
1. How can we research social movements? An introduction

Alberto Arribas Lozano, Anna Szolucha, Sutapa Chattopadhyay and Laurence Cox

WAYS INTO RESEARCHING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Why Research Social Movements?

For at least 150 years, activists have talked about movements as involving three kinds of activity: agitation (getting people to agree that something is unjust or otherwise wrong and that they should take action around it), education (once participants have got to that point of taking action, exploring why a problem persists, what social structures need to be changed and what interests need to be confronted to resolve it) and organisation (bringing people together in effective ways to bring the kind of pressure that is needed to actually resolve the issue).

As this suggests, most people's engagement with movements starts from their own response to the issues, agitating to convince others, and educating themselves or others around the issues. Thinking about the movement itself may come a lot later, particularly if people are not familiar with other organisations or movements and take a particular way of organising for granted. Sometimes it is only the experience of defeat or failure – a particular organising approach not working – or of becoming involved in a different struggle or group that sparks reflection about organisation; in other words, about movements themselves.

Movements have a long history of discussing these challenges, sometimes in critical conversations between different organisations and attempts to form alliances between different movements, sometimes in internal debates and conflicts over what strategy to adopt. The more democratic – and the more significant – a movement is, the more it is likely to be a space of reflection, conversation and argument about questions such as these:

- What are we actually doing well, and what are we doing badly?
- Is what we are doing working?
- What direction is it taking us in, and is this where we want to go?
- Do we have other possible options?

These start as practice-oriented questions, but inevitably bring in theoretical and political dimensions. Reflective activists also find themselves reading movement history, talking to activists from other movements, trying to find out about movements in other countries or regions as a way of trying to make sense of their own situation; and of course reading movement theory of various kinds that argues for particular ways of doing things, or particular understandings of the world that movements exist in. These may be comparative or theoretical perspectives, but activists read them to reflect on and potentially change their own practice.

2 *Handbook of research methods and applications for social movements*

For well over a century now, movement participants have been not only consumers but also producers of research: documenting their own practice, attempting to understand movements in other times and places, trying to generalise from different cases, engaging in collective reflection around their participants' experience, and among other things researching the people they hope to engage, the issues they are working on and their opponents. Not every activist or every organisation does this, but as a rule of thumb, as movements develop (engage wider social groups, persist over time, widen their political goals, create spaces for discussion, reflection, training and education), different kinds of research tend to become a regular part of their practice.

Starting from a rather different place, students, academics, journalists and think tanks also research movements. Some do so as sympathisers or opponents; others are simply trying to produce material for university or media purposes with little interest beyond that. Others again carry out their research in dialogue or collaboration with movement organisations.

These other kinds of research raise important ethical questions. Social movements represent a difficult collective effort, often of the poor, powerless and oppressed, to change these circumstances against powerful opponents. It should be clear that turning them into figures of hate or fun for media consumption purposes is deeply unethical (but all too common). Similarly, but less blatantly, a piece of student or professional academic research which is only intended to be read by an examiner or a handful of colleagues, and to help the researcher's career – while drawing on knowledge produced by activists and demanding their time and engagement – arguably represents an exploitative and ultimately unethical form of research.

Starting to Research Movements

For beginning researchers, the ethical, political and practical questions raised by research from movements, research with movements and research on movements are important to think about at the start; particularly when, as is common, we are only aware of one, or a handful of, models and possible approaches. In this *Handbook* you will find discussion of what we are doing as social actors when we research movements (Part I) before discussing the technical 'how' (Part II) and finally (Part III) about the uses and applications of movement research.

Editing this collection for people new to the field, we have tried to keep this perspective in mind: there are so many different possibilities and experiences, but often a poorly informed teacher, a restricted political tradition or a random reading can lead us to pursue a particular approach for a long time before realising that we actually had practical, political and ethical choices which we were not aware of.

This situation, of course, is strongly shaped by who 'we' are. As editors we asked contributors to write for new researchers in a wide variety of different situations: activists who have started to think about researching their own movements and politically engaged students; people outside the Global North and people who are not native English speakers; first-generation college students and adult learners; and people whose lives are shaped by a lack of wealth, power or privilege.

