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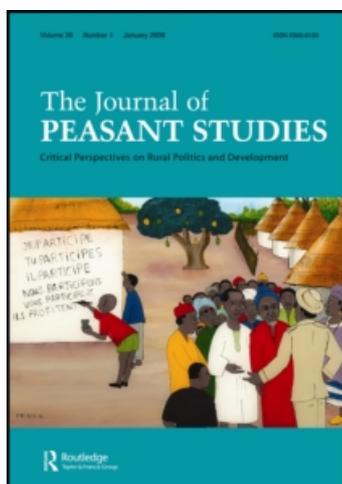
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Synergies and tensions between rural social movements and professional researchers

Marc Edelman

This essay outlines approaches to analysing and managing relations between rural activists and academic researchers. It suggests (a) that contemporary social movements engage in knowledge production practices much like those of academic and NGO-affiliated researchers and (b) that the boundaries between activists and researchers are not always as sharp as is sometimes claimed. These blurred boundaries and shared practices can create synergies in activist–academic relations. The essay then examines tensions in the relationship, including activists’ expectation that academic research will be immediately applicable to their struggles and researchers’ expectation that movement participants will accommodate their needs. The final section discusses the pros and cons, from the perspective of each side, of several models of activist–researcher relations, ranging from ‘militant’ or ‘engaged’ research to the contractual agreement between a movement and those involved in research on it. It argues that one of the most useful contributions of academic researchers to social movements may be reporting patterns in the testimony of people in the movement’s targeted constituency who are sympathetic to movement objectives but who feel alienated or marginalised by one or another aspect of movement discourse or practice.

Keywords: social movements; peasants; non-governmental organisations; engaged research; activism; rural development

There has been a certain timidity on the part of the professional, perhaps apathy. And on our part, a certain bitterness or resentment because of everything that has happened to us. There are people who have abused us ... At times we feel that we’re cows. The [researchers] give us a big milking and somebody else gets to drink the milk. You understand? – Sinforiano Cáceres Baca, Federación Nacional de Cooperativas, Nicaragua, interview with the author, Managua, 4 July 1994.¹

I presented a shorter, very different version of this essay at a January 2006 conference on ‘Land, Poverty, Social Justice and Development: Social Movements Perspectives’ at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. Many activists and colleagues at that forum provided comments and pointed critiques, as did Brenda Biddle, Jun Borrás, Philippe Bourgois, Jeff Boyer, Annette Desmarais, Jonathan Fox, Lesley Gill, Angelique Haugerud, and Jeff Rubin. I am very grateful to all for their input, which helped immeasurably in improving the argument. The deficiencies of the essay are, of course, my responsibility.

¹‘Ha habido cierta timidez de parte del profesional, tal vez cierta apatía. Y cierto resquemor de parte nuestra por todo que nos ha pasado. Hay gente que nos ha abusado ... Nos sentimos como vacas a veces. Y nos pegan una gran ordeñada y otro se bebe la leche. ¿Entendés?’

Introduction

Can and should rural social movements and professional or academic researchers work with each other and, if so, under what conditions and in pursuit of what objectives? In what ways are professional or academic researchers and movement researchers similar and in what ways are they different? What types of collaboration and cooperation might be fruitful? When do the relations between social movements and academic or professional researchers become problematical? What are some possible models or ways of specifying or negotiating mutually beneficial relationships? Who gets to ‘drink the milk’ and could the ‘milking’ metaphor be transcended?

This essay attempts to sketch some approaches to these issues. It starts with an analytical distinction between three categories of people: movement activists, academic researchers in universities and similar institutions, and professional researchers in other kinds of institutions, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It then argues, however, that the distinction is partly, though not entirely, a heuristic one and that the lines between activist researchers and other researchers are in practice often blurred.² To make matters worse, or at least more complicated, another useful heuristic that breaks down under even minimal scrutiny is central to the way the problem here is framed. That is, the distinction between activists and researchers (of all kinds) rests to a large extent on a spurious distinction between ‘doing’ and ‘thinking’. While such distinctions are dubious in practice, they nonetheless retain some limited analytical value inasmuch as activists and professional researchers (of both academic and other varieties) often occupy different social roles and institutional spaces and emphasise different kinds of social action.

The essay does not pretend to provide definitive answers, but aims instead at stimulating reflection, debate and mutual understanding. It draws on a reading of materials produced by movement and professional and academic researchers, on many conversations over the years, and on my own experience as a researcher sympathetic to and yet critical of some of the movements I have studied. I should state at the outset that I do not see the approaches of movement and academic or other professional researchers as incompatible or even necessarily as all that distinct. This does not mean, however, that the relations between them or their knowledge production practices are entirely unproblematic. Indeed, when professional (academic and non-academic) researchers and activists enter into relations tensions may always be present, in greater or lesser degrees and sometimes in subterranean forms, unrecognised by one or both parties. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the relation cannot be fruitful for each. It is also important to note at the beginning that (1) the essay focuses mainly on peasant and farmer movements, particularly transnational ones, even though many of the issues raised are likely relevant as well for other kinds of activist projects and for the researchers in and out of universities who accompany, study and write about and partner with them; and (2) the discussion of approaches to engaged research, of activists’ concerns about researchers and of the history of professional researchers’ acting for and against movements draws heavily on

²Moreover, as Silber (2007, 15) suggests, it is important to examine the ‘move to theorise a created temporal and spatial community of engagement and suffering as activism’.

examples from anthropology. In part, this results from the author's own disciplinary location, but more importantly it reflects anthropology's role in the social scientific division of labour as the field assigned to 'the savage slot' (Trouillot 1991) of less-developed countries, the rural and urban poor, and peasant and indigenous peoples.

Academics and activists: blurred boundaries

Contemporary social movements engage in knowledge production practices much like those of academic and NGO researchers and the boundaries between activists and researchers are not always as sharp as is sometimes claimed. These blurred boundaries and shared practices can create synergies in activist–researcher relations. There are nonetheless some critical differences that may give rise to tensions. While tensions between social movements and NGOs are notorious and widespread, they generally involve questions of representation and competition over access to resources and decision-making fora (Borras 2004, 2008, Edelman 2003, Desmarais 2007, 21–6). Tensions between activists and academics, on the other hand, tend to revolve more narrowly around the research process and the purpose and methods of knowledge production and dissemination.

