



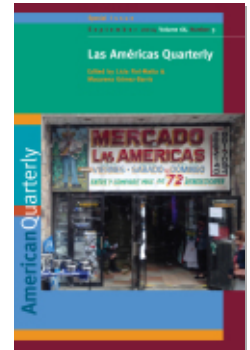
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A Politics of Encounter: Knowledge and Organizing in Common

Mara Kaufman

I want to begin with the relation of activism to academia not as a problem of the separation or conjunction between these realms but as a problem of practices and structures internal to both. We often assume that these are principally antagonistic and mutually distrustful fields, characterized by activist anti-intellectualism with regard to the academy and academic skepticism with regard to social change. This leaves us with the idea that we must bridge the two fields, which in turn tends to rely on innovative individuals to carry forth this task, a poor frame of reference that is more a reflection of the problems within each realm—the central figure of innovative individual—than a solution. I'd like to move away from the idea of “bridging,” but also away from the categories of activism and academia altogether to think about organization and knowledge production. While these things *can* happen within activism and academia, there is no guarantee that they will.

My thinking about the relation between knowledge and organizing comes from a collective organizational process that includes exposure to movements around the world, including and perhaps most importantly Zapatismo, but is primarily based on the work of the organization of which I am a part, El Kilombo Intergaláctico. Based in Durham, North Carolina, El Kilombo is made up primarily of students, migrants, and African American members of our local community, who work toward the creation of dignified housing, the production of and access to healthy food sources, and cooperative self-employment. All organizational projects are created by and for the community itself. The concepts presented here come from our collective thought and work.

Activism and Academia

What issues internal to activism and academia impede organization and knowledge production today? A first problem might be thought of as the extraction of the individual from the processes of knowledge production and political action through the formation of the professionalized identities of academic

and activist. The individualized academic careerism demanded by the requisites of resume building and the structures of authorship are exactly those that tend to discourage genuine engagement with a community, at least in ways that promote rather than exploit it. Professionalization is constructed in part around the need to suppress confrontation with concepts that exceed institutional control. The distance of critique provides the illusion of independence from the social entanglements that accompany what is produced in common.

Related to this is the dependence within both activism and academia on foundation and philanthropic funding. The sheer amount of time and energy involved in the cycle of funder-oriented proposal and report-back has a depoliticizing effect, as it takes one out of the time-space of collective rhythm. The subjective interpellation of professionalization and the participation in funding cycles, accented by the cutbacks and increased workloads of the neoliberal university and its counterpart in nongovernmental organizations, amount to what Tiziana Terranova reminds us is a kind of control over the surplus of production.¹ At stake in control over surplus is precisely the limit or capacity of the social to produce alternative forms of relation and organization, that is, to do politics.

In academia, we must add to this the social-reproductive function of the university, which transforms students not into obedient labor power but into self-managed human capital, driven by cultural more than wage capital. Work in the university risks becoming the management function of this human capital production, monitoring its development, selecting and supervising for its most promising potential.² We can often see this as well in the nongovernmental and even noninstitutional sphere, in activist résumés: “I run this campaign, shop this co-op, organize this media series, and make documentary film shorts on the side.” In other words, my social capital is speculative but highly profitable. Or, in sociologist Jared Ball’s metaphor, some of these spaces function like “live facebook”:³ the parading of profiles and the management of networks—visibly circulated, easily modified, and widely marketed.

