Beyond activism/academia: militant research and the radical climate and climate justice movement(s)

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The problematic of the activist/academic relationship has been a source of sustained concern for radical Geographers over the past 15 years. Drawing on my personal experience within the radical climate movement(s), this paper looks to develop on the commitments of militant research, contribute to the development of militant ethnography as a research approach and consider the subsequent implications for thinking through the activist/academic problematic. Elaborating on the epistemological distinction between 'truth relaying' and 'knowledge production', it is contended that militant research is an orientation and process synonymous with the disavowal of positivist knowledge and the construction of situated partisan knowledge(s). Rather than the (social) science of transmitting truth, research thus becomes the art of producing tools you can fight with. From this perspective, the activist/academic problematic is not a 'neutral' problem but a product of a certain way of knowing associated with the academy. The paper concludes that our concern should not be to navigate between (and thus reiterate) the fields of 'activism' and 'academy', but to surpass the problematic altogether. We are tasked not with reproducing the university in its current form, but reimagining it as a machine for the production of other worlds.

***Key words:** militant research, ethnography, militant ethnography, positionality, methodology, epistemology*

Starting in the middle

> What does knowledge become when it renounces the comfort of 'critical distance' with regards to the 'object,' when it refuses each and every 'evenly balanced evaluation' and adopts a point of view based in struggles? How is the ability to research experienced when it becomes part of the experience of life, when it becomes potential to create? (Casa-Cortes and Cobarrubias 2010, 235)

At around 10 pm on 11 August 2007, I and eight others sat nervously in the back of a van filled with scaffold poles, empty oil-barrels, thermos flasks and coils of rope. Most of us had never met before, and despite having crumpled photocopied maps of the area surrounding Heathrow airport, we weren't exactly sure of our destination. An hour and a half later, in a field just outside the village of Sipson, we had erected a series of 'tripods' on which a few brave individuals were balanced, blockaded the field-entrance with barrels and hurriedly set up a series of precarious gazebo-esque structures. Around 50 of us had successfully secured the site for the 2007 Camp for Climate Action (CfCA), a week-long action camp that would bring together more than 2000 people and gain international media coverage.

Emerging out of the ashes of the Dissent! network that had been at the core of the anti-capitalist mobilisations against the Gleneagles G8 in 2005, the CfCA would become one of the more prominent aspects of an amorphous 'radical climate movement'. Over the following five years, this movement would become constituted through hundreds of actions – ranging from thousands descending on Ratcliffe-upon-Soar power station, through to the blockading of Ffos-Y-Fran opencast mine or the occupation of airport taxi-ways – mobilising thousands of people. These actions would go on to inspire a wave of similar actions in Europe and beyond, ranging from the

halting of coal trains in Newcastle, Australia to the block-ading of a coal power station in the heart of Washington DC.

While other campaign groups – such as the Campaign against Climate Change (CaCC) and the Stop Climate Chaos coalition – mobilised marches upwards of 50 000 people, often to lobby governments to take 'fair, ambi-tious and binding' steps towards stopping climate change, the 'radical climate movement' could be differ-entiated both through its commitment to taking direct action and an underlying orientation towards anarchist, anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian perspectives. Indeed, the 'radical climate movement' should be under-stood not as a single-issue phenomena, but as having emerged with a heritage in the alter-globalisation 'move-ment of movements' and, before that, the UK's anti-roads and reclaim the streets movements (Plows 2008). The 'radical climate movement' was not therefore a straightforward environmental movement; rather, the participants were arguably 'united in a feeling of belong-ing to a broader, and global, anti-capitalist social move-ment' (Schlembach 2011, 197).

