Disciplining Dissent: NGOs and Community Organizations

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ABSTRACT   *In the context of neo-liberal globalization, we argue that many local community organizations and international development and advocacy NGOs share certain characteristics that impact struggles for justice, North and South. These include professionalization, collaboration with, and recognition and support from the state and/or international institutions, and a detachment from more critical forms of resistance. Drawing from experience and analysis of the Quebec community sector and involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in 'global justice' movements, we suggest that this exclusion and reshaping of political space presents new challenges for people's movements. We examine: (a) the development and professionalization of community organizations and NGOs; (b) the role of knowledge in consolidating professional power; and (c) challenges to these hegemonic trends from within activist organizing milieux.*

Keywords: community organizations, non-governmental organizations, activism, social movements, politics of knowledge production, professionalization, global justice

Introduction

In the context of neo-liberal globalization, many local community organizations and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) share characteristics that impact struggles for justice, North and South. These include growing professionalization, collaboration with, and recognition and support from the state and international institutions. Community organizations have often shifted from organizing active participants in social struggle to creating services for 'clients'. Similarly, large and medium-sized aid, development, and advocacy NGOs have sometimes displaced and attempted to become spokespeople for local, grounded social movements, and, more broadly, economically and socially marginalized people. In these

contexts, academic and professionalized knowledge is frequently elevated and valorized, while other knowledges are subordinated or silenced. This article examines the displacement and disciplining of grassroots organizing and social movements. This exclusion and reshaping of political space presents new challenges for people's movements. Despite these directions, which we see as the dominant trends, we acknowledge that many community organizations and NGOs are able to work for social and economic justice. In this article, we are not presenting a totalizing view but rather the directions of most organizations and the pressures that are pushing them in that direction. Indeed, many of these organizations are themselves sites of significant internal struggles over these issues and trends. We examine: (a) the development and professionalization of community organizations and NGOs; (b) the role of knowledge in consolidating professional power; and (c) challenges to these hegemonic trends from within activist organizing milieux. This article will not provide examples from practice but draws from the critical literature and both authors' many years of experience in community organizing in Montreal, Quebec, Canada (Shragge), and Asia-Pacific NGO and activist networks contesting capitalist globalization, opposing the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and bilateral free trade and investment agreements (Choudry).

Community

Quebec's community sector has undergone a transformation. The 1960s saw a renewal of community, which acted in opposition to the state and corporate power. This opposition movement mobilized citizens and built alternatives, such as popular clinics and co-operatives. There has been a gradual shift since from a 'community movement' to a highly structured 'community sector', which has accelerated in the current period. Community, in the neo-liberal period, has been called upon by government and other bodies, such as foundations and private trusts, to play a role in social provision and development. As local groups and organizations have received increased recognition and, at times, increased stability in their funding, their mandates have been narrowed and their leadership professionalized. However, Quebec's experience is not unique.

The origins of these governments' promotion of the use of community are reactions to the harsh reforms of the right-wing Thatcher, Reagan and Mulroney governments in the 1980s, with their emphasis on individual competition and the dominant role of the market. They argued for a society of individuals and drastically cut state services. With the election of Blair, Clinton and Chrétien in the 1990s, there was an attempt to redefine a middle ground or 'Third Way'. These leaders wanted to differentiate themselves from the previous administrations but did not want to return to older left-liberal statist models. The alternative is an approach that maintains the supremacy of the market, while creating a form of collectivity but not through the state. 'Community' becomes the intellectual vehicle for this policy direction in which the state intervenes but does not provide; thus keeping its commitments low and maintaining the 'gains' made in opening up markets under the right-wing administrations. The latter had polarized society through their policies, while 'Third Way' administrations wanted to build social consensus with the ideals of community playing a key role in the process. Our argument is that the promotion of communitarian ideas was a different strategy of obtaining the same ends with less confrontation and softer rhetoric (see Defilippis et al., 2006).

There is a convergence of both policies and practices in the US, Britain and Canada (Brodie, 2002; Fremeaux, 2005), which in turn, have been shaped by the ideas about community, drawn from several distinct schools of thought and approaches, with common threads through them. All begin and end with calls to renew community and promote local intervention in the contemporary political economy. Several dominant trends in community theory are important for us here.

