

The Body as a Site for Knowledge Production in the Time of “Alternative Facts”

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When right-wing politicians increasingly use populist strategies and social media as a platform, seeking to discredit established researchers, scientists, and journalists in order to shake the public's belief in media content, many people end up relying on dubious information sources and no longer know how to distinguish the difference. Facebook and Twitter are viewed by many as legitimate news platforms, whereas news sources that were trusted for decades are being viewed as “fake news” when they do not support populist ideals. These same populists tout “alternative facts” in the so-called “post-truth” era. And rather than supporting the mass democracy of the Internet that some had hoped for in the late 1990s, what these information sources/platforms do have in common is their efficacy in capturing individuals' private content and functioning as mass surveillance mechanisms. It is indeed the case now that “[i]n the digital age, information is fluid, and it is getting harder not to drown.”¹

Around ten years ago, many groups of people were performing militant research on the transformations taking place in institutions and in the labor market and their impact on our lives. There existed a widespread energy for fighting those processes at the time. It was felt around the world. The financial crisis had taken on a global dimension, and the subsequent austerity measures began impacting people on an unprecedented scale. Austerity measures and reforms were so similar in different parts of the world that exchanging experiences of struggle and of researching their tendencies and logic became a major strength for protest actions. These protests were then able to expand, and they snowballed into occupations and spread across cities, regions, and continents. Movements became increasingly interconnected, and this anger and exchange of knowledge bred creative solutions, alternatives, communication, sharing: resilience. Shortly thereafter, though, resources and common spaces became more and more limited. More and more people had to take on (multiple) jobs to survive. Time became more and more precious. Fear became prevalent – fear of defaulting on debts/loans, of surviving in a post-crisis economy/world, of finding employment in a more precarious labor market, and that fear was felt the most strongly by the most vulnerable parts of the population. Some of this fear is legitimate, but as we see these days, much of it is fabricated in an attempt to steer public opinion. Is it for these reasons, and the difficulty of being able to recognize truth in a post-truth society, that it is important to revisit the legacy of militant research that has spanned for decades, reaching a type of pinnacle just 5–10 years ago.

Militant research

Contemporary practices of militant research or *co-research* can be traced back to the 1880s when Karl Marx employed sociological tools for conducting workers' surveys on the conditions of the French proletariat in order to get workers to “think critically about their

¹ Govinda, Kishor, (2019), “Book Review: Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest” <http://sanhati.com/articles/19056/>

concrete reality.”² In the 1950s, these industrial sociological tools were revived and employed in the United States from an academic perspective, later expanding to Europe, where they developed into a more politicized practice. The Italian *operaist* (or *workerist*) section of the Italian workers’ movement played a major role in developing these practices of workers’ inquiry, later referring to them as *conricerca* (co-research). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, these Italian workers’ inquiries continued analyzing structures of exploitation in factories, however, they expanded their analyses to examinations of neighborhoods as well, referring to these as *social factories*. This examination of everyday life in the “social factory” became crucial in forming the foundation of many feminist struggles in later years. In the late 1960s, however, these inquiries were radicalized by Italian militant intellectuals who insisted on “applying them practically to struggles,” thereby shifting the position of conducting the inquiries to the workers themselves as a process of self-empowerment.³

Radical feminist practices in the United States in the late 1960s also had a major influence on the development of militant research. Within such radical feminist collectives, or “consciousness-raising groups,” “it was hoped that women would become experts in their own oppression, building a theory from personal and intimate experience, and not from the filter of previous ideologies,” such as those formed from the factory inquiries of previous years.⁴ These practices thus included the sharing of personal and common experiences of struggle as research methodology, thereby bringing embodied and experiential knowledges into meetings and discussions on common challenges with which they were faced.

