Militant research against-and-beyond itself: critical perspectives from the university and Occupy London

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This paper examines the increasingly popular approach of militant research and argues for the need to conceptualise it as a contradictory approach that exists against-and-beyond any form it takes. It understands militant research as a committed and intense process of internal reflection from within particular struggle(s) that seeks to map out and discuss underlying antagonisms while pushing the movement forward. Based on the author's experiences of doing militant research with Occupy London from both inside the university and through the Occupy Research Collective created outside, it argues that there are no ideal sites for doing militant research. It explores the opportunities of doing militant research within the university, pointing towards the potential for subverting the resources available, and highlights the barriers, in particular with relation to ethics. The Occupy Research Collective (ORC) is then examined as an alternative space for doing militant research. In turn, a number of limitations of ORC are noted, including both its lack of resources and tendency to (re)create a form of doing militant research detached from broader struggles. While recent work has highlighted the need for militant research to operate antagonistically to the neoliberal university, and there have been calls to create new institutions outside it, this paper extends previous arguments by emphasising the need to criticise all forms of militant research in order to push struggles forward. It draws on John Holloway's widely referenced 'in-against-and-beyond' dialectical approach to emphasise the inevitable challenges of insti-tutionalising militant research, no matter where this takes place. It concludes by suggesting that militant research should not shy away from embracing critiques of particular struggles and that further theoretical work needs to be done in terms of developing a more open and relational understanding of militancy.

Key words: *militant research, Occupy, university, activism, ethics, participatory research*

Introduction

Intervening in a rich history of fusing research with activism, geographers have provided a number of reflections on the opportunities and challenges of doing activist research. In the 1990s, Routledge's influential text argued for the need to create a 'thirdspace' between academia and activism 'where neither site, role, or representation holds sway, where one continually subverts the meaning of the other' (1996, 400). This sparked a wider debate on the challenges of navigating between academic and activist positionalities (Anderson 2002; Fuller and Kitchen 2004), including on the perils of 'going native' in activism (Fuller 1999). This discussion spilled over into the so-called 'participatory turn' in geography (mrs kinpaisby 2008), which has sought to provide a more concrete set of tools and practices to facilitate the movement between academic research and activism (see Kindon *et al*. 2007; Pain and Kindon 2007; Wynne-Jones *et al*. 2015).

Most recently, geographers seem to have become less concerned with how to navigate tensions of positionality, arguably because being an academic-activist has become so commonplace over the last two decades, and more focused on exploring how activist research can exist in relation to the neoliberal university (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010; Mason and Purcell 2014; Russell 2015; Taylor 2014). Researchers are often less interested in understanding what activist research is and

more focused on exploring what it can do. This shift can be located, at least in part, within a resurgence of interest across the social sciences, including geography, in militant research (Bookchin *et al*. 2013; Colectivo Situaciones 2005; Figiel *et al*. 2014; Malo 2004a 2004b; Russell 2015; Shukaitis and Graeber 2007).

Militant research is an approach that sees research and activism as co-constituted and is oriented solely 'by invested militant activists for the purpose of clarifying and amplifying struggle' (Team Colors Collective 2010, 3). The starting point for militant research is not an academic researcher seeking to further a particular strand of knowledge, but the context of political struggle. Thus for Shukaitis and Graeber militant research

> is not a specialized task, a process that only involves those who are traditionally thought of as researchers. It is an intensification and deepening of the political. (2007, 9)

Indeed militant research is already present in most social movements, which make their own inquiries and create their own methodologies for understanding and changing the world (Casas-Cortés 2009; Escobar 2008; Zibechi 2012). Militant research thus opens up the definition of what counts as activist-research, and implies the need to explore different sites from where it is practised. In this context there have been a number of attempts to either radically re-imagine the contemporary university (Mason and Purcell 2014; mrs kinpaisby 2008) or else abandon it and create spaces of militant research outside (Colectivo Situaciones 2005; Noterman and Pusey 2012) in the hope of finding sites from which militant research can flourish.