As well as the movements we and our authors have worked in and with, these situations are also shared by many of our authors. To date, virtually all English-language collections on methods for researching social movements have been written from and for the Global North, in most cases with an exclusive focus either on North America or on Western Europe. In this *Handbook* you will find authors and movements in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern

Europe; Black, Indigenous and POC authors and movements; feminist and queer authors and approaches; and working-class and Marxist movements and authors. Our authors include movement activists as well as academics, and many people whose work, like our own, combines both.

In this book we do not want to reproduce the cultural hierarchies involved in intimidating people by unnecessary and unexplained use of obscure language, as if readers were already familiar with particular academic (or political) traditions. This can create power hierarchies where the newcomer simply accepts what they are told as the price of entry; and often turns around when they have mastered the language and does the same thing to the next generation. The barriers of reading in a second language, time and energy to read difficult writing, lack of others to discuss with and sheer money – paywalls, the cost of books, and so on – are ignored in this process.

Of course research methods, like different movements, political traditions, and so on, have their own language which encapsulates their key ideas and approaches. A democratic approach to knowledge is not an anti-intellectual one which denies this; rather, it is one which recognises that people are not born knowing these languages but have to learn them. We aim to help people learn the ideas they need to do good research, rather than writing as if they already knew our own, local (disciplinary, intellectual, political) language.

We also recognise that often people will recognise a particular idea or way of thinking but have a different way of talking about it. Dialogue across these boundaries helps us all to share our existing knowledge and understanding and deepen it. This is the opposite of positioning a particular language as containing a magic value, be it intelligence or cultural status (for academic language), or moral worth and activist practice (for political language).

Researching Movements Means Researching Agency

It is not always obvious to everyone what is meant by researching movements. A lot of movements' own basic research is focused on coming to understand the issues that they organise around, from the most basic levels involved in producing a leaflet to inform people, to the sorts of counter-expertise developed by environmentalists challenging supposedly safe industries, or by the feminists who forced the concept of domestic violence onto academic and political agendas, or by the Marxist critique of capitalism. Researching movements, though, is fundamentally about researching what we do: particularly, how we organise, but also (for example) how we generate counter-expertise and carry out internal education, or how we agitate and try to win others over to our side.

This means getting beyond a simple understanding that the existence of a particular issue automatically leads to movements around it: all too often, as experienced activists know, people can fall for far-right arguments that scapegoat marginalised people as being responsible for problems faced by others; they can adopt charity-based strategies, allow themselves to be co-opted by elites who present themselves as saviours, or simply be so bad at organising that they never manage to get a movement off the ground.

Movements have to be made, at every level – from the daily grind of knocking on doors, giving out flyers or taking action in a workplace, to the more complex processes of connecting and coordinating different local actions, discussing strategy, developing spaces for reflection, and even creating the possibility for research – and it is this movement practice, what people do in their collective struggles, that movement researchers focus on.

This can be complicated if our own theory or understanding makes a short cut – to use Jane McAlevey’s (2016) phrase – from structure and positionality to action and theory. As the pioneer of history from below, E.P. Thompson (1968), put it, people’s experience (of oppression, exploitation, stigmatisation, and so on) appears as given by social structure. In a society shaped around racial hierarchies, patriarchy, capitalism, and so on, working-class people, women, Black people, and so on, will necessarily experience this structure on their own skin.

But how they understand that experience, and what they do about it, is not a given but varies. This is why movements are hard work and why their participants cannot just sit back and wait for the weight of poverty, injustice and underprivilege to lead us automatically towards a better world. People have to find ways of thinking about, and coping with, these negative experiences; but only some of those ways involve consciously naming what they are experiencing as something they can change through collective action, in other words through movement.

