Introduction: Protest and Activism With(out) Organization

We want to create freedom in our lives, to bring the poetic joy of being in the world to each moment of breath, and to fill the spaces of our existence with a deep and unshakable love for the mystery known as “life”. To do this requires us to revolt. To bring light we must pursue a trajectory that refuses the darkness, death, and dismay of the age we live in (White et al., 2016, p. 1).

In recent years, the world has witnessed many significant large-scale collective protests, as well as highly effective anonymous and individual forms of direct activism. A few particularly influential examples of these would include the ongoing anti-government and anti-austerity protests, the Occupy movement, the Black Lives Matter movement and student-led protests against higher tuition fees and the rampant commodification of higher education. By successfully engaging with alternative forms of governance and radical democracy that take place in a meaningful way beyond the state, these different forms of activism and protest continue to inspire new expressions of identity, relationships, resistance and solidarity into being. However, unsurprisingly, the (perceived) success and traction that these popular protests movements have gained and stand to gain can also be demonstrated in the increased forms of (state) surveillance, militarization of police forces and other highly aggressive and intrusive forms of censorship and repression.

At a time of seemingly entrenched economic, political, social and environmental crises, it is vital that these radical forms of activism and protest continue to challenge and incite the popular imagination, not least by foregrounding alternative futures that are desirable, practical and enactable. When taking a closer look at the organizational nature across these activist landscapes, for example, it becomes apparent that resistance led through membership-based, coordinated hierarchical organizations (e.g. Trade Unions, NGOs) still retains an important visibility and influence. However, in addition to, and in some meaningful way beyond, these more traditional forms of organized resistance, diverse and spontaneous forms of everyday activism, one consistent with a more horizontal and anarchist praxis of self-organization, can be seen carry an important influence and presence. The role of organization in social movements and other forms of activism remains a central, and often contentious, question for academics and activists.

When we contemplate setting out the “state of the field” on this question, we immediately pause. There are many entry points. Our own individual research agendas emphasize acts of resistance and change outside formal political institutions or at the self-organization end of the spectrum (e.g. White and Williams, 2012, 2016; Wood and Young, 2016; Wood and Brunson, 2011). We are personally interested in the collective and cumulative influence of everyday practices, and in the politics of those marginalized from institutions of power. The purpose of this Special Issue is not to establish a definitive superiority of one form over another, but rather to explore the many variations, permutations, ideas, strategies and contexts that exist, in the hope that the diversity and juxtaposition will be productive and stimulating.
The Special Issues in Protest and Activism With(out) Organisation are comprised of 16 diverse papers. Each paper addresses different practices of activism as they present themselves across a variety of social and spatial contexts. Denmark, Poland, the Czech Republic, Sweden, France, Germany, Spain, Puerto Rico, Mexico, South Africa, Egypt, the USA and Australia are all represented, and activism is documented at the scale of the local, the neighbourhood, the everyday, the nation-state, the international, the global and through cyberspace communities. Several of these countries are in the midst of significant political and social transition. More than half of the papers' authors are women, and the activists themselves come from several backgrounds: men and women, wealthy and poor, students, middle-class parents, workers, artists, musicians, liberals, anarchists. While we, in our capacity as Editors made every effort to try and attract this broad authorship for the Special Issue – and we are delighted with the excellent range of papers based on geographical location and gender – we are nevertheless aware that, as diverse and far-reaching as this collection is, there is still (always) more to consider. For example, a majority of the activists in these papers are white, and consequently there is not as much work on processes of racialization and racial justice as we would have anticipated.

Organization and institutionalization are not, of course, absolutes, but each lies on a continuum. While we may think of these as highly durable states, with structured offices, roles (often hierarchical), practices, cash flows and so on, we also remember that even a personal daily ritual is a form of organization, that there are many ways in which we institutionalize practices, relationships and identities with durability, if not with formality. It remains valuable to investigate what is possible and what has been achieved at all points along the continuum. Formal institutions often create authority, which may even have the support of the law and thus a police force. There are, however, informal social institutions that secure us in ways no formal law or police ever could (Jacobs, 1992; Scott, 1998).