The complex challenges facing today's social movements have required activists to become researchers. In many cases, researchers in the social movements (and among their NGO allies) employ methods, technical language, and publication practices that resemble those of academics. Examples are numerous, but include many fine reports on biotechnology, global trade and Canadian agriculture written and published by the National Farmers Union (Canada).³ Leading figures (or, in some cases, former participants) in the transnational peasant and small farmer organisations have also written rigorous and perceptive 'insider' histories of their movements, at times in academic journals (Bové 2001, Bové and Dufour 2001, Desmarais 2002, 2007, Holt-Giménez 2006, Stédile 2002, 2007, Borras 2004, 2008). In other cases, non-farm intellectuals and farm activists have collaborated closely in producing political and historical analysis (Alegria and Nicholson 2002, Stédile and Fernandes 1999). A few of these non-farm intellectuals have been integrally involved in formulating strategy, publicising movement platforms and activities, and carrying out research and training directly geared to movements' needs (du Plessis 2008, Monsalve Suárez *et al.* 2008, Rosset 2003).⁴ All of these are potential synergies between social movement activists and non-farm researchers that could be put into practice more systematically.⁵

Some movement activists view academics as coming from an alien world. They draw sharp distinctions between activists and academics (and sometimes between movement organisations and NGOs, even though these lines are frequently more

³Many of these are available at <http://www.nfu.ca/>.

⁴Importantly, however, most of these are associated with NGOs and not academic institutions. The implications of this distinction will be examined more below.

⁵Fox (2006, 28–29) points to the US environmental justice movement as exemplifying the potential of 'partnerships between engaged researchers and grassroots organisations. In the US debate numbers and quantitative analysis were the key battleground for revealing the racial and class imbalance in exposure to toxic hazards. Alternative numbers empowered alternative ideas, turning them into mainstream common sense'; see also Hale (2007a, 21).

blurred than certain activists like to acknowledge).⁶ Yet many leading activists also have considerable academic experience and credentials. They do not always ‘wear these on their sleeve’, since they are participants in and leaders of organisations that represent – or seek to represent – people who typically have much less formal education and sometimes none at all.⁷ For a few movement activists involved in farming, the off-farm employment that permits them to survive as agriculturalists includes holding academic positions available only to those who have obtained a post-graduate degree.⁸

The movements have also produced, through their own training programs or those carried out in conjunction with various NGOs, a significant cadre of grassroots intellectuals.⁹ Elsewhere, for example, I have written about the development in Central America of a large group of highly sophisticated peasant activists, trained in diverse areas such as trade policy, cooperative administration and agroecology (Edelman 1998, also see Rappaport 2005). These could be viewed as one impressive indicator of movement success, even when peasant movements in the Central American region have suffered major reverses in other aspects of their work (Edelman 2008).¹⁰

To summarise briefly, then, some important synergies between social movements and academics could involve exchanges of knowledge and contacts, joint strategy discussions, publicising organisations’ platforms and activities and analysing their histories, and engaging in collaborative research and training.

Sources of tension

Relationships between academics and social movements are, not surprisingly, sometimes characterised by tensions. These include activists’ expectation that academic research will be immediately applicable to their struggles and academics’ expectation that movement participants will accommodate their needs. Moreover, professional intellectuals, and perhaps especially those who work in academic institutions, are often deeply invested in the search for detail and complexity and for comprehensiveness and ‘truth’, even when they recognise the illusory, relative and unattainable nature of the latter two objectives. Some of the professional intellectuals’ best work, like that of good investigative journalists, involves probing

⁶On the blurred boundaries between social movements and NGOs, see Alvarez (1998), Bickham Méndez (2007), and Edelman (2008).

⁷Brazilian MST leader João Pedro Stédile, for instance, reports that ‘probably the best period of [his] life’ was when he was able to study in Mexico for two years in the 1970s. He reported meeting major figures in the Brazilian and Latin American left who were living in exile there, such as Francisco Julião, who had led the Ligas Camponesas (Peasant Leagues) in the early 1960s, and outstanding intellectuals such as Rui Mauro Marini, Vânia Bambilra, Teotônio dos Santos and Jacques Chonchol (Stédile 2002, 78–9).

⁸This is the case, for example, with at least one major figure in the National Farmers Union of Canada.

⁹Less commonly, as in Central America in the 1980s and 1990s, peasant organisations have provided the major impetus for creating NGOs to serve movement objectives.

¹⁰This process also points to the inadequacy of Gramsci’s frequently cited concept of ‘organic intellectuals’. As a good Marxist, Gramsci assumed that such intellectuals would come from the working class and, if they did emerge from the peasantry, would never remain loyal to peasant interests (Gramsci 1971, 6). Despite Gramsci’s doubts about peasants’ political reliability, in some countries, notably Bolivia, his language of ‘organic intellectuals’ has been widely adopted by militant activists of rural origin (Zamorano Villarreal 2009).

beneath the surface, questioning appearances and asking uncomfortable questions both of their movement interlocutors and of data that they may have obtained elsewhere (conversely, some of the worst work fails to do precisely this). The uncomfortable questions alone may generate frictions, but more fundamental is the activists' investment in presenting overly coherent 'official narratives' about their movements and in making representation claims that may or may not have a solid basis.¹¹ At times academic researchers and other professional intellectuals knowingly or unknowingly collude in producing and propagating those narratives and in 'airbrushing' (or, to be more up-to-date, 'photo-shopping') out dimensions of activists' biographies and of social movement practice that conflict with or complicate the 'official' picture or line. Whether or not this cosmetic approach, which in its more extreme manifestations critics sometimes characterise as 'self-censorship', 'uncritical adulation' or even 'cheerleading', really serves the needs of social movements is an important question, about which I will shortly have more to say.¹²

Academic researchers and social movement activists, even if they have similar knowledge production practices, sometimes seek to produce knowledge for different objectives.¹³ Or, even if the objectives of each are similar, they rank the same objectives differently. To be more concrete, a movement researcher and a university-based researcher might each wish to write a book that examines recent agrarian struggles in country *X*. Each might genuinely want the results of the research to serve the needs of contemporary and future movements for change. The university-based scholar, however, would likely be at least somewhat more interested in writing the book for an audience of professional intellectuals, addressing arcane academic debates, and publishing with a prestigious academic press.¹⁴ The movement-based author of such a book, on the other hand, would be more likely to seek a politically

¹¹On the latter point, see Borras *et al.* (2008, 182–89) and Edelman (2008, 231). Speed (2007, 215) suggests that 'the multiple tensions and contradictions that exist between anthropologists and those we work with' need to be viewed as 'productive tensions that we might strive to benefit from analytically rather than seek to avoid'.

