have done two things: Firstly, I have elaborated the rationales, and methodological and ethical principles of a participatory social movement scholarship that I have – given the centrality to it of the assertion of an ontological-/value-/interest-/identity-convergence between movement and researcher – elected to call solidarity research. Secondly, in part informed by the importance attached to the negotiation of positionality within the above, I have discussed two of my own experiences conducting and attempting to conduct participatory research with transnational agrarian movements. Reflecting on these experiences, two observations become apparent.

Firstly, and somewhat obviously, the freedom provided by a full PhD scholarship on the one hand, and the constraints encountered trying to negotiate formal funding criteria, on the other, both communicate the central importance of resources – and the conditions that come attached with them – for the viability of solidarity research, given the importance of dialogue and openness to its attainment. The preferences of funding bodies for fully elaborated, theoretically explicit research proposals⁹ can be regarded as part of the structural environment of academic research (and, indeed, the academy). This structural environment also includes the evaluative

⁹ Though the increasing emphasis placed by funders upon the real world 'impact' of academic research, and the attendant need, therefore, to identify research beneficiaries therein, does arguably present a potentially negotiable – albeit challenging - route to the type of collaborative relationships that are a key feature of solidarity research (ESRC 2012; Gillan and Pickerill 2012: 142)

frameworks that are used in the appraisal of academic output¹⁰, and institution-specific knowledge-transfer strategies, amongst others. These structural dynamics have been acknowledged by those advocating participatory social movement research, the awareness of which - as I discuss above - has stamped the methodological and ethical principles asserted by solidarity researchers. However, it has also been argued that methodological and ethical principles alone are not sufficient, and that solidarity researchers must also 'push the boundaries of the academy from within' (Dawson and Sinwell 2012, 180).¹¹ However, my own experience suggests – given the centrality of the situated epistemology to the rationale for solidarity research and the reluctance of many academics to make their own epistemological premises explicit – that in the short term it will be difficult to do this. That is, attaining the reflexivity within the academy that is a core methodological and ethical principle of solidarity research will not come easy.

The second observation concerns the apparent necessity of a certain degree of organisational capacity within the movement before it can participate in the type of dialogue that is required in collaborative research projects. In my first encounter I was dealing with a movement that possesses full time staff people and a clear organisational structure with lines of representation and accountability – from the 'leaders' to the base – clearly drawn.¹² In the second instance I was dealing with an ad hoc grouping, which had been convened for a specific process, and which did not possess the capacity for the type of dialogue that was required. What these dynamics mean for the ethics and viability of collaborative research needs further elaboration. As does the critically important (but only fleetingly addressed here) significance of intra-movement variations in positionality along lines of gender, race, age, class, and beyond, for the dynamics of academic-movement collaboration.

As a final remark it is important to note that solidarity research concerns the attempt to make academia relevant to social movements and, as I have discussed, there are various rationales for this. A key question, however, is whether there is any rationale for movements to engage with academics. In other words, what is the value to movements of the knowledge produced (and the process through which it is produced) working in collaboration with

¹⁰ Key amongst which, in the English context, is the REF (The Research Excellence Framework). The major determinant of the funding allocated to individual higher education institutions (via the Higher Education Funding Council for England), the differences between REF gradings (a four star system) can be profoundly significant (hundreds of thousands of pounds). The REF evaluates in relation to three general criteria, by far the most important of which is the degree of 'originality, significance and rigour', in relation to 'international research standards' of publications produced by the institution, worth 65% of total rating (REF 2012: 16).

¹¹ Dawson and Sinwell identify the following, 'speculative', means through which to achieve this: Insist on a peer review system in which one of the referees is movement-based; collaborative writing endeavours between movements and activists; and abandon the system of subsidies for accredited publications (Dawson and Sinwell 2012: 186-187). However, these are premised upon a prior acceptance by other faculty members and managers of their value, acceptance that – operating from the basis of the situated epistemology – may well be hard won.

¹² Beyond its organisational structure the work of the 'leaders' of La Vía is also very much regulated by their recognition that they need to work within a 'mobilising agenda' – that is, an agenda that receives the support of their base (Interview, La Vía leader, Jan, 2009).

academics? To me, this question alludes to the necessity of new processes of evaluation by solidarity researchers wishing to systematise their practices. Such evaluations would take heed of the theories of change and expectations that implicitly informed both academic and movement's understanding of the potential value of the knowledge to be generated and the measurable, concrete impacts of such process and their outcomes. Of course, given the capacity constraints encountered above, the viability of such processes of evaluation remains to be seen. However, such processes of evaluation are essential, I believe, in order to give credence to the claim of solidarity researchers to be putting their processes of knowledge production to work in support of the concrete struggles of the social movements with whom they wish to stand in solidarity.

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