It is important to recognize that these elements—the “privatization of the social individual” and the individual accumulation of social capital⁴—don’t just *limit* the effects of political involvement or merely replace other kinds of political involvement. Rather, they tend to actually produce a kind of hyperpragmatism, a systematic disbelief in the possibility of radical change (what some would call “politics”), something that evidences itself not in the presence of discourse but in the lack of strategy. This occurs alongside a hyperidealism, the belief that practices themselves provide a radical politics, rather than their role or deployment in a particular time and place. Hyperpragmatism and hyper-

idealism are surprisingly compatible in the sea of tactics and vacuum of context that characterize many moments in both activist and academic production. Consider the mirror of professionally interpellated critical intellectualism in socially responsible public volunteerism, and the great righteous weight put on things like rigorous household recycling, the frequenting of farmer's markets, and vigorous local consumption. While these practices are unobjectionable in themselves, when taken as a form of politics they tend to disguise the structure of a regime of accumulation that prevents the great majority of the population, in racially skewed ways, from ever being able to make these choices. It should be clear here that this is not an issue of exclusion (from markets and choices) but that such markets and choices are in fact built on the historic and systematic dispossession and degradation of entire populations, usually communities of color. Such practices taken as politics tend to foreclose a collective awareness of the depoliticization of our energies.

Knowledge and Organization

It is perhaps for those of us interested in social movements for whom these questions become particularly acute, as the structure of academia and patterns of contemporary political participation we saw above set up the danger of “mining” movements—of individually extracting that great wealth of intelligence and innovation that serious, ongoing collective organization generates. We risk what Randy Martin has called the “free trade” version of the social sciences:⁵ the ability to lift trade restrictions on disciplinary pursuits to open access to new markets. In this case, the “market” offers the fruits of knowledge and organization produced in struggle, but without the shared risks and commitments that struggle carries for the survival of one's community or collectivity. The problem here is not that we don't recognize activists and organizers as knowledge producers, or academics and intellectuals as practitioners, but that in the interest of political advocacy, the differences we mean to affirm become points of arbitrage,⁶ the value of which can be traded on the knowledge market. What we saw above as the professionalized extraction of the academic from the social finds its echo in the extraction of forms of knowledge and organization from their production in common. The appearance that the innovations in knowledge and organization produced in common and in struggle are the results of individual academic pursuit is, again, dangerously depoliticizing.

Using organization and knowledge production as reference points could help us clarify intellectual production as one of many practices vital to politics, recognize the common experiences that ground the construction of any con-

cept, and thus understand our task to promote and expand the integrity of that common. But the community of the common is a place of the intense, invisible, humbling, hard work of diverse relationships and social entanglements. Many of us, in a fragmented and segregated society, have been prevented the opportunity for, and the responsibility of, those mutual obligations. The myth of leading one's own life, or "being the leader of one's own life,"⁷ is built on a refusal of a process of subjectivation beyond our control, leading us back again to the illusion that holding progressive policy positions or making ourselves visible as participants in particular activities constitutes doing politics.

Cooperation and creativity are at the center of value production today, and activism and academia are of course built on this production. Insofar as we are unable or unwilling to enter the time-space of the stressful complexity and rich intensity of a community, we risk removal from those processes of creation (of knowledge and organization)—our isolation disguised, even to ourselves, by our access to and expertise in articulating that production. What is produced in the common, in Judith Revel's words, is one's relation to oneself and others;⁸ that is where new ways of living are created, and that, again (for us), is politics. There isn't any shortcut for getting there, just our own long and painful transformation. But within that transformation is the possibility for the creation of new subjectivities through struggle—and thus new modes of life—and that is what both organization and knowledge production should do.

Notes

1. Tiziana Terranova and Marc Bousquet, "Recomposing the University," *Metamute: Culture and Politics after the Net*, no. 28, www.metamute.com (accessed May 12, 2012).
2. *Ibid.*
3. Jared Ball, "Consensus Politics Are No Politics: A US Social Forum Diary," *Black Agenda Report*, July 2010, www.blackagendareport.com/content/consensus-politics-are-no-politics-us-social-forum-diary (accessed May 12, 2012).
4. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, "The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses," *Social Text*, no. 79 (2009): 101–15.
5. Randy Martin, *An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Judith Revel, "Resistances, Subjectivities, Common," *Generation Online*, June 2008, trans. Arianna Bove, www.generation-online.org/p/fprevel4.htm (accessed May 12, 2012).
8. *Ibid.*