¹²Warren (2006, 221) asks about 'self-censorship', 'Does it mean that whole domains of social life have been, in effect, off the table for richer ethnographic analysis?'. Bevington and Dixon (2005, 191) argue that 'uncritical adulation' does not provide a movement 'with any useful information and does not aid the movement in identifying and addressing problems which may hinder its effectiveness'. The 'cheerleading' concept is often invoked in off-the-record conversations among researchers who study social movements and rarely appears in print. Scholars not identified with (or even hostile to) the movements are those most likely to employ the term in publications (e.g., Wickham-Crowley 1991, 4).

¹³Martínez (2007, 191) compares the researcher-activist relation to the rural Haitian *konbit* or communal reciprocal work party: 'activist anthropology puts people to work alongside each other, each side maintaining a distinct project, the anthropologist hoping to harvest academic publications even as he helps activists cultivate political or organisational gains. As in peasant agriculture, the goal of activist anthropology is not generating maximum output but generating sustainable and equitably shared gain'.

¹⁴Academics also, of course, are expected to publish not just books, but articles in specialised journals. In certain countries (such as the United States) and in some academic disciplines, professional advancement is strongly correlated with publishing in 'disciplinary' journals, particularly those affiliated with the main professional associations. More innovative work on social movements, especially that which challenges positivist paradigms or which manifests even mild political engagement, tends to be relegated to smaller, less prestigious but frequently more stimulating publications or to those journals that nobody reads but which exist mainly to credential scholars in 'second tier' institutions and to make profits for academic publishers.

progressive publisher that will guarantee a large print run, wide distribution and perhaps a low price for the work. She or he would also possibly put more energy into a collective discussion of the research findings and into translating any published work into the main language of country *X*, if it was not first written in that language.

The point is not that academic researchers are selfishly pursuing riches or hoping to inflate their curricula vitae at the expense of, or using knowledge generated by, the social movements. Virtually all university researchers who study or accompany social movements are profoundly sympathetic to the activists' goals (the exceptions are usually those who study right-wing extremist and religious fundamentalist movements).¹⁵ Academics have political projects too, and those who study or partner with social movements tend to do so because they see in activism the realisation of some of their goals and hopes, movement toward a more just world and toward the kind of society in which they would like to live. Almost all of the scholarly books that academics write generate trivial amounts of royalties (though what is 'trivial' may appear different in the Global South and very occasionally, of course, academic books actually become bestsellers).¹⁶ Rather, it is the institutional situation of university-based researchers that powerfully shapes the extent to which different objectives seem important to them. Especially for early-career academics in major universities, the possibilities of continuing to be able to work in their chosen fields depend mightily on the kinds of journals and presses that have published their work (and on the language in which they publish). It is not that they are generally persecuted for publishing in other kinds of outlets, or for translating their work into other languages, it is just that these activities typically have to be something 'extra', carried out alongside and in addition to the more traditional – I am tempted to say, more soporific and dry – academic work that secures their careers (which, in the United States at least, must almost always be in English). This 'extra' effort, of course, entails risks and has costs in time and career advancement that need to be anticipated by the professionally vulnerable, early-career academic and that, in the interests of real transparency, also ought to be brought to the attention of and acknowledged by her or his social movement interlocutors or collaborators. My observations here may reflect the particular characteristics of US academia (and particularly the more exalted 'Research I' institutions) where 'engaged' or 'action' research and acting as a public intellectual are less accepted than in Europe or Latin America (see Greenwood 2007, 322).¹⁷ But the rules of promotion and tenure in

¹⁵For an excellent synopsis of the relevant literature and issues involved in the latter sort of study, see Blee (2007). Some researchers, while not sympathetic to rightist movements' goals, nonetheless strive to identify 'the human dimension' of even pathologically violent participants (see Cívico 2006).

¹⁶In the offices of some very distinguished scholars, I have actually seen royalty checks framed on the wall as ornaments, the amounts so laughably tiny as to make them not worth cashing.

¹⁷The 'Research I' category of universities, developed by the Carnegie Foundation (which discontinued use of the term in the late 1990s) refers to US doctoral-level institutions that place a heavy emphasis on research and obtain large amounts of federal grants. Criteria for promotion and tenure in Research II and other institutions may include a greater emphasis on teaching and service and less on research and publication. It is possible that researchers in these less prestigious institutions and particularly in fields that in the Research I universities avidly defend their disciplinary boundaries, may actually have greater leeway in pursuing unconventional career paths, integrating activism into their scholarly work, and publishing with other than the supposedly most important journals and presses.

European and Latin American universities do not vary much from North American ones, which is the important thing here in terms of explaining academics' priorities.

The time frames of academic and movement-based researchers are also different. The movement-based researcher typically wants research results now, to serve immediate political needs. Many social movements function in a permanent crisis-response mode as they attempt to adapt to fast changing political events. They do not enjoy the luxury of long-term reflection that academics aspire to have (even if this rarely exists in reality). Moreover, the organisation of university work, with its summer and sabbatical research leaves, 'is incompatible with any form of activism' or at least makes the academic largely unavailable to 'external stakeholders' between fieldwork periods (Greenwood 2007, 333–34).¹⁸ Academics, unlike journalists, are socialised in the universities to write slowly. Sometimes they have also unlearned the ability to write clearly and succinctly.¹⁹ Nor do academics always have access to great audiences or powerful media, as some activists seem to think. It is exceedingly difficult, for example, to place an opinion column in a major daily newspaper in the United States and very few scholars manage to do it more than occasionally, if at all.²⁰ Academic journals are notoriously slow in publishing research reports and I am convinced that very few people actually read most of them.²¹ These differences of pace, style, perception, and audience between activists and academics may be another source of tension.