All of this means that movement research is about researching agency, not simply structure. People’s collective agency is shaped by their situation and experience of these structures of inequality, power and cultural hierarchy, but it is not an automatic product of those. In other words, we have to investigate how they think and how they act in movements; and the different possible ways of thinking and acting that movement participants argue over and explore at different times. Who they are – their positionality in intersecting systems of oppression, exploitation and culture – shapes what they do and how they think, but we cannot simply assume people’s ideas and actions by knowing who they are. Instead, we have to research what they actually think and do.

How the Four of us Came to Research Movements

People come to researching movements from many different backgrounds and standpoints: it is a field full of ‘poor but bright’ students and self-taught activists, women and LGBTQ+ people, racial and ethnic minorities and migrants, and others who are engaged with, affected by and interested in movements to change the inequalities and injustices they have seen in their own lives. Here we share some snippets from our own experience which we hope will encourage readers to see social movement research as a possibility for them. As people editing a book on research methodologies, we all have at least one foot in academia, but many people do good work far outside the university, and have written other chapters in this book.

The Ireland that Laurence grew up in was an impoverished, semi-peripheral country, with brutal forms of religious patriarchy and a war in the North, but where popular solidarity with other postcolonial struggles was widespread. He grew up around movements and relied on scholarships to get him through secondary school and university, with research questions coming from his activism about how West German and Irish movements had developed. When the scholarships ran out, he got a job training care workers in a small rustbelt town and learned a huge amount from Ireland’s working-class community activism.

Through all of this he was involved in the organising and learning processes of what became the anti-capitalist ‘movement of movements’, but only really started academic publishing (rather than writing) when he had to support a family after the 2007–2008 financial crash. A lot of his work has been supporting activists doing research on their own movements’ practice. He co-founded the activist-academic movement research journal *Interface*, and is involved in

the Movement Learning Catalyst project. He sees academia as a day job that can give a bit of scope for activist work, rather than defining who he is or what he does.

Anna was involved in activism before becoming a researcher. She came from a small town in rural Poland and moved to the city where she got involved in the student and tenants' rights movements and campaigns for several years. She studied in several countries (Scotland, Canada, Poland, Ireland) before finding a space that would let her research movements in a way that fitted with her values and commitments. The Occupy movement took off as she was beginning her research career, and she changed her topic so as to accompany that movement in Dublin and Oakland. Since then she has been based in Norway, England and Poland, and working with anti-fracking movements and, more recently, communities impacted by the new space race.

Alberto was a first-generation college student from a working-class neighbourhood in Madrid. Because of this, he never thought of becoming a scholar as an option; he left the university after his BA and had no relationship with academia for almost a decade. During this time he was heavily involved in Spanish autonomous movements, popular education and Latin American solidarity. He eventually moved to Ireland, doing factory work before going back to university for postgraduate study.

Because of his activist history, he was never interested in 'studying' social movements, but rather in 'thinking and working together with' movement activists, exploring engaged and collaborative methodologies that can help to produce knowledge useful for the movements themselves. Alberto won funding for a series of research projects developing dialogues between social movements and academia in Spain, South Africa and Peru, as well as taking research assistant jobs in other projects. He currently works in a pan-European project developing strategic training for activists and popular educators.

While studying for her MA in Mumbai, Sutapa became acutely aware of rights-based movements and politics of the body around exploitation of women, the working class and minority communities. Apparently minor episodes from childhood had already motivated her to understand how history, development and power had shaped the gendered roles and activities of Indigenous (Adivasi) people. Seeking to understand Indigenous survival movements, she became acquainted with anti-colonial movements.

Moving to Europe and identifying as a migrant, Sutapa became involved with migrant justice and squatting movements as a participant and a researcher. Moving between scholarships and contract posts in several countries, she found that endless reading of theoretical and empirical studies was not enough to understand the mechanisms of Indigenous or migrant movements, and that these studies did not speak to her movement experience. Instead, she participated in movements and collected stories from activists to write about their life challenges. She suggests that ethnographers who are passionate about movements from below, in or from the Global South, should work on many different fronts because of the multiple inequalities involved. Where Western conceptualisations of identity theory have proven insufficient, ethical and participatory field research can centre the experiences and struggles of those involved.