In this paper I examine experiences of doing militant research with Occupy London – a social movement born in 2011 through the global resonance of occupations in prominent urban spaces – from both inside and outside the university. I argue that there are no ideal sites for doing militant research and that there is a need to take a contradictory position towards any forms that support it. I start by considering militant research from inside the university, in particular highlighting institutional ethics as a key barrier, before examining the Occupy Research Collective, created outside the university. I demonstrate how each site had its own opportunities and limitations for doing militant research and go on to propose that, following John Holloway's well-referenced dialectical approach, militant research be understood as operating 'against-and-beyond' itself, a constant struggle to overcome any form it takes. This extends previous contributions by emphasising the need to criticise not only the neoliberal university but all forms of militant research in order to push struggle(s) forward. I conclude by suggesting that militant research should not shy away from embracing critiques of particular struggle(s) and that further

theoretical work needs to be done in terms of developing a more open and relational understanding of militancy.

Doing militant research within the university

In its recent history – from the workers inquiries of 1960s Italy (Panzieri 1965) to research with the alter-globalisation movement in the late 1990s and 2000s (Malo 2004c; Shukaitis and Graeber 2007) – militant research has made extensive use of the university (see Malo 2004a 2004b). In my case, while the starting point for my involvement with Occupy London was as a committed activist, the starting point for my research was a PhD at University College London (UCL) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The university provided me with a comprehensive institutional structure, from supervision and training to a community of research students, a strong base to develop my research. There are few alternative institutions in the UK so well resourced to support long-term research, although the barriers to entry are ever-greater with the ongoing neoliberal 'assault' on universities in the UK (Bailey and Freedman 2011).

The university not only supported my research but also Occupy London, providing space and material resources to a movement that was relatively poor. As Taylor (2014) argues, 'being useful' is an essential, yet surprisingly overlooked, aspect of what universities can provide through activist research. The provision of basic services, such as meeting rooms, is an important part of this. In addition, I was able to bring my activism into the university by teaching and presenting seminars to students and staff about my research, gathering support in the process. More generally, the university provided a space through which I could organise with others. For example, following the announcement that UCL was planning to build a new campus in East London, demolishing a vibrant housing estate, a group of students and staff formed the Participatory and Activist Research Network with the aim of fostering a more politically engaged attitude in our research.

The university is not a monolithic institution, but is constantly being re-worked by individuals within it, pushing it towards different ends. The university not only provides a resource base for doing militant research but, at best, is ripe for the creation of 'cracks' (Holloway 2010) in which academics (re)imagine and struggle for a 'communiversity': 'using our talents, our abilities, our resources, to do other things simply than write journal articles and achieve academic accolades' (mrs kinpaisby 2008; see also PyGyRG 2012). Nevertheless, the university also provided barriers to doing militant research, at times standing in clear antagonism. In my case this became most evident in the context of *ethics*.

All research undertaken at UCL involving living human participants must meet criteria for ethical approval set out

by the Research Ethics Committee (REC). The fact that my research potentially involved 'illegal or political behaviour' meant that it was deemed by the REC to involve more than minimal risk, and required formal approval. The REC decided to reject my application on the grounds that during the course of my research I may become aware of *potential* criminal activity by Occupy London, and they needed a guarantee that I would report this activity to the police. In the words of the Chair: 'the Ethics Committee cannot approve a study where the researcher becomes aware of possible criminal activity and declines to report it'.

The REC presented a clear barrier to my research by requesting me to participate in an activity that I, and most likely everyone in Occupy London, would consider highly unethical. Their request was completely opposed to my understanding of ethics in the context of militant research – working with and alongside fellow activists rather than against them – and accepting it was simply not an option. I was only later granted ethical approval after I reframed my research as focused on historical events leading up to May 2012, thus removing the possibility that I could become involved in any discussions as a researcher relating to possible future crimes.

The question of ethics has been widely discussed in literature on activist and participatory research. From an institutional perspective, there has been much critique of the rigid and un-reflexive nature of academic ethics committees' 'tick box' procedures (Askins 2007; Elwood 2007; Gillan and Pickerill 2012; Martin 2007). As Cordner *et al.* point out, a key limitation of institutional ethical requirements is that they 'assert a set of preconceived principles of how a particular moment of ethical uncertainty should be addressed' (2012, 163). Social movements are dynamic and uncertain processes, and it is only from within this changing context that an ethical conduct can be developed that 'maximizes beneficence and minimizes harm' (2012, 163). Moreover, the apparent objectivity of Ethics Committees calls for 'neutrality' and 'balance' that are very hard to define within a political context of researching social movements (De Jong 2012). Militant research is based on a commitment to the ethics of a particular struggle, and thus takes seriously the ontologies and epistemologies of social movements themselves (Chesters 2012). Indeed, for militant researchers our positionality is defined from within a movement, and our ethics will inevitably develop from this perspective. This does not imply no benefit can be gained from institutional ethical requirements; at times they can be useful exercises in forcing the researcher to confront particular issues, such as anonymity of participants. It does, however, suggest that ethics needs to be considered beyond the remit of a bureaucratic committee.