Among social movement activists the perception sometimes exists that university-based researchers control huge economic resources. This is rarely the case. University jobs, especially in the public universities, tend to be poorly paid in most countries, at least in comparison with those available in other sectors of the economy to individuals with comparable advanced training. The grants that university-based researchers receive are frequently insufficient to cover their costs. Young, graduate student researchers commonly live in quite precarious circumstances. Academic and NGO-based researchers can hopefully be an *intellectual* or *political* resource for social movement activists, able to connect them to knowledge, information and policymakers. Researchers may also be able to facilitate activists' connections to

¹⁸Warren (2006, 221) points out that 'most of [academic anthropologists] are part-time observers'. Many nonetheless position themselves in heroic and self-aggrandising ways in their written accounts as a way of establishing narrative authority and fail 'to acknowledge scholarly networks and lines of transnational solidarity that provide the basis upon which innovative findings and activism are constructed'.

¹⁹Conversely, many have been trained to employ deliberately obscure yet high-prestige, jargon-laced prose styles accessible only to a small, initiated group of similarly specialised colleagues. It is not always a simple matter to unlearn these rhetorics of (academic) power in the interests of communicating about or supporting a broader political project.

²⁰But see González (2004b) and Besteman and Gusterson (2005) for forceful interventions by academics in, respectively, major media and public policy debates.

²¹Credentialing, rather than knowledge diffusion, is often the main function of most academic journals. This is rarely evident to non-academics, however, and is rarely acknowledged by academics. Opinions differ as to whether activists actually read social movement theory produced by professional scholars (as opposed to case study histories of movements). Shukaitis and Graeber (2007) point to intense engagement with certain varieties of 'high' theory by (mostly European) anarchist and autonomist activists. Bevington and Dixon (2005, 189), writing mainly about US political science and sociology's social movement studies, ask, 'what does it say if the social movement theory being produced now is not seen as helpful by those persons who are directly involved in the very processes that this theory is supposed to illuminate?'

certain funding agencies. But academics themselves are unlikely to be a direct source of money resources or to have significant funds to contribute to the movements.

Another problem that arises from the academic–activist relation is the activists’ fear that the academic might be gathering intelligence or functioning as an agent provocateur.²² This reflects activists’ well-founded anxieties about omnipresent imperial or state power, even as it is also suggestive of their sometimes exaggerated belief in their own political significance. The involvement of supposedly neutral academic researchers in intelligence work dates back to World War I and the first decades of professional social science, when the Mayanist archaeologist Sylvanus Morley reported from Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula to the US Office of Naval Intelligence on Germany’s sympathisers in the region and its shipping in the Caribbean (Sullivan 1991, Harris and Sadler 2003). In the inter-war years, British anthropologists, in particular, worked among colonised peoples and, while their work tended ‘to obscure the systematic character of colonial domination’ (Asad 1973, 109), their advice to the authorities was rarely sought and, when offered, was almost always ignored (James 1973, 48–9). During World War II, numerous anthropologists lent their skills to the struggle against Nazism and Japanese imperialism and to the administration of local populations, particularly on Pacific islands that had been retaken by the United States (Price 2008, Wolf and Jorgensen 1970). In the post-war era, anthropologists and other social scientists were involved in research and in intelligence and military work that came to be viewed as ethically and morally questionable in a range of Cold War hot spots, including Guatemala, Thailand and Vietnam, and Chile (Berger 1995, Gusterson 2003, Horowitz 1967, ‘Newbold’ 1957, Price 2002, Watkin 1992, Wolf and Jorgensen 1970).²³ More

²²Price points out that the situation is actually more complex, since scholars may be witting or unwitting participants in research that is directly funded or sought by intelligence agencies or in independent research that is later used by such agencies. ‘The following four scenarios are possible: Witting-Direct, Witting-Indirect, Unwitting-Direct, Unwitting-Indirect’ (2002, 17). He concludes that ‘most of anthropology’s interactions with intelligence agencies have probably been unwitting and indirect, with anthropological work being harvested by intelligence agencies as it enters the public realm through conferences and publications’ (2002, 21). Many social scientists have been reluctant to examine scholars’ past links to intelligence agencies, arguing that to do so will result in reduced possibilities for field research. Price argues forcefully for scrutinising such ties, since ‘we all risk reduced field opportunities as these largely unexamined historical interactions become documented’ (2002, 17).

²³Richard N. Adams’ survey research with political prisoners in Guatemala, following the 1954 CIA-directed coup, was published in 1957 under the pseudonym ‘Stokes Newbold’, a composite of his own middle name and that of Manning Nash, who collaborated in the research. In a 1998 reminiscence, Adams noted that since his survey did not provide much evidence that the rural population had been influenced by Communist proselytising, as the State Department had alleged, the US Embassy rapidly forgot about it. Ironically, some left-leaning social scientists subsequently found Adams’ survey of considerable value in examining the social class origins and attitudes of Guatemalan rural activists of the 1950s (Grandin 2004, 226n54, Wasserstrom 1975, 464). Adams also indicated that he used a pseudonym at the insistence of his employer, the Pan American Sanitary Bureau, and that ‘I never hid the fact that I was the author, but it was some years before it became widely known’ (Adams 1998, 15, 20n9). During the rest of his long career, Adams developed a pronounced concern about research ethics (Adams 1967) and a strongly critical stance regarding US policy in Guatemala and the Guatemalan military’s abysmal human rights record, as did June Nash, who also participated in the survey.