The first is the effort to re-establish a moral compass through community as a response to the fragmentation of society associated with the 1960s (Etzioni, 1995). The second emerges from a critique of large bureaucratic government, arguing for new decentralized forms of organization and greater community participation and responsibility (Giddens, 1998, 2000). Third, consensus-organizing (Eichler, 1998, 2007), community-building (Traynor, 2008) and related forms of organizing, such as asset-based (McKnight, 1995; McKnight and Kretzmann, 1999), are offered and promoted along with a critique of conflict organizing. These new approaches assume a broad common interest and partnerships at the local level; that is community organizations are one of several stakeholders who participate in consensus building. Finally, the market and entrepreneurial culture is to be encouraged as a way to replace the state as a source of social and economic provision. Both free market ideologues (Porter, 1997) and left pragmatists (Shuman, 2000) see the market as the only viable mechanism to improve the lives of all citizens. These ideas gained credence in the general onslaught of right-wing governments of Reagan, Thatcher, and Mulroney, and with subsequent shifts under more moderate governments, various forms of communitarian policies arose to give credibility to the ideas that follow as long as they were compatible with the neo-liberal agendas of the period. Local organizations thus picked up increased responsibilities for social provision and economic development; meanwhile, more senior levels of government are actively involved in shaping these practices (Gough et al., 2006; Ilcan and Basok, 2004). There is a movement in two directions: community organizations act from the bottom-up, initiating services and programs, while governments view 'community as policy', organizing intervention and funding programs that shape local activity to become responsible for a variety of services and programs. This vertical relation has resulted in an increasingly collaborative relationship between community and government with diminished conflict (Fisher and Shragge, 2007; Hamel et al., 2000).

Thus, there emerges a horizontal collaboration between community organizations, creating relationships of negotiation and co-operation with each other, in addition to the different tiers of government and some private foundations to obtain resources, to initiate interventions and to co-ordinate actions. These processes of collaboration between different actors preoccupied by social and economic development of local territories constitute forms of local governance, in which 'civil society' through community organizations plays an important role. Pierre and Peters (2001, p. 21) use the term 'communitarian governance' to describe the role of local voluntary organizations in a consensual process of organizing 'governance without government'. The emphasis is on the important role of local organizations in the governance process, but at the same time, their participation is structured by government. Ilcan and Basok (2004, p. 130) describe this as 'governing through community under advanced liberalism' and argue '... community government refers to the ways in which the contemporary politics of government has come to define, shape, and orient communities ... such that they engage in activities that attempt to responsibilize certain groups of citizens for particular purposes and ends' (Ibid., p. 130). Community organizations in their participation in local governance cannot be separated from their role as service providers as the state has shifted many responsibilities to voluntary providers. In addition, these forms of community moderation and collaboration with government and private sector stakeholders have become opportunities for the professional leaders of these organizations not only to stabilize them but also to advance their own careers.

NGOs in an Era of Global Capitalism

Alongside neo-liberal state restructuring and the reconfiguration of the role of community organizations in the North, the 1990s saw the further spread of NGOs and 'civil society' organizations

world-wide. Increasingly, governments, intergovernmental organizations and international financial institutions promoted the policy and practice of 'strengthening civil society' along with 'good governance' (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001, 2005; Veltmeyer, 2007). These are intrinsic pillars of a neo-liberal policy environment, argue Petras and Veltmeyer (2005). The dominant notion of 'civil society' emphasizes rights of individuals to pursue their self-interest rather than collective rights, and upholds the interests of state and capital. It also facilitates what Kamat (2004) calls the privatization of the notion of public interest.