One lesson that arises from the collection of papers as a whole is that there is no singular activist response or form of organizing. There is no ideal scale, no ideal mode or working, nor ideal activist. We see a diversity of forms and degrees of organization, and sometimes basically none, just spontaneous outrage. But this is not to diminish the significance and durability of informal organization. And problems with institutionalization and its accompanying "professionalization", operating at certain scales of activity and global networks (e.g. World Bank) may skew the agenda. Different styles of organizing and modes of resistance, from negotiation to black bloc acts of disruption, accomplish different things, in different contexts. As much as we try to theorize these predictively, the contingencies frustrate those efforts. What we can discern is that there remains a wide variety of possibilities, that the state’s assistance or cooperation is not always necessary, that formal organizations are not necessary, that unity is not necessary. Informal, disorganized acts reveal the power of disruption, the pushing of boundaries and the raising of critical questions that challenge the dominant framing of the problem. These acts may also be ordinary, everyday interventions that are not replaceable with formalized practices.

Surprisingly, for some, anarchists are counted among organization’s adherents. Contrary to depictions of anarchy as chaos or fundamentally without order, there are several papers which draw attention to the history of explicit discussion of political and social organization among anarchists and/ or, cite important modes of organization as being inspired, and informed by anarchist praxis. Anarchists often feel compelled to remind others that they are against rulers, not rules (see Springer, 2014;
There are also arguments here, however, for the usefulness of formal organization, for institutionalization, for working with the state and for taking political power. For some, it is a question of a particular political moment where advantage may be seized, solidarities solidified or a specific change enacted with some state of formality or institutionalization.

The papers in these two issues collectively argue against too much broad, universalizing theory, but argue strongly in favour of the need for theory to unpack the layers and complexities of individuals and groups who struggle for a more just, less violent world. At some point, moreover, these theories need to intersect (rather than subsume each other) so that we can better understand how, for example, violence towards animals or our climate interacts with the violence against activists by police. In this context, the interdisciplinary commitment evident within the content throughout the Special Issue speaks of great promise in challenging rigid disciplinary ways of organizing, and of the potential in transgressing these (parochial) academic boundaries and hierarchies. There are many excellent examples of this within the papers published here, but particularly – and repeatedly so – in the critical praxis that occupies the interstitial spaces between critical sociology and human geography. It is our hope and expectations that this willingness to experiment and learn from other fields, whatever our disciplinary identity/ies, will provoke important new ways of thinking, of doing and of articulating activists and activism in future.

The complex variations of research here also re-open and expand the question of what constitutes “activism” and what activist work looks like. What constitutes a “social movement”? Does it include the disorganized, the informal, the personal? What are our expectations in terms of intent and purpose? Is there such a thing as accidental activism? Some of these papers tackle these questions and interrogate the relationships between our everyday lives and the power to make a difference. What is enacted on an individual level in practice may be, in solidarity and informal communication with others, a kind of collective action. Here, we not only have the ideas of veganism or toilet training as activism, but also the idea that non-human activities constitute part of the “work” of this activism.

Another strong theme across several of the papers is the emotional and affective components of activism, including the affective strategies of campaigns: emotion as a motivator, as an obstacle, as both a producer and effect of solidarity. A wide range of emotions is covered here, including ambivalence. Far from incidental, emotion may be its own organizing factor and managing emotions may be critical to the success or failure of an event or a movement. Measuring emotions and their impact can be nebulous work, and it raises interesting methodological questions. Some of the papers here have strong articulations about those challenges and, in particular, about the positionality of academics who study activist groups and events of which they are also part.