Another perspective of militant and co-research emerged from *critical pedagogy* in the late 1960s. Critical pedagogy is a school of thought that was inspired by the writings and practices of Paulo Freire, particularly in his work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which was influenced by Freire’s personal experiences with poverty and class-related difficulties in traditional schooling. One of Freire’s key aims was to expand literacy among the poor in Brazil, because, at the time, the illiterate were not granted voting rights. This, among other oppressive apparatuses, was part of the legacy of the colonial education system with similar modes of oppression existing in other parts of the world. Therefore, Freire’s work examines the relationships between knowledge, class, and power and the emancipatory potential of radicalizing pedagogical processes. These critical pedagogical perspectives used *participation action research* (PAR), based in the notion of “co-intentional education” for revolutionary leadership, i.e. the notion that teachers can guide students the way that leaders guide a revolution by co-creating and re-creating knowledge and reality through “common reflection and action” and “committed involvement.”⁵ The practices of *participation action research* became strongly “linked to popular education and grassroots activism in the midst of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial revolutionary movements,” particularly in Latin America and South Asia, strengthening social struggles in rural areas.⁶ *Participation action research*

² Karsunke and Wallraff cited in Marta Malo de Molina. (2004a). “Common Notions, Part 1: Workers-Inquiry, Co-Research, Consciousness-Raising.” *transversal*. <https://transversal.at/transversal/0406/malo-de-molina/en?hl=militant%20research>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Paulo Freire (2005/1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. M.B. Ramos (Trans.). New York, London: Continuum.

⁶ Marta Malo de Molina (2004b). “Common Notions, Part 2: Institutional Analysis, Participatory Action-Research, Militant Research.” *transversal. instituent practices*. <https://transversal.at/transversal/0707/malo-de->

thus integrates community knowledges, “prioritizing practical knowledges” that could be reapplied to the community in order “to be collective and contribute to the transformation of reality, generating a new and more just reality.”⁷ *Participation action research* thus blurs the division between research object and subject by making social praxis the object and outcome of the research. Critical pedagogy has been expanded over the decades, with emphases on different areas of struggle, including analyses of race (bell hooks), gender/feminism/queer (Shirley Steinberg), postcolonial theory/decoloniality (Peter McLaren), Indigenous knowledges (Sandy Grande), democratic citizenship (John Dewey, Henry Giroux), migration (Michael Apple), and anti-schooling or “deschooling” through the expansion of learning tools from institutions to all areas of life and society (Ivan Illich).

The notion of the “social factory” that was introduced by the Italian workerist struggles was expanded in a significant way by critical feminist positions that challenged Marxian theories through *reproductive labor theory*. These perspectives emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s in different parts of the world as part of a feminist movement, and have developed in recent years in response to immaterial and precarious labor theories. Proponents of these perspectives include Selma James, Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati, Wages for Housework Committees, The International Feminist Collective, and more recently Precarias a la Deriva.

Reproductive labor theory is defined in the pivotal publication, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (1972) by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, as the unpaid indispensable wageless work such as housework, taking care of male workers, and child-rearing that is not only directly productive to the capitalist system but which reproduces it by (re-)producing the key commodity of laborers themselves. Reproductive labor theorists, therefore, break away from Marxian analyses of the factory and male-centric definitions of labor, anchoring women’s unpaid labor as a pivotal foundation to capitalist exploitation.⁸ Federici claims that by ignoring women’s unpaid reproductive labor, not only is a fundamental source of capitalist accumulation disregarded, but a key element in unifying resistance as well. Dalla Costa and James describe this revolutionary potential, stating that: “Women are not marginal in the home, in the factory, in the hospital, in the office. We are fundamental to the reproduction of capital and fundamental to its destruction.”⁹ They expand that idea from an analysis of the relationship between the home and the community where the production within factories, schools, offices, etc. becomes interlinked, stating that when viewing the “community as a productive center and thus a center of subversion, *the whole perspective for generalized struggle and revolutionary organization is re-opened.*”¹⁰ They summarize the potential of this perspective, stating that:

“The community is the other half of capitalist organization, the other area of hidden capitalist exploitation, *the other, hidden, source of surplus labor*. It becomes increasingly regimented like a factory, what Mariarosa calls a social factory, where the costs and

molina/en?hl=Common%20Notions,%20Part%202:%20Institutional%20Analysis,%20Participatory%20Action-Research,%20Militant%20Research

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mariarosa Dalla Costa & Selma James (1972). *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press, p. 3.