Wolf and Jorgensen (1970, 32) cite a US counterinsurgency specialist in Thailand, who was interviewed by a *New York Times* reporter: ‘The old formula for successful counterinsurgency

recently, US social scientists have deployed to Afghanistan and at least one played a key role in authoring the US Army's new counterinsurgency manual (González 2007, Rohde 2007).²⁴

Clearly, then, the activists' fears regarding the researcher's possible covert activities or loyalties are not based solely on febrile imaginings. Nonetheless, three important points deserve consideration. First, it is worth remembering, especially if suspicion falls on a foreign researcher, that most countries' secret services almost always employ nationals of the country in which they are operating, rather than their own nationals, to do most of the actual spying.²⁵ Second, it is only a tiny minority of outside researchers who are compromised by ties to intelligence agencies and false accusations of such links have occasionally resulted in tragedy.²⁶ Third, in various world regions outside (and frequently foreign) researchers are among those who have produced many of the most compelling exposés of powerful institutions, structural violence, and militarisation, as well as the most trenchant critiques of the deficiencies of mainstream punditry, scholarship and policymaking.²⁷

Even if the academic researcher is entirely beyond reproach, activists are also concerned that the data gathered or the reports published might find their way into the wrong hands or strengthen the analytical capabilities of their antagonists. If these concerns arise, they need to be addressed explicitly and clear agreements need to be reached about how to assure that no harm results from the researcher's activities. Much academic research – probably most – does not do any direct or indirect harm and it does not do much direct good either, since, as I noted above, hardly anybody usually reads it.²⁸ But activists can and ought to do background research on

used to be 10 troops for every guerrilla ... Now the formula is ten anthropologists for each guerrilla' (Braestrup 1967).

²⁴The manual, known as *FM 3-24*, includes a chapter by 'Montgomery McFate', a pseudonym for Mitzy Carlough, who received a PhD in anthropology from Yale.

²⁵The writings of Philip Agee, who worked for the US Central Intelligence Agency in Latin America for many years before abandoning the CIA and authoring an exposé, provide abundant evidence of this practice. Agee remarked, however, that it was harder to recruit agents in countries with a higher standard of living and a developed welfare state than in less-developed countries. 'Uruguayan communists simply are not as destitute and harassed as their colleagues in poorer countries and thus are less susceptible to recruitment on mercenary terms' (1975, 339).

²⁶Price (2002, 17) mentions the case of Raymond Kennedy, a US scholar who had worked in the Office of Strategic Services during World War II and then joined the State Department. An opponent of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia, he resigned from the State Department in protest against US policies. Four years later he was executed in Java by anti-colonial fighters who mistakenly believed he was a CIA agent.

Similar suspicions fall on non-researchers as well, undoubtedly in larger numbers and with tragic results, especially during revolutionary armed movements. See, for example, Bourgois's description of internecine violence among the Salvadoran guerrillas in the 1980s (2001).

²⁷Examples are many, but include Besteman and Gusterson (2005), Gill (2004), González (2004a), Lutz (2004), McCaffrey (2002), and Vine (2007).

However, the ethical and legal dimensions of foreign activists involving themselves in the politics of other nations are rarely considered in the literature on engaged research. Some, such as Juris (2008) and Scheper-Hughes (1995), apparently consider such involvement a matter of internationalist or ethical commitment and completely unproblematic. Speed (2007, 11) is among the few who acknowledge the problem and note its impact on her research; she nonetheless attributes her difficulties in Mexico to a government 'xenophobia campaign'.

²⁸Vargas notes 'that scholars, especially those in the beginning of their career, benefit from their involvement with grassroots organisations in ways glaringly disproportionate to what we can offer them' (2007, 164–65, also 178).

academic researchers if they have doubts about them. Other academics might even be able to help with this, though this of course runs the risk of creating unfounded paranoia and destroying cooperative relationships (see Price 2002, 17).

Some academic researchers expect that the people they accompany or study will or ought to accommodate their needs for time-consuming conversations or other contributions (searching for documents, photocopying, making introductions, chauffeuring them to meetings, and so on).²⁹ This expectation, perhaps the outcome of the exalted status that some university professors enjoy in their home institutions and societies, understandably irritates movement activists. Like overworked university faculty members, activists have many demands to which they must respond. The benefits of meeting the researcher's needs may be unclear or abstract, minimal or nonexistent, or realisable only far in the future. Not all human relationships, fortunately, require a clear *quid pro quo*, but ongoing ones do usually require some sort of reciprocity. Attending the academic researcher can become yet another burden and source of stress for the activist. How might each party to this relation see the other more clearly? How might the expectations and perceptions each has of the other be made more explicit? What can each party offer the other?

Some models of activist–academic relations

It may be useful, in addressing the question of activist–academic relations, to distinguish two types of researchers that enter into relations with rural social movements: first, the researcher who has knowledge or connections sought by the activists, such as an expert understanding of agronomy, trade policy, intellectual property, web design, foundations, or legislative processes and lobbying; and second, the researcher who seeks to study and write about the rural social movements.³⁰ I have already suggested that the first kind of academic or NGO-affiliated expert may be an important intellectual or political resource for the movements. The second type is potentially more complicated. This is primarily because the category may include researchers who fall in different places along a wide continuum of epistemologies and political commitment. These may range from a positivist stance of 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' to a 'militant' position that conceives of the researcher's role as a publicist and/or uncritical supporter of the movement under study.³¹ In between these two poles are various degrees of 'engagement' or 'commitment' and at least the possibility of a critical interrogation of both activists' and scholars' activities and knowledge production practices. Also important, of course, is the specific set of issues that the researcher intends to examine. Some situations of extreme political urgency or polarisation – massive human rights violations, structural violence,

²⁹Nabudere (2007, 79), writing on Uganda, remarks on the 'deep mistrust on the part of people who had developed "research fatigue" from constant harassment by hordes of researchers since colonialism had first knocked on their doors. They had seen researchers come and go while their own conditions had steadily worsened. This suggested to them, with some justification, that the researchers were part of their problem.'

³⁰Fox (2006, 30) remarks that 'one kind of contribution that scholars can offer to social actors is to wade through, decipher, and boil down the mind-bending quantities of arcane and hard-to-access information that is produced by mainstream institutions'.

³¹Given the hegemony of positivist approaches in some disciplines, it may be important to recall that the very origins of modern social science were thoroughly activist and its practitioners were often deeply involved in what might today be called social movements and in attempting to modify policy (see Calhoun 2007, Greenwood 2007).

famines or epidemics, for example – may require that researchers ‘commit’ in more sustained, profound ways. This may not be simply a moral or ethical imperative or a decision that is up to researchers. The research subjects with whom they work may very likely push them in this direction.