The formal and informal, the neatly planned and the spontaneous also co-exist and interact. It is worth considering, for example, the way the less-structured, less-durable, outside-the-system acts challenge, disrupt and energize formal institutions and practices, without necessarily undermining the latter. Their apparent opposition may be synergetic (Kalyvas, 2008). Looking closer still, we might consider the ways in which those less-structured, less-durable, outside-the-system acts also challenge, disrupt and energize their participants. The creativity of working outside the formal, beyond even the acceptable, can change who we are. Our participation may enlighten and even heal us.
Contents: first issue in Protest and Activism With(out) Organization

Eight of the 16 articles are published in the first Special Issue of Protest and Activism With(out) Organization. The opening paper “Action with(out) activism: understanding digital climate change” is written by Jessica McLean and Sara Fuller. Situated within the diverse and complex socio-spaces that constitute climate activism, the paper focuses particular attention towards the crowd funded Climate Council communication institution in Australia. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative evidence, many prescient themes are problematized including the competing – or reinforcing – relationship(s) between: (mainstream) collective based and (everyday) individual forms of activism; the motivations that underpin and motivate actions (reflecting in particular on the spectacle of action with(out) conscious activism); and the emergence of digital spaces as loci for action on climate change. There are many valuable insights and powerful arguments that are forthcoming, all of which agitate for greater recognition of the complexity, nuance and “messiness” involved when focusing on contemporary – and futures forms of transformative action based on protest and organization. Indeed, in keeping with future modes of organizing, the acknowledgement here towards (new) horizontal and anarchistic process of self-organization coming further to the fore is noted here, and strongly supported in number of other papers in this Special Issue.

From Australia, and climate change, to the “creative city” of Berlin and cultural governance; the next paper is “Articulations in Berlin’s Independent Art Scene: on New Collective Actors in the Art Field” by Friederike Landau. Landau begins by emphasizing the important expressions of solidarity and support those artists and associations have given grassroots social movements across a range of urban struggles. Situated with the creative city, the main intention of the paper is to better understand how artist-led organizations formulate their claims and concerns, and what strategies they engaged in to influence and shape the discourse around urban cultural politics. To this end qualitative interviews with two collective actors are drawn on to inform an original framework classifying five axes of differentiating political critique. These axes reflect the organizations’ political programme, personal infrastructures, their approach to the administration, strategies agendas and collective action. Reflecting on the findings here, Landau makes a persuasive case to that illustrate the important of the art field and the (trans)formative potentialities for Berlin’s future cultural policy that can emerge through a complementary and mutually enriched combination of pragmatic and utopian thinking.

Three continents in three papers! In “Mobilizing and Organizing in precarious times: analyzing contemporary collective action in South Africa”, Carin Runciman draws on three detailed case studies of contemporary mobilizing in South Africa – a country which has the reputation of being the protest capital of the world – to focus our attention towards the complex relationships, and the relative strengths and weaknesses that exists forms of between collective action, spontaneity and organizing. Many surprising and thought-provoking arguments are forthcoming, not least in rejecting the widely held assumption that formal organizations are at the centre of contemporary collective action. Runciman suggests that the reality is formalized social movement organizations have declined in the last ten years or so, and the rise of protest has taken place outside formally organized bodies. Many significant implications emerge from this, and are considered both in relation to South Africa and also for activists worldwide. One of these, the author argues, is the need to re-define social movements, and to this end the paper advocates an alternative conceptualisation of social movements which “roots collective action within a materialist framework of analysis”.

Guest editorial
The fourth paper is written by Kelly Dombroski. In “Hybrid Activist collectives: reframing mothers’ environmental and caring labour”, Dombroski draws on virtual ethnography with online women’s sites and groups to detail some of the environmental activist work that women do within the home in Australia and New Zealand. Employing the use of “hybrid activist collectives” as a tool of analysis, the paper demonstrate how at a time when women still take on the majority of household labour and “social reproduction” their “reproductive” labour has expanded to include care not just for families and their needs, but also for the environment and sustainability. An important consideration of maternal activists – and how they experiment with different ways of being in and with (and co-producing knowledge about) the “more-than-human” world is forthcoming. In this context key examples of maternal activism in the areas of human rights in childbirth, and the environmental issues of modern hygiene and sanitation practices are addressed.