⁹ Ibid. p. 19

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 17

nature of transport, housing, medical care, education, police, are all points of struggle. And this social factory has as its pivot the woman in the home producing labor power as a commodity, *and her struggle not to.*"¹¹

In 2002, *Precarias a la Deriva* developed as an initiative between research and activism as part of the reaction to the general strike in Spain that year. The feminist collective found themselves unrepresented within the mass mobilizations of workers, themselves primarily consisting of a newer constituent of workers – precarious, invisible, immaterial, and fragmented. Thus, they were not only faced with traditional forms of invisible feminized labor, such as caring for the home and family, they analyzed the more contemporary forms of feminized labor, such as *care work*, *affective labor*, or *immaterial labor*. These new forms of flexible work that lie at the core of post-Fordist, immaterial, and neoliberal labor forms are referred to as the *feminization* of labor, or “a whole set of qualities and competences historically constructed as female under patriarchal regimes of the sexual division of labor [that] have come to define standard performances required from workers in a wide variety of occupations.”¹² These new forms of labor, often partially of fully immaterial (producing communication, knowledge, care, affects instead of material products), have made more and more workers precarious – with temporary contracts or none at all, no insurance, no security, irregular pay – and have made the notion of unionizing for a strike or struggle nearly impossible. They have, therefore, not only transformed how we work, but also the concept of how we strike.

So while *Precarias a la Deriva* approached the topic of analyzing precarious labor from a feminist perspective, in the context of contemporary labor forms, it became an analysis that was relevant to workers of all genders across all fields and practices. Concretely, they approached this issue by attempting to “transform the classic picket line into a picket survey,”¹³ by approaching people and asking: “Why are you striking?”; “Under what conditions do you work?”; “What tools do you have to confront situations that seem unjust to you?”; and ultimately “What is your strike?” This expanded into an ongoing research project, questioning people in precarious, feminized work conditions, producing a film, numerous texts, archival material, etc. Their goal was to collect and try to understand how complex and diverse precarious labor is and to find some common denominators in working conditions that could unite people, overcome the isolation of precarious labor, and approach perspectives for a common struggle.

Current challenges

Between approximately 2008 and 2014, a very particular phase of protest developed across different parts of the world. As stated in the beginning, these consisted of actions against austerity measures / budget cuts caused by the financial crisis, and the subsequent restructuring of institutions, such as universities, that attempted to overcome the crisis of the

¹¹ Ibid. p. 11

¹² Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Neilson (2013). *Border as Method: Or the Multiplication of Labor*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, p. 104.

¹³ *Precarias a la Deriva* (2004). "Adrift through the Circuits of Feminized Precarious Work," *transversal*. *precariat*. <https://transversal.at/transversal/0704/precarias-a-la-deriva/en?hl=adrift%20through%20the%20circuits>

welfare state. In the case of the restructuring and reform of universities, the majority of protests and occupations across Europe were triggered by the Bologna Process, which culminated in 2010. In the following years, the Arab Spring and Occupy Movements unraveled, which all created a tremendous amount of knowledge of struggle. This knowledge was developed through various forms of militant research among activists, often traversing or even hijacking institutions of knowledge production, and distributed through publications, mailing lists, online platforms, calls to action, plenaries, summits, conferences, meetings, etc. Publications such as the *Occupation Cookbook* (2009)¹⁴ documented successes, failures, and challenges of plenaries and occupations, creating guidelines for future struggles. Numerous online archives existed. And the transnational meetings that took place allowed for tremendous exchange of experiences and knowledge to take place, thereby strengthening movements and future actions.

While there is certainly significant activism taking place today, particularly in the migrant and feminist movements, not to mention the struggles that never waned in many parts of the Global South – many of the important strengths, strategies, and modes of disseminating and archiving experiential knowledge have suffered in recent years. Previously, people in grassroots organizations and collectives in the left often used mailing lists and other short-lived platforms for communicating and organizing. However, new meetings, events, and work groups would often create a proliferation of new mailing lists or platforms. This flood of content made it difficult to consume information, and these platforms inevitably began to collapse. The emergence of Facebook served as a new, centralized space for consolidated communication and networking, but this was met with a fear of surveillance and caused many people to abandon those efforts, struggling to recruit others for redeveloping alternatives. Furthermore, many important online archives of struggle began to disappear. This coupled with the flood of post-truth dynamics on social media led many to feel a sense of political impotence in a landscape that was increasingly veering to the right. A key question that arose was *how can we develop sustainable alternatives to mainstream social media platforms that are also truly inclusive?*

In recent years, many people have experienced a sense of guilt, anxiety, detachment or impotence in regard to political action. The struggles themselves changed, more and more people struggle in precarious positions, many others struggle with burnout or other stress/anxiety-related health problems. These situations make us all more *vulnerable*. Our vulnerabilities have in many ways certainly resulted from a capitalism in crisis and the transformations and domino effect that it induced. However, one can also understand these crises as structural vulnerabilities in and of themselves. This can allow us to reframe certain questions and to ask *can one vulnerability be used to destabilize another?* In other words, departing from the notion that we could use our lived knowledge and experiences as forms of counter-power, how can we use an exchange of our experiential and embodied knowledges of vulnerability as a strength – not as a lack – for articulating and imagining new modes of action today? How can we learn from the legacy of militant research, of anti-colonial and feminist organizing and reflecting on the community as the source of production and the body as the source of knowledge, in the present day with the challenges we are facing now?