While the movement grew exponentially in size, profile and frequency of the actions, there were nonetheless voices within the movement that warned of a tendency towards us becoming 'a dramatic single-issue mass lobby for punitive state intervention. Friends of the Earth with D-locks' (Archer 2007). In other words, for some in the movement there was an active concern with maintaining a distinction between 'radical' praxis and the wider envi-ronmental movement, and of seeing the latter as in some way flawed, lacking or 'un'-radical. As someone whose 'formative' years were not within environmental politics as such, but rather anti-war, international solidarity cam-paigns and the anti-capitalist mobilisations around the 2005 G8 in Gleneagles, this paradox regarding what con-stituted a 'radical' praxis on climate change seemed of utmost importance.

This paradox thus became the content of my mili-tant ethnographic approach; it posed a problem for 'us' as self-identifying radical/anarchist/communist/anti/post-capitalist subjects looking to act on the question of climate change. What constituted 'us' as 'politically' dif-ferent? How do we act? How do we affect change? How do we talk and think about the world around us in a way that doesn't reiterate the conditions of the present? How do we produce ourselves as an empowered collective subject rather than reactive individuals? In what way is 'mainstream' environmentalism lacking, and are we pur-suing a praxis that is meaningfully different? Or are our actions merely a radical posturing, a sheep dressed in the 'radical' clothing of the wolf?

Although the outcomes of the research are not of direct concern to this paper, it is inevitably impossible (and perhaps both undesirable and inconsistent with the mili-tant ethnographic approach) to wholly disentangle the content from the process of the research. Fundamentally, this is because the process of research (and me as researcher) cannot be alienated from the 'object' of the research concern (Colectivo Situaciones 2003 2005). Beginning from within, I understood militant ethnography – as a form of militant research – as the process of gradu-ally identifying and becoming fixated on a contradiction, inconsistency or paradox within an overtly politicised milieu, and then striving to understand and contribute to the collective surpassing of this paradox – a combination of thought and action orientated towards understanding and changing collective praxis, identifying and surpassing the limits of our existing selves.

Throughout my 'militant research' orientation (imma-nent research, perhaps?), many of the concerns associated with the activist/academic problematic were incompre-hensible – somehow offset, negated or confused by the militant approach. From the outset, there existed no 'criti-cal distance' between me – as some hypothetically pre-existing 'researcher' – and the 'object' of my research. I could not make sense of '*going* native' (Fuller 1999), for I was never 'outside' of this milieu in the first place – I was researching in the middle of where I was. I was not concerned with finding processes to 'link my intellectual and political concerns' (Juris 2008a, 20), as they had never been separate (and in any case, what value is the 'intellect' when separated from the 'political'?). There existed no 'third space' that I felt compelled to navigate between an 'activist' field and 'elsewhere' (although I shared Routledge's concern with 'research and theory [that] remain[s] analytical and *disembodied*'; 1996, 401).

Militant research – as an orientation – is thus in many ways a rejection of the entire problematic of the activist/academic, or more accurately, it is a subjective orientation towards research in which the 'academic' component is irrelevant precisely because militant research does not take the university as a referent. In the first instance, militant research is irrespective of the uni-versity and the attendant subject of the academic. Instead, all forms of militant research are concerned with 'the capacity for struggles to read themselves and, consequently, to recapture and *disseminate* the advances and productions of other social practices' (Colectivo Situaciones 2003) – militant research is thus the con-scious and deliberate attempt to make movements *move* through a reflexive (dialectical, even?) critique of their own praxis.

In a subtle distinction between this paper and other thoughtful contributions to the activist/academic debate, my starting point was not therefore to negotiate the relationship between being both an 'activist' and an

'academic'. Rather, I approached and experienced the institution – as I'm sure many others have – as someone attempting to contribute to the critical transformation of a movement in which I was already a constitutive actor.

Through expanding on my research experience, I shall suggest that militant research is both an orientation and process that allows us to reappraise the problematic of activism/academia. Speaking personally, it has become most obviously a question of how does one survive within the university, both when in the process of militant research, and when one is *not* in the process of militant research. The paper thus concludes with an initial consideration of how the orientation and process of militant research is concomitant with developing a normative position regarding the very function of the university, demanding we ask not what the university *is* but what we want it *to do*.