I found it useful to frame ethics as part of broader struggle, summarised by Routledge (2004) as a 'relational ethics of struggle', which does not seek to define what ethics is or should be, but acknowledges the researchers' positionality within the movements and institutions they are involved. Our ethics is formed through our commitment to social change and our ongoing interactions with those we struggle with and against. For an academic militant researcher this may involve questioning the tensions between careerism versus collaboration, support versus propaganda, and critique versus undermining a movement (Routledge 2004). As I argue below, a relational ethics of militant research should shy away from criticising particular struggles in the acknowledgement that they are necessarily part of a broader process. Most challenging for me was that although many Occupiers were supportive of my research, seeing it as beneficial to the movement, others were sceptical of what could be gained from a 'professional' academic, something the Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010) painfully recalled in their research with anti-capitalists.

Crucially, then, developing a relational ethics of struggle involves not only working inside the university but also outside it, taking seriously social movements' support and concerns of doing academic militant research while also acknowledging the inevitable limitations of individual struggles. Following my negative experiences at UCL, and my desire to work with other militant researchers, I helped create a space for militant research with Occupy London outside the university.

Doing militant research outside the university

During the winter of 2011/12 there was a growing desire by militant researchers to create a space for research on/with Occupy London outside the university. From an academic perspective, this included negative experiences such as my own, and concerns that the high volume of academic research on Occupy was too detached from the movement and often published in exclusionary ways, given the financial and jargonistic barriers to accessing much academic knowledge (Mason *et al.* 2013). From a non-academic perspective there was a desire to create a more formal space to collectively think about Occupy London, complementing the 'Tent City University' that provided workshops and lectures on camp. In early 2012 a handful of militant researchers (some of them active Occupiers) set up a group initially called the Occupy Reading Group – to provide a space for collective reflection – soon re-named the Occupy Research Collective (ORC), in recognition that we were actively researching Occupy London.

ORC became a crucial space for militant research over the coming months, providing an alternative to the university that allowed researchers to share resources and ideas, and discuss ethical dilemmas such as my experience at UCL. It was also a space that encouraged reciprocality, feeding back research into Occupy in an attempt to make it of value to activists. As Mason *et al*. (2013, 254) argue, research that seeks to transform needs to be 'not only comprehensible but also useful'. ORC existed in dozens of regular meetings, an email list, and a blog page.[1] The most significant event was The Occupy Research Collective Convergence on Activism and Research Ethics, held on 30 June 2012, at UCL, opening up the university's resources for use by militant researchers.[2] The day-long convergence attracted dozens of people from across the UK, including some with a background in academia, in order to explore 'the ethics of researching within-and-beyond the Occupy movement.'[3] The convergence successfully created a wide network of militant researchers, and generated a wealth of ideas and plans, some of which were followed up. It produced jargon-free reflections on Occupy and was a good example of a collective project.

Afterwards, however, ORC's lack of resources and participants' increasing burn-out, especially from those active in organising Occupy London around the eviction, made it hard to sustain the group. Moreover, while ORC successfully engaged with some Occupiers, there were many others not participating. There was always a risk that ORC was re-creating an institution outside the university that was detaching itself from the wider movement. In attempting to institutionalise militant research there is always a potential that, as Holloway (2010, 139) argues, a form is created that takes on 'a "life" of its own', appearing independent of the activities producing it. ORC created a form that outlived Occupy London's existence in camps, making the active relationship between research and activism harder to sustain. Those attending meetings were increasingly (although never exclusively) researching Occupy as part of their own projects, usually supported by a university, and we were failing to engage in a wider, collective discussion. This not only limited ORC's relevance to Occupy London, but it also had the effect of limiting ORC's critique of the movement, perhaps out of fear of undermining it. Moreover much needed time went into administrative tasks, such as running a blog page or email list, with less time for doing research itself, and ORC always risked separating itself from the Occupy movement as a specialised space for doing research.