Activist experiences, migrant lives, class and gender inequality, practical and emotional distance from academia, and a primary commitment to our fellow activists: all of these are common to people researching social movements. We hope that these stories help readers to see possibilities for themselves and to avoid being intimidated by the hierarchical dramas of intellectual work; work which movements often do much better than universities. We all

have messy stories, but we, and many other people with similarly messy stories in different dimensions, manage to survive, do good research, enjoy the process and contribute to our movements.

The Challenges of Doing Social Movement Research in the 2020s

In the following chapters, we have not only invited our authors to share their knowledge, skills and analysis of particular methods and approaches, but also asked them to reflect in a genuine way on the challenges that they have been facing in doing research about and with social movements. Therefore, across the pages of this *Handbook* are written multiple stories of personal, political, institutional and economic hardship and adversity that researchers all over the world have been facing while doing this kind of work. Far from being an ‘externality’ of the research process, these challenges constitute an inherent part of research dynamics that shape its outcomes and impact to a considerable degree. While these challenges are often context-specific, we think that readers will find many parallels between their own experiences of researching social movements and those described in this *Handbook*. For those new to the field, these reflections can offer a pre-emptive warning, a motivational example, an interesting piece of information for a comparative analysis, or simply a heart-warming confirmation that others also encounter similar challenges all the time. We invite the readers to dive into individual chapters to study some of the specific challenges of doing social movement research. In this section, however, we wanted to offer a more general outlook on some of the main challenges that we have identified in this *Handbook*, as well as a few others that may need to be brought to light a bit more, considering issues that may become even more important in the future.

Many chapters in this *Handbook* identify relevance to movements as one of the most important challenges facing social movement research. Studying social movements should not only create new knowledge in ways that are inclusive and representative of the views and dynamics of the movements themselves, but also be relevant to the work and organising of those movements. However, this immediately brings up a host of potential challenges: from agreeing on what constitutes relevant research, to ensuring that the aim of creating relevant knowledge still contributes to movement building rather than being simply about the issues that activists organise against. There is also a problem with accepting that genuine research should not just confirm what we already know. In fact, the best research often comes from an understanding that a lot of the answers that we are looking for may be ambiguous, and not necessarily what we thought they would be. Hence, the relevance of this kind of research may be questioned or resisted, and it may require considerable effort on the part of movements to incorporate the findings in their own practice, that is, to accept that their research is indeed relevant to what they are doing. These processes are iterative and open to future evaluations as the circumstances and membership change; therefore, the meaning of what exactly constitutes relevant research is bound to change over time.

Scholars can contribute to social movements in a wide variety of ways, from attracting funding to participating in training activities, strategic litigation, networking, and so forth. As mentioned above, there is no extra-situational definition of ‘relevance’; what counts as relevant in any given research situation must be mutually defined, and recursively discussed, among all parties involved in a project. Many chapters in the *Handbook* focus on the contributions that may emerge in the research process itself. Thus, this *Handbook* brings together an ecology of

action research methodologies (Arribas Lozano 2022), including participatory action research, Indigenous and decolonial methodologies, feminist research, activist or militant ethnography, and community-based research, among others. Researchers working within these diverse epistemic, theoretical and methodological traditions and practices have many themes in common.

First, they problematise the traditional politics of knowledge production, destabilising the definition of what counts as valid knowledge and theory; and raise critical questions about what the purpose of research is, who it is useful for, whose knowledge is taken seriously, and who we write for and how. They put the questions of knowledge for what, for whom and with whom at the centre of social movement research.

Second, they are grounded in dialogical engagements with their research participants, whose concerns, questions and interests will inform the research design and implementation; they work together with social movement activists as co-researchers around jointly established agendas or problems, instead of prioritising the intra-disciplinary questions and debates that structure the field. In this sense, they seek to bridge theory and practice, fostering a dialogue between academic and non-academic knowledges and knowledge producers. This will turn fieldwork into a time and space for co-analysis, co-conceptualisation and co-theorisation (Rappaport 2008). Within these frameworks, the many challenges, tensions and contradictions that may arise in research are neither denied nor disregarded; instead, they become a key part of the process of knowledge production itself (Hale 2008).