Militant research as orientation

> People in therapeutic systems, or in the universities, who consider themselves to be mere depositories or channels for the transmission of scientific knowledge, have already made a reactionary choice. Despite their innocence or goodwill, they really occupy a position that reinforces the systems of production of the dominant subjectivity. It does not have to be this way. (Guattari and Rolnik 2008, 41)

It may seem frustrating (at best) when the response to the question of what a militant researcher actually does is 'It depends, and besides, what I did might be completely inappropriate in another context', or even more confusingly, 'You do what needs to be done'. On first impression these responses appear as somewhat slippery apologies, yet they are both wholly appropriate and accurate – the problem lies with the presuppositions of the question. Militant research is not an 'off-the-shelf' set of techniques for measuring, recording and assessing the world according to academic standards, but rather an orientation and a process. What occurs during the militant research is wholly contingent, demanding attention to the changing necessities of the milieu within which one is situated.

The militant research 'orientation' has a long if somewhat irregular history that finds its roots in Marx's (1880) *Workers' inquiry* – an extended survey directed at the French working class – which was later developed by those involved with the Italian Operaismo of the 1960s and 1970s (see Malo 2004; The Commune 2011). More recently, groups such as Precarias a la Deriva (2004), Colectivo Situaciones (2003 2005) and Team Colors (2010) have also experimented with militant research. While the forms of research are very different, what they arguably share is a specific orientation that is grounded in a commitment to the augmentation and transformation of the movements of which they are part.

In many ways, the question of orientation is at the heart of the debate regarding whether there is something that can be properly considered a 'feminist method' (see Harding 1987a 1987b; Reinharz and Davidman 1992; Sharp 2005; Naples 2007). For Harding, it was essential to make a distinction between epistemology ('a theory of knowledge'), methodology ('a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed') and method ('a technique for . . . gathering evidence'). In Harding's schema, the fundamental question of what constitutes 'feminist' research must take place at the level of epistemology, as it is these decisions that

> influence how we define our roles as researchers, what we consider ethical research practices, and we interpret and implement informed consent or ensure the confidentiality of our research subjects. (Naples 2007, 547)

In other words, questions regarding 'method' are secondary to the question of the orientation of the research. The importance of considering orientation stems from the disavowal of the positivist position that it is possible to produce knowledge that is somehow neutral, and by extension, supporting the assertion that whether one acknowledges it or not, all knowledge is inherently partisan knowledge. Without extensively rehearsing this argument, the critique of positivist epistemology – and thus the inherent need to consider orientation – can be summarised through contrasting interpretations of research as either 'truth relaying' or 'knowledge production'.

John Berger's (1972) essay *Ways of seeing* usefully rehearses this distinction through perspectives on the photographic process. A positivist perspective holds that the photograph provides an unquestionably objective account of the world, while the act of taking a photograph is a (scientific) process of 'truth relaying'. 'Good' research will strive to minimise noise, variables and unintended acts of distortion so as to ensure the photograph provides as 'truthful' account of the world as is possible – in other words, they will ensure some form of methodological rigour (see Baxter and Eyles 1997). To the contrary, Berger argues that:

> photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snapshot. The photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. (1972, 8, 10)

Rather than interpreting the photograph as the presentation of truth, we must understand the act of taking a photograph as the production of a very specific and orientated knowledge. The act of decision between what is 'relevant' to the image and what is not, and what is

rendered as 'noise' or 'distortion' rather than relevant information, is an unavoidable act. To claim that the photograph is a mere 'transmission of truth' is to either hide or apologise for the photographer, an audacious attempt to remove the photographer from the existence of the photograph. This is nothing but an illusion. To believe the photographer does not exist is to reproduce the dominant (yet flawed) understanding of knowledge as disembodied, impartial and universal, reinforcing precisely the 'systems of production of the dominant subjectivity' (Guattari and Rolnik 2008, 41) that are the wrath of any progressive cosmology.