In recent years there has been much commentary on the need to create spaces for militant research outside the university. This argument has been made most clearly by the Argentine group Colectivo Situaciones, which argues that the university provides little potential for doing militant research. Its work emphasises the importance of commitment to a militant situation, and the need to develop knowledge from the messy experiences of making other worlds. For Colectivo Situaciones (2005), the commitment to a particular situation problematises the possibility of researching through the university, an institution that it finds incompatible with its approach. Ideally militant research would take place 'in autonomous collectives that do not obey rules imposed by academia', allowing for the development of new research practices, developed under alternative conditions such as through workshops or collective readings (Colectivo Situaciones 2003, np).

My experiences of doing militant research with ORC is that even seemingly autonomous spaces suffer from their own problems. Through its (re)institutionalisation within a social movement, militant research risks losing sight of its critical perspective as a means of '[intensifying] and deepening of the political' (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007, 9). Moreover, there remains the pressing challenge of doing militant research with limited resources, especially when you have an occupation to run, or a social movement to organise. Although ORC occasionally re-surfaces – for example it met in 2014 to reflect on research carried out on Occupy London since 2011 – it has lost momentum and there is little sustaining it. It seems unlikely, at least from my perspective, that an ideal site for doing militant research will come into existence, and there will clearly be a need to work both inside and outside the university (at least in the short term). Most challengingly, however, it seems that militant research will necessarily need to be pushing beyond any form it takes if it is able to provide a means of both intensifying and also *taking forward* struggles.

Militant research against-and-beyond itself

I understand militant research as a committed and intense process of internal reflection from within particular struggle(s) that seeks to map out and discuss underlying antagonisms while pushing the movement forward. Central to my understanding, and that of others, is some notion of social change, a broader movement in which better worlds are created. As such, in this final section I suggest that militant research must necessarily be understood as pushing against any form it takes, as it is only through negation (and simultaneous creation) that change becomes a reality. This is a key element to dialectical thought, something that has been eloquently expressed through the work of John Holloway by the notion of 'against-and-beyond'.[4]

In their book on militant research, Shukaitis and Graeber suggest that John Holloway's work represents a 'beautiful example' of the approach, an 'open process' that 'discovers new possibilities within the present' (2007, 11). Central to Holloway's argument is that changing the world can only

come about through humans' capacity to exist 'against-and-beyond themselves' (2002, 25). Building on Marx's dialectical theory, Holloway (2002 2010) argues that there is no outside to that which we protest against – the multiple forms of power-over that flourish in capitalism – and that the very nature of humans is to scream against the world we are born into. This scream, a 'refusal to accept' (2002, 6) is not just theoretical critique, however, but implies a concrete 'doing', a 'practical negation' (2002, 23) in which imaginations of other worlds, the 'projection beyond' (2002, 24), form the basis of human materialism. This dialectical approach dissolves the boundary between theory and practice and suggests that the task of all militant research (understood not as a specialised task but an everyday challenge for humanity) is a constant moving against-and-beyond the world(s) we create.

Holloway's notion of against-and-beyond (often expanded to 'in-against-and-beyond') has been widely used by militant researchers (Asher 2015; Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010; Pusey and Sealey-Huggins 2013; Russell 2015), but almost exclusively in relation to the (neoliberal) university. Developing a dialectical understanding of militant researchers' relationship with the university is helpful because it demonstrates the contradictory and antagonistic relationships that many researchers develop with the institutions that both support and undermine their work, as in my experience. At the same time, however, it seems necessary to expand this dialectical position beyond the university and to position militant research against-and-beyond any form it exists in.

Creating new institutions of militant research, however 'counter' or 'autonomous' they may be, risks creating a form 'that would contain or detain' (Holloway 2002, 242) the movement of militant research that seeks to push struggles forward. Whether these institutions take the form of protest camps (Halvorsen forthcoming), autonomous pedagogic spaces (Noterman and Pusey 2012), reading groups on the edge of the university (Mason *et al.* 2015), or the example of ORC presented here, militant research needs to constantly negate its form in order to move beyond it. This opens up a new set of debates, beyond the remit of this article, on how we approach the questions of *institution* and *form* in struggles to change the world (see Halvorsen forthcoming; Hardt and Holloway 2011). Nevertheless it seems an important step to recognise that militant research will always be contradictory and that pushing against-and-beyond itself is a permanent challenge.