NGOs operate in so many contexts and roles that it is difficult to generalize about them. Some have their origins in missionary and/or faith-based charitable and philanthropic work (De Waal, 1997; Gallin, 2000; Manji and O'Coill, 2002). While the term 'NGO' usually implies a non-profit organization, some NGOs are little more than businesses (Jordan and Maloney, 1997; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001; Reinsborough, 2004). Some are volunteer-driven, have community constituencies of some kind, and claim a democratic structure. Some emerge from, and remain accountable to, broader social struggles. Others, as Gallin (2000, p. 27) notes, 'have a self-appointed and co-opted leadership, are not accountable to any constituency other than public opinion and their funders, do not provide public financial information, and have no clear monitoring and evaluation procedures'. Several factors account for the growth of NGOs involved in Third World development, and their relationships with governments and the private sector. Fowler (2000, p. 2) sees the rightwards shift in Northern politics during the Reagan–Thatcher era as key to 'the start of the rise in official finance to, and number of NGOs that continues today'. Similar to what we argue above in relation to 'community', this was due to the move away from government to the market as the engine of growth and progress, and 'meant more responsibility to citizens and their organizations' (Ibid., p. 2). Although funds used to flow primarily from Northern governments or financial institutions to Southern governments, NGOs have increasingly become channels for, and direct recipients of, this 'development assistance' (Biel, 2000; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001; Wallace, 2003). NGOs have grown to fill gaps in providing services and public goods, which the public sector used to provide. In many countries they provide employment for former civil servants as public sectors are downsized under structural adjustment or other free market reform programs imposed by donors. Even before the fiscal austerity of the Reagan–Thatcher era, UN conferences, increasing intergovernmental forums, agreements, treaties, and negotiations had been accompanied by a parallel process of international NGO meetings, campaigns, and other activity. Improved communication technologies and international travel for those who could afford it, and a growing identification of common issues and problems which transcended national borders also contributed to the rise in international NGO activity. The policies and statements of intergovernmental organizations, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, also set parameters for which kinds of NGOs are officially recognized through dialogue or other forms of engagement. After the Cold War, the motivation for official development assistance shifted gears. Northern government and private sector funding agencies resourced NGOs as part of an economic and foreign policy strategy to 'democratize' countries through 'civil society' (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001, 2005; Veltmeyer, 2007) in a unipolar world. This entailed support for only a limited role for a restructured state, free market economic reforms, and an increased role for NGOs and private sector organizations in the provision of social services and local development initiatives. For Kamat (2004) and Petras and Veltmeyer (2005, p. 20), the professionalization of community based NGOs and their depoliticization works well for neo-liberal regimes, keeping 'the existing power structure (*vis-à-vis* the distribution of society's resources) intact, while promoting a degree (and a local form) of change and development'.

Within the context of neo-liberal transformation, both community organizations and development/advocacy NGOs come to contribute to managing and structuring the processes of dissent, channeling it into organizational structures and processes that do not threaten underlying power relations. Further, these organizations act to absorb cuts in services and a reduced role for the state under neo-liberal restructuring and/or as a safety valve or lid on more militant opposition against such policies. Here we should emphasize that we are describing a dominant trend in the context of socio-economic transformation. Many community organizations and NGOs do act in opposition, mobilize, and support broad social and political movements, but these constitute the minority and are often marginalized. We turn now to examine some trends in NGOs and community organizations that act to shift them into disciplining dissent within such networks. These include professionalization and what we call an ideology of pragmatism. Some write of the emergence of a non-profit industrial complex (Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007).

Professionalization of Dissent

NGOs and community organizations share many common features, including the trend of professionalization over the past 30 years, leading to a concentration of power as a result of internal position and training. This has three related characteristics. The first is the centrality of paid staff. Although formally accountable to boards of directors, staff direct day-to-day operations and longer-term agendas and activities. The second is that increasingly staff are not movement activists who have found paid work in the organization, but people who have received professional training in many new university programs that train people in the management of NGOs and community organizations. This training is largely technical and draws from traditional management literatures including organizational development, and strategic planning. The underlying assumptions of these programs are drawn from the corporate world and assumed to make non-profits more efficient and accountable. Yet this prepares professional staffers with a model of local managerialism that emphasizes organizational governance over radical politics and supporting local mobilization and social movements. Universities can play an important role, but this role should be to help people associated with NGOs and community organizations develop a critical ideological framework and the capacity to reflect critically on their work and organizations. Finally, professional staffers tend to represent their organizations in public as spokespeople, at negotiating tables, and in partnership structures, whereas they could instead play organizing roles that mobilize those active on the ground, and help them develop leadership skills and represent movements in the public.