To accept that the photograph is essentially inseparable from the photographer is to accept the photograph as both a situated statement *on* and intervention *in* the world, an attempt to portray and affect the world in certain ways – whether one claims (or realises) to be doing so or not. As Orwell suggests, 'consciously or unconsciously everyone writes as a partisan' (2003, 195). We can thus understand Roseneil's claim that we should have 'no qualms about rejecting "value-neutrality" and taking sides' (1993, 179); it is a given that all knowledge is orientated, such that even those who claim to be producing scientific, disembodied knowledge 'about' the world are themselves reproducing the dominant subjectivity. The question must thus be rethought as which side do you choose to take; do you choose to reproduce the dominant way of seeing/knowing? Or do you choose to align with an antagonistic perspective that knows the world differently?

What, then, can we understand of militant research as orientation? The process of militant research necessarily 'starts from the understandings, experiences, and relations generated through organising as both a method of political action and as a form of knowledge' (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007, 9). To this extent, the militant researcher is orientated as a constitutive participant within a given politicised milieu – they are immanent to a field of political desires and the heterogeneous yet resonant bodies within this. It is impossible to think of this as 'going native' (see Fuller 1999), which suggests a researcher is somehow 'coming' from a foreign or alien outside. The researcher begins orientated *within* and *as part of* the milieu of the research, the 'inquirer her/himself [is] placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter' (Harding 1987a, 9) – the self/other, researcher/researched binaries collapse in on themselves.

Given this orientation, what therefore is the 'photographic act'? Or to put it another way, how does one go about knowledge production when orientated through militant research? Or again, what do we now mean by research? As Nate Holdren has suggested, this is wholly contingent on the research milieu:

One experience of research militancy can find the techniques and experiences of another to be either a resource to draw upon and redeploy, something relatively inert and not useful, or something incompatible to and actively destructive for its own project, an object lesson to avoid. (2006, no page)

Although beyond the scope of this paper – and thus an invitation for discussion elsewhere – this opens a Pandora's box for those who fetishise participatory methods as some form of Golden Ticket to progressive, respectful or sensitive forms of research. If we accept that the question of 'method' is subordinate to the question of orientation, we also have the basis for critiquing 'participation' as a fetishised object. It is beyond question that 'militant research' may utilise participatory methods, but that is not to imply that participatory methods are inherently 'radical' or 'progressive' (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010, 249). Indeed, the value of 'participation' resides more at the level of orientation and process than it does at the level of method.

We should therefore approach the partisan construction of knowledge 'exactly like a toolbox', in the sense that the production of knowledge is literally the production of tools that modify, enhance or create new ways of seeing and enable new ways of affecting the world. Paraphrasing Proust, knowledge(s) should be approached and used 'like a pair of glasses to view the outside, and if it isn't to your liking, find another pair, or invent your own, and your device will necessarily be a device you can fight with' (Deleuze and Foucault 2004, 208).

Given these reflections, an appropriate response to the question of what a militant researcher actually does would be 'you're missing the point'. Nonetheless, the question still stands – what *does* a militant researcher actually do? While impossible to give an absolute answer to this (just as it is impossible to give a conclusive answer as to what a feminist researcher actually does), I can speak personally of my experience of conducting militant ethnography within elements of the radical climate and climate justice movements.

Militant ethnography as process

For multiple reasons, the second-half of 2008 can be retrospectively understood as the impetus behind the militant research undertaken within the radical climate and climate justice movements. I had been charged under the UK's Malicious Damages Act for my participation in a high-profile environmental direct action concerning emissions from coal-burning, resulting in a long court case that demanded extensive reflection and justification of our collective action. The Camp for Climate Action (CfCA) – one of the most visible elements of the UK's radical

climate movement – had recently held a protest camp at Kingsnorth power station, and was at the beginning of considering its direction for the following year while reflecting on the 'politics' of its process. Following the first international meeting of the network, which later became known as Climate Justice Action (CJA), an international 'call to action' had been circulated in mid-September calling for mass mobilisations surrounding the COP15 summit at the end of 2009 – a call supported by the CfCA at its September national gathering.