In the next paper “Environmental self-organized activism: emotion, organization and collective identity in Mexico”. Tommaso Gravante and Alice Poma draw critical attention to the significant lack of research dedicated to understanding how indigenous communities, villages and collectives self-organize to defend (the right to live) in their territories. To begin to address this, the paper harnesses a culture-focused view of protest (which fully integrates both emotional and biographical dimensions) within three collectives in the Guadalajara Metropolitan, north-west Mexico. Particular attention is paid to exploring the complex relationships between emotions, bonds and activism and particularly the way in which “moral shocks” operate in a way that catalyze form of activism and direct action into being. There are some very powerful quotes, both capturing expressions of solidarity and support, as well as hate, anger and disappointment that emerge through the qualitative methodology and methods the research drew on. Throughout though there is a tremendous sense of hope and power that is captured in both the individual and wider the grassroots community to resist, organize and fight for a different – autonomous – future.

Dominika Polanska and Galia Chimiak’s paper “Organizing without Organizations: On Informal Social Activism in Poland” draws on rich case study evidence situated within the “post-socialist” experience of Poland. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is used to underpin the research data, which was undertaken in 2014-15. What is of particular concern in the paper, is the need for a broader, more extensive definition of civil society and social activism, one that properly recognizes the importance of informal forms of organizing. Indeed, given the rise of this type of organizing and activism, the danger of continuing to neglect to incorporate social activism based on informal networks; activism which lacking a discernable leader and legal status of an organization, foundation or association is considerable. Seeking to understand the rationales that motivate activists is also an important focus of the paper and to this end four dimensions – social, ideological, political and functional – are presented and considered. The paper concludes by focusing on the complex relationship between grassroot initiatives, and more dominant formal forms of organization in the collective struggle for the common good, which offers many implications and points of reflections.

The next paper, “Social movements in crisis? From the 15-M movement to the electoral shift in Spain”, is written by Ibán Diaz-Parra and Jaime Jover-Báez. Since emerging in 2011, the Spanish indignados have captured the imagination of many activists, and inspired many forms of activism across a wide range of struggles, both within and beyond Europe. The findings presented by Diaz-Parra and Jover-Báez draw...
on interviews and their own first-hand involvements in social movements in Seville, which include participating in demonstrations, occupation of public squares and assemblies within the 15-M movement during 2011, and anti-austerity and other protests more recently. The main contribution of this paper is the call to better understand the material conditions that have informed the social and political mobilization, and direction that the 15-M protest has taken in recent years. Any appeal to move towards a post-materialistic representation of political projects is seen to be empty: meaningless both for grassroots movement and more formal political parties. In addition to this, important reflections on the question of scale; the micro-local scale and nation-state institutions are presented: is a particular scale most effective for revolutionary politics? How do relationships among organizations at different scales affect outcomes?

Completing this first part of the Special Issue, and returning to the theme of climate change is “Depoliticised activism? Ambivalence and pragmatism at the COP16”, by Leon Sealey-Huggins. The research here draws on Sealy-Huggins’ research and personal experiences as a “scholar-activist” at alternative “popular” spaces outside the conference of parties (COP) meeting in Cancun, Mexico. Analyzing the diverse forms of activism and engagement evident at the COP16 is used to simultaneously resist and reject the appeal of “post-politics” of climate change, and through which to better understand possibilities for (alternative and anarchist-inspired prefigurative) forms of activism and organization. There is much to be taken from this paper, both in the findings, which seek to explain how activists are organization to opposed depoliticised responses to climate change and in the detailed critical reflection on the scholar-activist, militant ethnography approach and its motivations. It is this kind of innovative approach that is needed at this time, to encourage confidence in academics and/or activists to adapt similar approaches with which to better capture the increasingly dynamic and fluid complexity of activism with(out) organization.

We would like to close with a special thank you to those scholars who are writing here in English as a second (or third) language, and whose work has brought in literature from other languages to enrich our collective discussion. We should also add that the response to our call for papers was enthusiastic. Even after expanding to a double issue, we did not have room to include every deserving paper, and we hope those papers will find a home in the near future in this journal, or elsewhere. From all the submissions, we had the impression of a constant buzz of activity. It is a more than a bit inspiring. It is the spirit of revolt that brings with it the renewed promise of hope, freedom, solidarity and love to those places and communities where it is needed most.

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References


Further reading


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