Professionalization brings with it important broader political and social consequences. Reinsborough (2004, p. 194) writes of a 'terrifyingly widespread conceit among professional "campaigners" that social change is a highly specialized profession best left to experienced strategists, negotiators and policy wonks. NGOism is the conceit that paid staff will be enough to save the world'. The professionalization of dissent, the valorization of certain kinds of knowledge, the devaluing of other forms which emerge from within social struggles, and dubious claims to representation frequently go hand in hand in these milieux. Dorothy Smith (1987, pp. 216–217) writes that professionalization 'uses knowledge to restructure collective noncapitalist forms of organization into hierarchical strata, detaching them from the movements they originate in and connecting them to the relations of ruling'. Thus, NGOs and community organizations create and become enmeshed and invested in maintaining webs of power and bureaucracy, which divert energy and focus away from building oppositional movements for social change.

There is a deeply colonial and (re)colonizing aspect to this process. The professionalization of knowledge for community organizations and NGOs is drawn from Western sources and assumptions. Linda Smith (1999) critiques many imperialist and colonial assumptions, which underpin Western knowledge and research. She asks whose knowledge matters, where it comes from and who controls it. Drawing from her work, we ask where the rules of community and NGO practices originate? Are Western models of NGOs forged during the years of structural adjustment the best solution to bring about social change, and what are the implications for local knowledge and traditions of the reliance on them to do so? Smith (1999) argues that the West has imposed legal frameworks, textual orientation, views about science, rules for practice, and selection of speakers and experts, which are sourced in liberal scholarship. Prevailing approaches to formal NGO development tend to require a legal framework for organization rather than informal or traditional forms. A textual orientation insists that practice is not real unless it can be documented in writing; oral traditions lose their legitimacy. Science, expressed as social science research is the means for evaluation, and increasingly organizations are required to use tools and criteria from the business world to plan, with quantitative methods used to evaluate success in practice (Dar and Cooke, 2008). The expert has become the person of training, speaking for those served by service organizations. Greater training, obsession with technicism and the professionalism has resulted in the devaluing and displacement of people who speak and act on their own behalf. This tends to lead to formal rules for practice with common forms of governance and similar expectations for formal accountability upwards to funders. Local knowledge and power is often cast aside or lost in the process. Such professionalization has implications for dividing NGOs and community organizations from social movements that are, by definition, less structured, have non-professional leadership, and are based on experiential/struggle knowledge/traditions and radical ideologies (Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007; Shragge, 2003). Another pressure which forces managerialist organizational governance structures and practices on to local organizations comes through donor funding from NGOs (mainly based in the North, and often themselves heavily reliant on state support) or for community organizations, government, often expressed as a sub-contracting relationship or foundations/ trusts. Funding criteria and reporting guidelines place a heavy burden of expectations on organizations which may not have the capacity to do the administrative work associated with this, nor fit neatly into criteria and guidelines set by funders. Organizations are then in a dilemma, forced to stand on principles and strive for self-reliance or at least identify those relatively rare funders who do not impose such conditions, or to transform their organization by adopting a particular form of professional practices, functions, and priorities. Project-by-project funding can also constrain or undermine the building of a broader framework of analysis and focus for mobilization (Kamat, 2004; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001, 2005).

Linked to professionalism is the role played by academics. Some progressive academics can and do play useful roles in providing resources for movements, but this can be problematic. Combining their roles as professors, with NGO directors/staff, consultants, or independent experts, they become key players in the formation of elites in movement and NGO networks, with a disproportionate amount of power to frame analysis and to disseminate ideas both within networks and more widely via their social status, perceived credibility and authority, and relatively privileged media access. Indeed, many of the prominent actors/political entrepreneurs, who set up, or have sometimes reshaped NGOs as personal vehicles, have academic backgrounds and identities. A 'star system' operates that establishes certain people as authorities—an increasingly formalized elite of 'global justice', or 'community' experts and intellectuals. In the Quebec community sector, for example, research partnerships have given academics privileged

roles in promoting policy and defining practice agendas through the concept of 'best practice'. Alongside this, as Hodge and Bowman (2006) note, is the growth of consultancy work and emergence of a 'consultocracy' of unelected advisers with influence upon political decision making.