¹⁴ *The Occupation Cookbook: Or the Model of the Occupation of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb.* (2009). Center for Anarchist Studies. <http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/occupationcookbook-web.pdf>

Today, we have become so inundated with fear that the left has been adopting strategies of fear-mongering, previously predominantly the domain of the right, to stimulate people into action. However, let us imagine using these vulnerabilities as common knowledges of struggle – rather than fear – for reimagining a desirable future; a reality in which our sense of self does not become destabilized but rather anchored through an exchange of our experiences of embodied struggle. In a time when a constantly turbulent news cycle makes it more and more difficult to focus and to understand what is taking place around us, let us instead comprise a map of the nodes of experiential and embodied knowledge, of past successes and failures, for revisiting and developing strategies of struggle in the present-day.

One of the important questions that Precarias a la Deriva asked in their picket survey was “How shall we articulate our common need without falling back upon identity, without flattening or homogenizing our situations?” In other words, how can we identify common denominators, while respecting the complexity and intersectionality of our lives, and use them as a uniting force instead of feeding into the divisiveness they often trigger? How can we communicate these commonalities and differences in order to overcome the isolation and fragmentation that divides us and turns us against each other? And most simply, looking at the situation today, ask “*what is y/our strike?*”¹⁵

Finally, let me propose a thought experiment based on the concept of the Future Archive, developed by Manuela Zechner.¹⁶ The Future Archive is a perspective and series of fictional interviews for reinterpreting the present from an imagined, desirable future. We began this reflection by looking at the consequences of the Financial Crisis of 2008 and the snowball effect it produced with austerity and fear. If we look at the present from 2008, it's perhaps not so surprising. In 2008, extreme austerity measures were becoming commonplace. Many new forms of web surveillance had become widespread after the 9/11 attacks. There was a broad sense of fear, anxiety, and paranoia. The US had an unfair election that outraged many people worldwide. And a new conservatism was dividing societies around the world. There are certainly differentiations, but that situation somehow doesn't seem so different from what we are experiencing today. And not only did we survive that, but new mass movements, which were fighting against similar forms of oppression, rapidly expanded around the world and became more networked than ever before, leaving behind a wealth of knowledge on strategies and perspectives of struggle. A plethora of new technologies developed to cater to these processes (and one could argue that Facebook and co. succeeded in appropriating many of these rather than introducing better alternatives), and new modes of communicating and working together emerged.

So, rather than looking to the past for answers, let's use our experiences and knowledges of the past to look to the future. Therefore, I will close with a list of challenges. Let's call it an exam. And I would certainly be happy to open a channel of communication to receive some written thoughts on these issues and to put a little militant research experiment into practice; one that both uses the university as a basis, but also (especially in the current situation) traverses it, through a kind of survey.

¹⁵ See e.g. https://sindominio.net/karakola/antigua_casa/precarias/balbucesos-english.htm

¹⁶ <https://thefuturearchiveblog.wordpress.com/>

So, I would like to ask all of you to think about the following questions and to sketch out some ideas over the next few days:

How can we reflect on the current moment from an imaginary utopian future? What kind of desirable outcomes can we envision from the current crises we are experiencing? Were our actions useful? Can we learn from our mistakes today?

How do we use our vulnerabilities as our strengths in the current moment?

How can we learn from our own experiences and from the many archives of resistance that provide us with a wealth of knowledge for approaching crisis? And how can we communicate these without giving our knowledge to platforms of surveillance and profit? How can we be totally inclusive in these processes? How do we remain flexible (if we need to e.g. shift between technologies when they become appropriated) without losing each other?

And ultimately, what is your/our strike?... without forgetting that “our” or “we” is not a homogenous unit and those differences can also help to strengthen us in a time when we are being pitted against each other with many falsely imposed divisions.