Nonetheless, there is no single model of activist–academic relationship that will address all of the tensions, possible synergies, or questions. Some models of relationship will accomplish some things better than others. For this reason, both parties to such relationships might do well to think in terms of creativity and variety rather than in terms of a single desirable model or pattern.³²

‘Militant’ or ‘engaged’ research constitutes a range of approaches, although there is not, of course, consensus about the practices and ideas that these rubrics might include or about how much they might overlap. At the more ‘militant’ end of the spectrum, the academic or NGO-affiliated researcher places herself or himself at the service of an organisation, takes direction from that organisation, works as a sort of publicist, and reports findings that advance the organisation’s agenda.³³ Admirable as this commitment sometimes might be, the ‘militant’ model has some shortcomings, whether seen from the position of the movement or from academia.³⁴ The work of intellectuals closely identified with particular organisations or political tendencies often has less credibility in the larger society and especially in the media, academia and among policymakers than does the work of intellectuals who are sympathetic to the movement but maintain some critical distance and independence. In the role of advocate or publicist, the formally independent voice is likely to be heard more widely and to be taken more seriously than the one seen as ‘militant’ and compromised. Moreover, as Jennifer Bickham-Méndez (2007, 144) argues, ‘Decision makers might assume research presented by academics to be more rigorous and reliable than that put forth by campaigning NGOs, lending a level of legitimacy and credibility to social justice struggles.’

³²Three colleagues who commented on an earlier version of this essay pointed out that activist–researcher synergies are most likely to occur when both parties develop strong feelings of trust in each other as a result of daily interactions around small matters. Activists naturally observe outside researchers at least as much as the other way around, and they make decisions about the extent of their collaboration on the basis of how they evaluate the researcher’s integrity, sincerity and decency, among other things.

³³Efforts to theorise these ideas and practices include Scheper-Hughes (1995), the essays in Harrison (1991) and in Hale (2007b), and the mostly anarchist-influenced essays in Shukaitis *et al.* (2007). Juris (2008, 20, 319) calls for researchers to practice ‘proactive solidarity’ and remarks that, ‘Militant ethnography . . . refers to ethnographic research that is not only politically engaged but also collaborative, thus breaking down the divide between research and object.’ This formulation, apart from its emphasis on ethnography to the exclusion of other research practices, obscures the extent to which collaboration between researchers and subjects may be of varied forms and intensity. In other words, it elides discussion of a collaborative engagement that might not be militant in the sense of subordinating the researcher to a larger political project, but which still might serve objectives shared by the researcher and the movement.

³⁴At times, the ‘militant’ stance, presented as an unproblematic matter of pre-existing ethical-political principles, verges on a troubling naivete, as when one prominent US anthropologist – newly arrived in South Africa – identified herself in a squatter camp as ‘a member of the ANC [African National Congress]’ (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 414). At least one critic has charged, in relation to this case, that the ‘militant’ position rests on ‘an amalgamation of sociobiological and religious ideas’ and substitutes an outsider’s politics for research itself (Trencher 1998, 122).

An additional problem derives from the frequent gaps between leaders and grassroots activists and the notorious factionalism (and at times, corruption) that pervade social movements (Edelman 2001, 310–11). To which individuals or groups is the ‘militant’ activist committed? What does that commitment imply about the analytical weight accorded dissenting voices and alternative claims? Even more troubling can be the problem of what to do ‘when faced with dirty laundry’ (Fox 2006, 35), that is, when the researcher runs across anti-democratic practices or instances of malfeasance. Jonathan Fox argues compellingly for an approach of ‘first do no harm’. Simple whistle blowing to one or another movement sector (or to donor organisations) may, as Fox indicates, constitute unacceptable, impolitic and counterproductive external intervention. But, as he also suggests, doing nothing or pretending that nothing is wrong may not help the movement and represents another kind of external intervention, albeit one characterised by inaction.

The degeneration of the United Farm Workers (UFW) since its founding by César Chávez in California in the 1960s is a striking case of what can occur when knowledgeable outsiders (and insiders) eschew speaking out or intervention in the face of questionable practices (Cooper 2005, Pawel 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, Weiser 2004). In its early years, the UFW led dramatic organising campaigns and consumer boycotts and the charismatic Chávez, with his principled dedication to non-violent direct action, was widely considered a Mexican-American version of the great US civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. In the late 1970s, faced with growing tensions among his top lieutenants, Chávez implemented self-awareness encounter sessions (called ‘The Game’) in the UFW modelled on the programs of Synanon, a cult-like authoritarian drug rehabilitation organisation, and ‘drifted toward a more autocratic management style’ (Ferriss *et al.* 1998, 212, Pawel 2006c). By 2005, less than 2 percent of California’s agricultural labour force belonged to any union and a mere 5,000 workers had UFW contracts – one-tenth of the organisation’s peak strength.³⁵ Following the death of Chávez in 1993, the union largely abandoned its original mission of organising farm labourers and his heirs poured their efforts

into a web of tax-exempt organisations that exploit his legacy and invoke the harsh lives of farmworkers to raise millions of dollars in public and private money. The money does little to improve the lives of California farmworkers, who still struggle with the most basic health and housing needs and try to get by on seasonal, minimum-wage jobs ... [The] tax-exempt organisations ... do business with one another, enrich friends and family, and focus on projects far from the fields. (Pawel 2006a)

As the UFW began to unravel in the late 1970s, few activists stood up to Chávez or resisted his increasingly erratic leadership (Pawel 2006c) and when his family members began to ‘enrich’ (Pawel 2006a) themselves and one another it was

³⁵In part this resulted from anti-labour policies in the state capital and from growers’ increasing reliance on undocumented Mexican workers, many of whom came from indigenous communities and spoke little Spanish. The UFW lacks organisers who speak indigenous languages. One indigenous worker-activist quoted in a press report declared: ‘We hear a lot about the achievements of Cesar Chavez. But we can’t see any of them. Where are they? Truth is, the UFW has no strength here, not among our people. We remember how, when the Mixtecs first began to organise, Cesar called us “communists”. That’s okay, he’s gone. We need our own organisations now that speak to our heart, our own union’ (Cooper 2005).