Academics can become gatekeepers between struggles and movements, interpreters and translators of struggles, without accountability to a community or mass base. As a consequence, this limits the amount of political space available for more sharply critical or reflexive views inside NGO networks, and official community organizations. Frequently, organizers' voices and theorizing from within the context of concrete social struggles are not seen as worthy, informed and valid as academic viewpoints, or by comparison with professional lobbyists and campaigners (Bevington and Dixon, 2005; Kelley, 2002; Reinsborough, 2004). Moreover, there is an underlying assumption that NGOs can convince officials and politicians with rational persuasion, drawing upon the credibility of people seen as credible researchers.

Histories of contemporary social movements written by and about movement elites, leaders and notables can marginalize, omit and silence important voices, processes, and events in struggles for global justice. They can also influence movement dynamics, the setting of our parameters, aspirations, and strategies. So who speaks for whom? When large well-resourced NGOs purport to represent the interests of the poor and marginalized at NGO/'People's' Summits, why should we believe them? When accounts of events in the South are told by NGOs or activists, often decontextualized, or through a limiting framework that distorts and silences, how are these represented and for what purposes? Similarly, many of the representations of community movements and struggles are framed by academic writing through research projects and policy papers. Often there are structured partnerships in the research relations between academics and community practitioners. However, the structure of these partnered research projects puts real power in the hands of academics. There are exceptions but these occur through the leadership of academics committed to grassroots and more radical community organizations.

Compartmentalization

One consequence of this professionalization and valorizing of academic knowledge is the compartmentalization of social struggles at local and international levels. Linda Smith (1999, p. 28) argues that we must contend with the dominance of systems of knowledge based on a colonially driven 'systematic fragmentation', disciplinary carve-up and disconnection of peoples from their histories, landscapes, social relations, and ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting with the world. 'Global justice' networks are uneasy, usually loose, coalitions, and many of the organizations and other actors involved approach institutions/agreements, such as the WTO, through a compartmentalizing lens. Armstrong and Prashad (2005) contend that coalitional politics has positives and negatives. They see it as a result of fragmentation and the 'NGOization' (Ibid., p. 184) of the left. '[E]ach of our groups carves out areas of expertise or special interest, gets intensely informed about the area, and then uses this market specialization to attract members and funds. Organizations that "do too much" bewilder the landscape.' While they argue that specialization can result in valuable analytical and strategic resources for a broader movement, they suggest that fragmentation is problematic, leaving us without a sense of common strategy, tactics, movement, or political agreement about how the systems currently operate and reproduce themselves. Quebec's community sector is highly organized and, as a consequence of professionalization and specificity of organizational mandates, it has been able to set up coalitions (*regroupements*) of organizations working in the same area to negotiate with government for recognition and more stable funds. The success of this process from the point of view of

organizational self-interest has created a sub-contracting relationship between community organizations and various ministries, such as health, social services, and education. The community organizations thus end up as specialized services and compartmentalize broader issues into partialized services devoid of mobilization or advocacy for wider social change.

Commenting on the international context, Biel (2000, p. 298) views NGOs as key actors in a liberal pluralist civil society and central to a 'new political economy of co-opted empowerment' which promotes fragmentation and inhibits 'the gathering-together of the forces of the poor'. Mathew (2005, p. 193) discusses the 'self-fragmenting' tendency of US progressive movements which comes with the institutionalization of the separation of communities at each and every level possible, resulting in a rise and proliferation of community-based organizations which each have their own interests (but not necessarily accountability back to the community that they claim to represent). This contrasts with an awareness of the comprehensiveness and systemic nature of neo-liberal capitalism's impacts which can explain the resistance from broad fronts of social movements in many countries which *do* mobilize and resist against a common enemy (Choudry, 2009, 2010; Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2003, 2005).

NGOs and the Ideology of Pragmatism

An 'ideology of pragmatism' ties development NGOs and community organizations into institutional power while they purport to be progressive and transformative. It is sometimes expressed as constrained disruption and stylized militancy in advocacy, text, and practice. Missing from this is any fundamental critique of capitalism or reflexivity about the organization's own implication in structures and systems of power. Organizations' official policies, principles, platforms, and constitutions must not be transgressed. Funders must also be kept happy. In NGO and community networks, there is much focus on development and development models which obscure capitalist assumptions which underpin them. Many organizations seek merely to ameliorate some of the social or environmental impacts through community development and participation-based development projects. Wood (1995) succinctly describes some intellectual and conceptual dilemmas, which help to explicate some of the cleavages of NGO/community organization positions regarding local and global manifestations of neo-liberalism. They:

> hope for little more than a space in its interstices and look forward to only the most local and particular resistances. . . . The typical mode, at best, is to seek out the interstices of capitalism, to make space within it for alternative 'discourses', activities and identities. (Ibid., pp. 1–2)

This ideology of pragmatism (Choudry, 2010), resonates with Piven and Cloward's (1977) observations regarding the rationale for, and effects of the institutionalization/depoliticization of poor people's struggles in the US. This ideology assumes that the most that can be hoped for in terms of social change are limited gains as opportunities permit *within* existing structures. In their professionalized and institutionalized realities, many NGOs serve elite interests through funding and other forms of patronage; they enact what is often justified through an ideology of pragmatism. By focusing on lobbying, which is disconnected from popular mobilizations, and trying to influence elites, they become driven more by notions of polite reformism and self-interest in maintaining their organization and funding relationships—and ultimately serve elite agendas (Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007; McNally, 2002). It is important to recognize as well that some local organizations and NGOs are able to successfully manipulate

their funding arrangements and maintain oppositional activities. They are able to do this because they have several funding sources, a clear vision and understanding of their goals, and are prepared to lose the funding if there is too much pressure to change their agenda.

We need to map the political economy of NGOs and community organizations, asking which perspectives are amplified and which are suppressed in this process. Such analysis should also examine ways in which such material support can orientate organizations to prioritize institutional survival and maintenance at the expense of mobilization, and account for other ways in which actions may be shaped by material incentives. Perhaps it is unsurprising that in some cases there is outright hostility and suspicion towards NGOs from mass movements, especially towards those which receive government and/or foreign funding. We need to better understand ways in which the institutionalization and bureaucratization of organizational forms advance or inhibit movements for social change. The process of co-optation of some community organizations and NGOs cannot be divorced from the reverse side of the coin for those who refuse to operate within the parameters set from above—increased repression, surveillance, and the criminalization of dissent.

These differences are not merely ones of strategy and tactics, but reflect different ideological, historical, and theoretical understandings. Reformist NGOs frequently reproduce official positions by denouncing street protests and claiming that these are stopping their message getting heard—we can see this clearly in relation to the global justice movement (McNally, 2002; Yuen et al., 2002). Community organizations distance themselves from social movements that challenge dominant ideologies and power relations. In doing so, they also seek to distance themselves clearly and publicly from anti-capitalist positions. As Bob (2005, p. 194) contends, '[i]n their role as gatekeepers, major NGOs may act as brakes on more radical and exceptional ideas emanating from the developing world, and for that reason some important challengers eschew foreign ties'.

Again, we are not arguing here for a totalizing, overly dismissive or over-deterministic analysis of NGOs and community organizations which conflates their many different organizational forms, contexts, and histories. Analysis of NGO activities in specific times and settings calls for micro-level analysis and careful attention to geohistory. But this must be contextualized within a political economy framework which attends to interconnected processes of funding and other forms of donor patronage, the depoliticization and fragmentation of grassroots organizations and movements, claims to representation, and the changes to state institutions and processes in a neo-liberal regime. In conclusion, we argue that underlying their practice that results is always 'do what is in the boundaries', and acceptance of limited gains. This is quite a different position from those groups that fight for limited gains but advance a platform that sees this work in broader and longer-term understandings about the need to politicize, build grassroots power and leadership, and education for change.

Ways Forward: Learning, Knowledge Production in/and Collective Struggle

We now turn to discuss alternative ways to organize and build power, including grassroots, bottom-up approaches and leadership from below. An integral part of building this power is connected with how knowledge, learning, and conceptual resources for struggle developed and mobilized in social action settings can inform, orientate (and in turn be informed and orientated by) practice in ways that counter dominant trends of professionalization. As Kelley (2002, p. 9) puts it: 'Social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions. The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression'. Indeed, NGOs and community

organizations can build alliances with grassroots movements and organizations working to create opposition and leadership from below. These characteristics include organizational auton-omy, ways to access diverse funding (or working with very little of it), a vision which is reviewed and integrated in practice, different points of and shared leadership, accountability to movements, and an understanding of the dialectics of struggle in relationship to shifting agendas of organizations in response to new or evolving priorities which arise in the course of engagement in social action.