Conclusion

Through my critical reflections of doing militant research inside and outside the university, I have argued for the need to understand militant research not only against-and-beyond the form of the university, but necessarily against all forms it takes. In conclusion I suggest there are two implications of this that geographers and others who are increasingly turning to militant research may wish to consider.

First, militant researchers should not shy away from criticising the struggle(s) in which they are located. At its worst, there is a risk that some strands of militant research become exclusionary or even elitist. As an 'orientation' (Russell 2015), militant research begins from an intense commitment to a 'situation' (Colectivo Situaciones 2003). It requires, as Juris (2007, 173) describes, a 'collective reflection' and analysis of practice, yet, more often than not, the 'collective' is usually centred on particular groups of self-defined activists, even if they are part of 'diverse movement networks'. There is always a risk that intense commitment to a situation – as ORC demonstrated, for example, by tying itself so closely to Occupy London – slips into vanguardism, denying the possibility that there are other situations from which to change the world. In other words, militant research may base itself on a commitment to a situation, or social movement, when there is no guarantee that it is going to make the world a better place. As Holloway states:

> Who is to say that forming part of the so-called Black Block in an anti-G8 summit is more or less effective a means of struggle than creating a garden as a means of fighting against the massacre by humans of other forms of life? (2010, 256)

Militant researchers are often understandably hesitant in providing too strong a critique of social movements, in fear of delegitimising or, worse, being interpreted as a call to retreat from 'activism' to the comfortable world of theory. While there are sometimes intense moments of critical reflection, as took place with the rise in alter-globalisation movements, for example (see Anonymous 1999; Kellstadt 2001; Martinez 2000; sasha k 2001), much militant research remains contained within a particular situation. Understanding critique dialectically can be useful here in pointing towards how all struggles are related, part of a 'relational ontology' (Merrifield 1993) where the situation to which the militant researcher is committed can be infinitely expanded (Holloway 2010). Providing a critique of Occupy London – of sexism in the protest camp for example – could push towards an appreciation of everyday struggles that exist beyond the remit of social movement politics. Geographers have made significant progress in understanding activism relationally (see Featherstone 2008), and militant researchers are well placed to take these arguments forward.

Second, and related, is the need for militant research to continue developing theory – understood as a practical reflection, thinking-as-doing – that is open and relational,

incorporating the multiple everyday forms through which people struggle against-and-beyond forms of oppression. There have been important developments by militant researchers in this regard – for example, by feminists and others examining immaterial labour and precarity (see Dowling *et al.* 2007; Precarias a la Deriva 2004) – but more work needs to be done to open up a militant perspective that embraces activism with a small 'a'. Indeed, for many the notion of militancy remains associated with oppressive meanings. Writing from a feminist perspective, for example, Juhasz (2013, 20) found the 'militaristic, patriarchal or even aggressive meanings' of militant research unsuitable for her online activist research project. These concerns cannot be ignored and future militant theorising will surely want to consider this in more detail. Even more challenging, however, is taking seriously Holloway's (2002 2010) assertion that the most radical theory we can develop is one of 'not-knowing', a process that involves everyone in an ongoing dialogue, or an 'asking we walk', as the Zapatistas say. Critique, then, can provide a means for posing new questions and pushing struggles towards a more inclusive and relational movement.

If militant research is an everyday, non-specialised task, then there still remains much to get out of it as a theoretical practice, and it will continue demanding our attention inside and outside the university. As geographers increasingly adopt a militant research approach (exemplified at the double session on militant and participatory research at the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)'s 2014 Conference), they will have much to offer, taking forward the discipline's rich history of fusing research with activism.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 See http://occupyresearchcollective.wordpress.com/ (accessed 22/01/2014).
2 See http://occupyresearchcollective.wordpress.com/post -convergence-data-bomb/ (accessed 22/01/2014).
3 See http://occupyresearchcollective.wordpress.com/2012/06/ 01/occupy-research-collective-convergence-orcc-activism -research-ethics/ (accessed 22/01/2014).
4 Holloway (2002) credits the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (1980) with coining the related notion of 'in-and-against'.

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