investigative journalists, not internal dissenters or ‘militant’ researchers, who encouraged greater scrutiny.³⁶

Another role, not incompatible with ‘militant’ research though not necessarily linked to it either, is being an ‘engaged’ public intellectual and witness. The public intellectual or ‘citizen-scholar’ (González 2004a, 3) speaks out in the print and electronic media, debates the spokespeople of the opposition, exposes hidden wrongdoing, provides expert testimony in courts and legislatures, discusses lobbying and other strategy with activists, teaches students and colleagues, and brings to a larger public the issues raised by grassroots movements.³⁷ The public intellectual works fundamentally to bring about political and cultural shifts in society. Often his or her contributions are not especially dramatic, but they are grains of sand that hopefully contribute to eroding the legitimacy of existing power structures, exposing abuses, strengthening the legitimacy of grassroots movements, and informing broader publics about alternative visions, other experiences and strategies for change.

Most social movements claim to be representatives of particular sectors of the population (women, farmers, indigenous people, immigrants, and so on), but it is nearly always a small minority of the group that the movement claims to represent that actually participates in it (Borras *et al.* 2008, 182–86). Activists are often baffled about why people fail to join them in larger numbers. One of the most significant contributions of academic researchers to social movements may be reporting patterns in the testimony of people in the movement’s targeted group who are sympathetic to movement objectives but who feel alienated or marginalised by one or another aspect of movement discourse or practice (Burdick 1998, see also Bevington and Dixon 2005). Movement activists and leaders are often unable to identify problematical organisational patterns that for them have become ‘naturalised’ and that outside researchers easily detect, such as ethnic or regional imbalances and exclusions. Importantly, the ‘militant’ researcher, closely identified with the movement, is unlikely to do these things as well as a more independent researcher to whom people will speak candidly.³⁸

Reporting the testimony of the alienated or uninvolved is one important role, but asking challenging questions more generally is another.³⁹ Both are delicate matters, since they potentially dispute movements’ ‘official stories’, activists’ self-concepts and organisations’ strategic visions. In the world of transnational activism, for example, national organisations that participated in cross-border alliances at times withdraw in order to struggle at the national level or to work with alternative transnational

³⁶Family members of UFW leader Dolores Huerta are also prominent in the same organisations. One of the first journalistic exposés of the UFW affiliates wryly remarked that ‘some would call this nepotism’ (Weiser 2004).

³⁷Examples of mass media interventions of this sort are collected in González (2004b).

³⁸One strand of activist research may simply involve generating critical knowledge, i.e., ‘an effort to understand how things could be different and why existing frameworks of knowledge do not recognise all the actual possibilities’ (Calhoun 2007, xxiv-xxv).

³⁹In a brilliant essay on ‘Research as an experiment in equality’, Portelli (1991, 44) suggests that the research interaction itself is both laden with political content and an opportunity for political work. ‘There is no need to stoop to propaganda in order to use the *fact* itself of the interview as an opportunity to stimulate others, as well as ourselves, to a higher degree of self-scrutiny and self awareness; to help them grow more aware of the relevance and meaning of their culture and knowledge; and to raise the question of the senselessness and injustice of the inequality between them and us.’

networks (Borras 2008).⁴⁰ Because sympathetic researchers tend to assume that transnational strategies and organisational forms will always be the most effective, they rarely pose this assumption as a question even though activists frequently mention as a problem the conflicting demands of local-, national- and transnational-level activities. The balance of what is gained *and* what is lost in moving from a national to a transnational level (or back) is among the critical issues that activists need to consider as a matter of long-term survival and researchers need to analyse either as part of a more genuine solidary relation with the activists or as a matter of political-intellectual honesty.⁴¹

This researcher contribution to the movements – posing difficult questions and especially reporting the testimony of the disaffected – may be more possible when the scale of the research is smaller and place-based rather than when it has a wider, multi-sited focus (it is also easier when organisations are flourishing than when they are in decline). In my own case, I felt that I was more effective in this way when I did extended field research in the countryside in Costa Rica in the 1980s and 1990s, and when I knew many campesinos in and out of the movements, than when I began to study transnational farmer networks and was constantly moving from place to place and had more superficial, shorter-term interactions almost exclusively with movement participants and few or none with non-participants.⁴² The issue of non-participants in targeted constituencies also raises the broader question of what Fox terms ‘the *directionality* of the researcher’s goals – are we drawing from the movement in order to project analysis *outward*, or are we drawing from the external environment in order to project analysis *inward*?’ (2006, 30, emphasis in original).

The last model of activist–academic relations that I will mention involves a formal contract specifying shared objectives and what each party is expected to do and over what period of time. Some indigenous peoples have long required that outsiders hoping to carry out research among them be vetted by a council of experts. The Kuna in Panama, for example, require written contracts with researchers and demand that all studies carried out in their *comarca* or district be published in Spanish or Kuna and provided to the group’s own archives. The statutes governing their territory specify as a crime ‘the free giving of Kuna-related data and documents

⁴⁰In 2008, for example, several Mexican organisations that had participated in the transnational *Vía Campesina* network wrote an open letter explaining their decision not to attend the organisation’s Fifth International Conference in Mozambique. They charged that the North American regional coordinating group of *Vía Campesina* engaged in ‘verticalist and antidemocratic’ practices and spread ‘disinformation’ and was more interested in ‘international activities’ than in supporting local and regional initiatives (AMUCSS, ANEC, CNPA, and FDC 2008, see also Edelman 2005, 37–9).

⁴¹In an analysis of the impact of transnational consumer boycotts, ‘stateless regulation’ and NGO monitoring of corporations, Seidman writes, ‘In an era when most national governments seem weaker than footloose multinational corporations, the international human rights movement and past examples of transnational consumer-based pressure on corporations seem to offer promising new directions for transnational campaigns ... I interrogate this promise, hoping not to undermine efforts by transnational activists to find new approaches to organising workers, but to provoke discussion: in the effort to create new support for workers’ struggles, why do so many activists neglect or bypass local institutions designed to protect citizens, and what might be gained or lost as a result?’ (2007, 15–16).