Participation in community organizations and social movements offers activists, the wider movement, and community opportunities to learn and create knowledge, through informal activities that take place in the daily life of organizations/movements. This happens if the place created is not overly controlled by professionalism and offers social interaction. A study of informal learning in three community settings in Canada (Church et al., 2008) identified different kinds of informal learning in the community sector. These organizations were involved in what can be described as business development and training but because they had links with other movements and an oppositional culture, these forms of informal learning were happening in their daily activities.

The first of these is 'organizational learning': how community organizations come to under-stand how to operate and position themselves. There are no formal courses and the implicit cur-riculum is sometimes obscured, but still it must be learned—and quickly—if they are to survive. Especially significant is learning how to build programs that receive support while simul-taneously carrying forward historical concerns for social and economic justice. It invariably requires becoming adept at a new language in order to secure and sustain funding. Organizations can learn how to manipulate funding conditions and use programs to promote their social change agenda if they are clear on their vision and have a critical reflective capacity.

The second form of informal learning is 'solidarity learning'. Organizations studied for the above research are immediately concerned with preparing participants for labor market (re)entry or creating an alternative market. However, only some of the activities that participants engage in are related directly to the curriculum of the program and the job. Others take place through social interaction in and around formal organizational practices. Thus, our interest in these organizations is not so much in the formal outcomes of business development or job place-ment as it is in the learning that takes place simply because these settings bring (often isolated) people together. For example, during a break in a meeting of the Homeworkers' Association, a woman who had been an activist in the clothing trade in Hong Kong explained how to negotiate more effectively with employers. The conversation was impromptu and unrelated to the meeting agenda. We link this and other similar observations to issues of political identification, citizen-ship, participation in decision making, and the building of social solidarity. This 'social learning' is embedded in social interaction whether between participants, different levels of a community organization, between organizations or, significantly, between organizational representatives and their funders. This learning is often unanticipated, incidental (though not insignificant), and dynamic in nature. Therefore, we think of the work placement/creation function of these community organizations as the excuse that makes the 'real curriculum' possible—engaging and transforming participants so that they can become social actors.

Holst (2002) notes how the importance and nature of learning in social movements tends to be dismissed in the literature. For him,

> social movements, through public protest that can take various forms, attempt to educate and per-suade the larger public and politicians. Second, there is much educational work internal to social

movements, in which organizational skills, ideology, and lifestyle choices are passed from one member to the next informally through mentoring and modeling or formally through workshops, seminars, lectures, and so forth. (Ibid., p. 81)

A wealth of knowledge can be brought forth from social struggles. Yet relatively few attempts have been made to theorize informal learning through involvement in social action. One exception is Foley (1999), who validates and analyses the importance of the incidental learning in a variety of social struggles. Foley argues that to do this analysis 'one needs to write case studies of learning in struggle, making explanatory connections between the broad political and economic context, micro-politics, ideologies, discourses and learning' (Ibid., p. 132).

Holst (2002, pp. 87–88) refers to the 'pedagogy of mobilization' to describe

the learning inherent in the building and maintaining of a social movement and its organizations. Through participation in a social movement, people learn numerous skills and ways of thinking analytically and strategically as they struggle to understand their movement in motion ... Moreover, as coalitions are formed, people's understanding of the interconnectedness of relations within a social totality become increasingly sophisticated.

Such forms of knowledge can directly challenge the professionalization and technicism we describe, and help to inoculate organizations against disconnection from potential movement sites of contestation and building opposition. Novelli (2010) highlights the dialectics of strategic learning through struggle and contestation which includes incidental, formal, informal, and non-formal education. This implies an engagement in 'strategic analysis, which in turn leads to strategic action, and then to intended and unintended consequences of action, and to further reflection/analysis and action' (Ibid., p. 124).