The intersection of these nameable events – alongside a multitude of other less visible discussions, perspectives and inspirations – began to ignite a concern with the praxis of the movement. It was no longer self-evident to all movement actors that the ways 'we' in the radical climate movement(s) knew/acted upon climate change represented a significantly 'radical' praxis, or that this was substantively different to the tendency of the mainstream environmental movement. While there had been some discussions and publications that spoke back to the movement regarding this 'liberal' tendency (Archer 2007; Abbott 2009; Cambridge Anarchists 2009; Resonance 2009), these critiques remained undeveloped despite their fundamental importance to how 'we' attempted to situate ourselves as 'radical' political actors.

It would be facetious to claim there was some light-bulb moment at which this paradox suddenly emerged fully formed, or that there was a neat linearity between the generation of the 'question' followed by a 'research process' intent on finding the answer. Rather, Deleuze's suggestion that 'the art of constructing a problem is very important: you invent a problem, a problem-position, before finding a solution' (Deleuze and Parnet 2006, 1), provides a far more accurate account of the labour of this militant research process. This process was thus directed towards understanding and constructing this problem-position – of interrogating and constructing an understanding of the shortcomings of 'our' praxis – with the intention of surpassing and overcoming them. In other words, the intention of the research was to contribute to the interpretation and transformation of the praxis of movement, to contribute to making the movement *move*.

The extent to which militant research can be deemed successful is thus measured solely by the extent to which it had some effect on the movement milieu. In practice, it is highly problematic to measure the degree to which this research was successful, not least because an attempt to contribute to transforming the praxis of a movement necessarily means challenging some elements of our praxis. To those movement actors intent on more of the same, such a research contribution may be an annoying or potentially destructive distraction from the task at hand, and thus perhaps dismissible as intellectual waffle or a waste of time. On the other hand, there will be movement actors who will be receptive to such reflexive contributions, those who will take up the problem-position and collectively look for new praxes that respond and surpass it.

Militant research is thus a process of being critically committed to a given political milieu – at once committed to the milieu through critical attempts to transform it. The intention is not to take detached, static and explanatory snap-shots – like much of 'social movement theory' (for example, Tarrow 1998) – nor is it to uncritically reaffirm the goals and processes of a given political tendency (see Chatterton *et al*. 2007). Rather the point of militant research is to contribute to processes of critical reflection and transformation of our movements.

In practice, militant ethnography – as a form of militant research – meant adopting multiple forms throughout the research. Similar to research conducted by Routledge (2008 2009) and Juris (2007 2008a 2008b), this resulted in attendance and participation in national organisational gatherings, coordinating workshops, facilitating information sessions, writing funding applications, discussions on e-lists, coordinating publicity, arranging mass coach transportation to mobilisations, helping refurbish squatted convergence spaces, distributing literature, participating and speaking on protests, and so on. In other words, my participation was wholly contingent on the nature of the specific political milieu within which I was a constitutive participant.

Through these actions was an ongoing reflexive process of discourse analysis, participant observation and affective awareness that – recalling that the research/researched binary has collapsed through the militant research orientation – could be considered a sort of 'collective autoethnography'. When de-jargoned, this meant that while listening, conspiring, reading, planning, writing, laughing and celebrating along with friends and comrades within the movement, I was concomitantly developing both my own and others' understanding of this 'problem-position'. This was manifest both in terms of *how* I therefore acted or spoke, *what* I would do (or not do) and *why* I would try and effect decisions or processes in certain ways.

On an observable level, this meant 'formal' reflections on the movement, including publications in movement journals such as *Shift* (Russell 2010), open-source anarchist journals widely syndicated across 'movement' websites (Russell and Pusey 2010) and a collectively authored and edited book(let) (Building Bridges Collective 2010). Although fetishised within academia, these formal reflections may be less significant to making movements move than the ephemeral outburst in a meeting, a shared reflection over a beer or indeed the choice to abstain from a given meeting or action.