⁴²I do not mean to suggest that I have found it easy to raise challenging questions of activists. On the contrary, at times it can be decidedly uncomfortable for both the researcher and the activist (see Edelman 1999, 34–6).

to any institution without an equitable and reciprocal enrichment' (CGK and CISAI 2003).

Would this type of contractual relationship work in the rather different context of relations between social movements and researchers who wish to study and write about them? The Via Campesina and some of its constituent organisations have been moving in the direction of establishing such a written protocol for their relations with researchers and academic and non-governmental organisations, loosely modelled on similar agreements that indigenous peoples in Canada have found useful. The goals of this more formalised relationship would include assuring that the research is of use to the movement, helping the movement to understand what the research is about, and – in some cases – shaping or determining the research agenda.⁴³ While these seem like reasonable objectives, particularly from the point of view of the activists, they also entail potential difficulties. The first of these relates to what I have called above activists' penchant for presenting overly coherent 'official narratives' or 'stories' about their movements and in making representation claims that may not have a solid basis. To what extent would the written contract limit researchers in the kinds of testimony they could report or in asking delicate questions? The contractual agreement should ideally include a genuine movement commitment to openly entertain uncomfortable questions or findings and to refrain from personalising any discomfort experienced in the process. Activists need to ask whether the refusal to countenance challenging questions or consider problematical findings really serves the movement's interests. The second difficulty concerns the potential of the written contract to become a kind of gate-keeping or an ideological litmus test. Gate-keeping of this sort would not only preclude facing uncomfortable research findings, but it could also introduce a burdensome formality and bureaucracy into the relation that consumes activists' (and researchers') time and energy.

Despite these caveats, however, it is essential that researchers recognise that their very presence entails costs for the movements, even if there are also clear benefits of collaboration. The activists' desire for a written contract that spells out the parameters of the relationship is thus eminently understandable. So too is the possibility that close collaboration can identify shared objectives and powerful synergies.⁴⁴ Researchers in private universities in the Global North, for example, are often able to fund activists' international speaking tours and other activities. Contractual agreements could also contemplate the disposition of royalties from books or other research products, even if these are unlikely in most cases to be very substantial.

What can or should movements ask or insist on from the academic researcher who expresses an interest in doing research with and writing about them? Really anything they would insist on in another political or personal relationship, including any or all of the following things: transparency about funding sources and objectives and about how, if at all, the movement might benefit from having a researcher in its midst; frank dialogue and exchanges of opinion about issues of mutual concern; prompt, clear and succinct reporting of research results in a form accessible to movement participants; co-authorship of publications or visual or other media, if

⁴³Annette Desmarais, personal communication, 15 September 2008.

⁴⁴Juris (2008) and the essays in Shukaitis *et al.* (2007) provide a number of compelling examples from the perspectives of 'militant', anarchist-oriented researchers.

both parties so desire; and collaboration in day-to-day movement tasks. As regards the latter, in the 1980s and 1990s when I was involved in work in Central America, for example, I sometimes rented jeeps to get myself and activist friends to assemblies in remote areas. I participated in some memorable joint forums with Costa Rican academics, NGO researchers and peasant leaders that sometimes degenerated into heated arguments from which everybody nonetheless learned a great deal. I occasionally translated correspondence and grant proposals, and copyedited the text of the English edition of the ASOCODE newsletter.⁴⁵ Several times I hosted ASOCODE representatives on their visits to UN agencies, foundations, and church and university groups in New York. These were small forms of solidarity that I would have offered to anyone, but which I felt especially pleased to share with those throughout Central America who had treated me with the utmost graciousness and hospitality and who expected little or nothing in return for helping me to understand their struggles and write about their lives and aspirations.

Concluding remarks

The epigraph of this essay quotes a long-time campesino activist-intellectual lamenting that too often researchers ‘milk’ their subjects, who then don’t get to drink any of the milk. Activists (and many researchers too) have been rightly critical of this extractive, exploitative and unidirectional model of movement–researcher relations. Yet developing different, more horizontal and collaborative kinds of relations and research practices is not entirely straightforward either. Movements frame issues and make claims in ways that may not withstand close examination, even by sympathetic observers, and they may resist hearing information that contradicts the stories they tell about themselves (and possibly ostracise the people who bring that information). Researchers’ professional priorities may not coincide and may conflict with those of the movements they study. NGO-affiliated intellectuals, while less constrained by the career imperatives that often shape academics’ research and dissemination practices, sometimes assume that they may speak in the name of those on whose behalf they claim to work. All parties to this complicated, multi-faceted relation are involved in generating new knowledge. This can be a shared practice, though too frequently differences arise over what knowledge to produce, how to produce it, who should produce it, and what to do with it and who ‘owns’ it once it is produced. Some of these tensions become explicit, while many others remain uncommunicated and sometimes even unconscious.

What can be done to realise the potential synergies between professional researchers and social movements and to ensure on both sides greater clarity about shared (and divergent) objectives and more realistic expectations and understandings of limitations and possibilities? This essay has analysed several models of activist–researcher relations and argued that different approaches are suitable for different goals and that no single approach is able to address or resolve all or even most of the tensions in the relationship. Indeed, I have suggested that some tensions are very likely inherent aspects of any process of collaboration between social movements and researchers. What, then, of a process in which the activist–researcher distinction

⁴⁵ASOCODE was the Asociación Centroamericana de Organizaciones Campesinas para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo (Association of Central American Peasant Organisations for Cooperation and Development). Its rise and demise are outlined in Edelman (2008).

is erased? This 'militant', 'engaged' or 'committed' stance also entails strains and, in its more extreme versions, a narrowed vision that may turn out to be of little help – or indeed, harmful – to the movements themselves. Rather than reifying the 'militant' or researcher as a single thing or practice, the essay has argued that 'engagement' and 'commitment' are best understood as existing along a continuum that has many dimensions. Sometimes the most enduring contribution of the researcher to the social movement may be in challenging its activists' assumptions with fresh data and an outsider's insights. Not to do this, as suggested above, can involve an abdication of responsibility that flies in the face of genuine engagement.

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