Foley (1999, p. 140) emphasizes the importance of 'developing an understanding of learning in popular struggle'. His attention to documenting, making explicit, and valuing incidental forms of learning and knowledge production in social action is consistent with others who understand that critical consciousness and theory emerge from engagement in action and organizing contexts, rather than ideas developed elsewhere being dropped down on 'the people' from movement elites (Bevington and Dixon, 2005; Choudry and Kapoor, 2010; Kelley, 2002; Kinsman, 2006; Smith, 1999). As Bevington and Dixon (2005) note, important debates inside movement and NGO networks often do not enter the literature about social movements. Scholars who seek to understand movement and NGO networks need to attend to questions coming out of social movements and activist research in regard to power dynamics and the valuing of certain forms of knowledge. Foley (1999) writes that the process of critical learning involves people in theorizing their experience: they stand back from it and reorder it, using concepts like power, conflict, structure, values, and choice. This critical learning is gained informally, through experience, by acting and reflecting on action, rather than in formal courses.

Many scholarly, NGO and activist accounts pay inadequate attention to the significance of low-profile, long-haul political education and community organizing work. Gupta (2004, p. 3) notes, it is not easy for activists 'to sit down and record their work, but in this age of information overload you need to record in order almost to prove that you exist'. It is important to document the articulation of challenges to hegemonic NGO and 'civil society' positions to challenge their status as the definitive 'alternative' discourses to be referenced by future movements and academic inquiry. In doing so, grassroots groups can contest professionalized NGO forms of knowledge and power and other hegemonic positions within NGO/movement milieux and contribute to building a body of knowledge and resources for struggle.

The gatekeeping practices and the replication of dominant hierarchies of knowledge described above are being challenged actively through the reassertion of grounded grassroots perspectives, non-Western epistemologies and pedagogies of struggle, sometimes within networks dominated by NGOs (and internal struggles within organizations), and sometimes in entirely separate forums and arenas of struggle. In addition to our argument about the importance of knowledge and learning in struggle as a way to resist the process of disciplining dissent from within NGO/community organization networks, we see hope in other ways to organize and mobilize outside of NGO and formal community organization structures which draw on local models, knowledges, and histories of mobilization. There is renewed emphasis on exporting Western models of community development practice, and imposing it on all local initiatives in terms of their content, and more importantly their professionalism and legal structures and forms. But alternatives exist. The most common expression is social movements but there are other ways, which sometimes combine different forms of social organization and action into a hybrid model, or sometimes look quite unlike forms of social action which we are used to.

Two useful concepts that come out of struggles in the Third World illustrate possibilities for self-organized communities outside of NGO and formalized community structures. The first draws on Bayat's (2000) work on social movements in the Middle East. He argues that global restructuring is creating new subjectivities of the marginalized, the unemployed, casual labor, street subsistence workers and street children, who have created new urban spaces—terrains of political struggle—outside of formal structures of either government or NGOs. Bayat contends that traditional theories cannot explain these forms of mobilization of the poor. He proposes an alternative—'quiet encroachment of the ordinary'—non-collective but prolonged direct action by individuals and families to acquire basic necessities for their lives—land for shelter, urban collective consumption, informal jobs, business opportunities and public space in a quiet and unassuming illegal fashion. Second, Barker (1999) examines informal examples of local democracy, arguing that it occurs in places where it would not be expected. He uses the term 'political activity settings' to talk about everyday places where people gather as places that form important spaces for politics—for example, markets, mosques, and town meeting places for deliberation and decision making to respond to local situations. Although the action is often local and distant from seats of power, and at times weak in response to these forms of social power, it is significant none the less. It represents places in which politics and mobilization can take place usually outside of highly structured NGOs with limited and specific mandates. It also demonstrates the capacity of people to take autonomous actions at times when changes around them pose threats to them.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding how professionalization of social change has disciplined and undermined the political space for radical organizing, we see encouraging signs of resistance and struggle, mainly emerging from local struggles which connect with global understandings about capitalism and power. Often the work of building social movements and counter-power to capital and the state is incremental, messy and not always obvious at the time. Like Foley (1999), we acknowledge that learning through involvement in social struggles can be contradictory and constraining. Building coalitions and radicalizing positions in community organizations, broader networks or alliances is also a complex, sometimes ambiguous process (Choudry et al., 2012). We need to attend to 'informal spaces' and incremental learning in a variety of organizing/organizational contexts as important places for community development and resistance

within traditional structures and forms. Dominant trends in governance through and by professionalized NGOs and community organizations can be resisted through recognizing and drawing upon the intellectual work that comes out of social struggles, and alternative models of social action.

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