Militant research in/against/beyond the university

As stated earlier, militant research in the first instance is irrespective of the university and the attendant subject of the academic. To that extent, I have explored how I experienced militant research as both an orientation and a process, and outlined how I utilised a mixed ethnographic approach to knowledge production immanent to a political milieu. From a militant research orientation, the problematic is thus not so much navigating the duality of activism/academia, but to what extent one can conduct militant research within the university.

In his influential discussion on the experience of conducting activist research, Paul Routledge considered himself as 'consciously acting as an activist and a researcher at the same time', necessitating a 'difficult and unstable' negotiation between his 'roles as "activist" and "geographer" ' (1996, 405) – yet this is to conflate 'research' and the 'academy'. Throughout my experience of militant research, and despite my best attempts, I have struggled to empathise with this position. The assertion that 'the voices of those involved in struggles are distinct from the social science literature that seeks to study and explain such struggles' (1996, 406) is undoubtedly correct, yet the problem lies not in maintaining and negotiating this distinction, but in ensuring one is conducting research as a subject orientated *through* struggle, rather than as an 'academic' producing disembodied – 'dead' – information *about* movements.

Militant research dissolves the perspective that 'activism' and 'research' are somehow opposed, a refutation of the idea that activism is some form of uncritical mindless 'campaigning' whereas research is armchair 'intellectual' work (something perpetuated by many self-defining 'activists' and 'academics' alike). This distinction is itself a hangover of the positivist perspective that intellectual work is the act of revealing disembodied truth, and that it takes a specialist or expert (the academic) to produce this disembodied knowledge. What *is* in opposition is therefore the academic as positivist-researcher – 'those who see themselves as channels for the transmission of scientific information' (Guattari and Rolnik 2008, 41) – and the task of being critically committed to producing partisan knowledge that is situated within political milieus. There is no possible negotiation between undertaking orientated 'knowledge production' on the one hand, and being an official 'transmitter of truth' on the other – a commitment to the first necessarily discredits the second.

As suggested by the Autonomous Geographies Collective, 'the most important principle for academics committed to social change is to make strategic interventions collectively with the social movements we belong to' (2010, 247). If this is the positive image of what we want

the academic *to do*, then by extension it means reimagining the university not as an institution of elites 'trained' in some 'science' of truth-relaying, but rather as an institution fundamentally geared towards establishing and surpassing the problem-positions of everyday life. The university should become an amplification chamber where quotidian experience is enabled to read itself, where non-experts are supported in intervening in the conditions of their own lives.[1]

One is left with a simple perspective on the contemporary university; to the extent that it is possible, we should exploit the few remaining 'cracks' (Holloway 2010) that allow us to live while contributing to antagonistic social change – both through teaching and research. Yet it is clear that the university, at least in the UK, is fast approaching a state of disrepair following a sustained assault through the 'neoliberal lens'. An ever-expanding exploited and precarious workforce (Grove 2013), the devaluation of research that does not demonstrate an 'impact' within the present framework of the possible (see Harvie and De Angelis 2009; Rogers *et al.* 2014) and the transformation of 'education' into a process of producing indentured entrepreneurial subjects (see Lazzarato 2012) are significantly reducing the number of 'cracks' left within the academic institution.

To the extent that it is possible, we should seek to counteract those forces and reimagine the university as a politicised machine that works to produce and amplify different perceptions of the world, to find ways to interrupt and change the rules of everyday life. We must challenge (and fight) over the very function of the university. 'Demand the Impossible!' should become the rationale of the academy, where 'impact' is understood as the capacity for teaching and research to disrupt, discredit and dismantle the post-political malaise that dominates the 'West' (see Swyngedouw 2005), and instead open up new possibilities for hope in what the future(s) could look like.

Note

1 This is not to be read as an essentialist statement on the function of the university, but rather as the recognition that the function of the university is something that is fundamentally open to contestation. Forming a normative position on what the university should do – and fighting for it – is of pressing urgency.

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