Third, they are aware of the power relations involved in research, and undertake methodological innovation/experimentation as a way to achieve their goals. Different types of collaboration are explored throughout the research process; together, scholars and research subjects define the research project, process and products – what knowledge should be produced, how and for what purposes – and sometimes carry out collective analysis and theorisation.

Fourth, moving away from practices of academic extractivism, these approaches seek to build bridges between research and action, knowledge and practice. They are driven by a commitment to social transformation, trying to produce social science that is relevant and useful for the social movements or communities we work with, and bringing forth different types of outputs that the co-researchers will be able to use as they see fit to advance their own projects and struggles; for example, informing future actions of the movement, helping to restructure its internal organisation, redefining strategies and alliances, generating new campaigns, and so forth (Juris 2007).

In sum, these research traditions aim to create knowledge that will be empirically grounded, conceptual and theoretically innovative, and most importantly, valuable for both the scholars and the social movements involved, generating a ‘movement-relevant approach to theory that puts the needs of social movements at its heart’ (Bevington and Dixon 2005, p. 186). For this purpose, these scholars are often connected to (rooted in) actual collective struggles and/or movements for social justice, articulating research in ways that can be relevant within and beyond academia.

Likewise, there is a growing recognition that academic social movement research, despite its internal heterogeneity, remains modelled on the historical experience of collective action in the West, the post-industrial liberal democratic societies where its dominant paradigms originated, especially the United States (US). Northern-centric approaches may be ill-equipped to grasp the specificities of social movements in the Global South, wherein colonialism and post-colonial state formation influenced the emergence of distinct forms of mobilisation, cultures of activism and ‘social movement landscapes’ (Cox 2016).

The core countries of the Global North constitute the epicentre of academic social movement scholarship, which routinely fails to engage and integrate conceptual and theoretical innovations being produced across the Global South. The challenge is therefore to reshape the frontiers of social movement research, redefining the field in non-ethnocentric terms. Hence, social movement researchers should: (1) explore the debates, analytical frameworks, theoretical developments, concepts and research methods being crafted by Southern researchers and movements; (2) analyse the factors (structural, institutional or otherwise) that have prevented the emergence of alternative/Southern paradigms and research agendas for the study of social movements; and (3) identify opportunities for dialogue, collaboration and cross-fertilisation between dominant social movement studies and theory produced in/from the Global South. We need to learn the history and current state of social movement research in different Southern regions/areas, and to understand how Southern researchers perceive the field: Are dominant paradigms useful to analyse collective action in these regions? Are they contested and/or reworked? From the point of view of Southern scholars, what are the main limitations of dominant paradigms, and how could these limitations be overcome? Attention must also be paid to the situation of social movement scholars in different institutional contexts across the Global South: How do they relate to their own local movements? Do they have access to funding, research networks, or other resources and forms of institutional support? Finally, we must analyse what social movement scholars, North and South, consider that a field of social movement studies not dominated by perspectives from the Global North would imply in practical terms; that is, regarding research funding priorities, journals and publication policies, international collaboration, issues of language and translation, and so on.

The global wealth of movement knowledge that has been recorded in languages other than English should not be underestimated in this context, but constitutes another challenge in researching social movements from a less provincial (Northern) perspective. Engaging with research from outside of our immediate contexts is difficult because it is connected to the ability to find and understand movements that may have formed, and people who have lived, in very different circumstances from our own. Reaching beyond what a particular movement or activist knows best – in terms of geographical location, political tradition, historical experience or strategic practice – is perhaps the most challenging task of movement research; a task that this *Handbook* is hopefully going to make a little bit easier by highlighting research methods and experiences from across the world.

Our list of challenges facing social movement research would be incomplete without mentioning the persisting and, in some places, growing authoritarianism that puts social movements and people researching with them in the spotlight, if not in direct danger. Surveillance, threats, intimidation and even killings have been common reactions of state agencies (sometimes working in tandem with private corporations) to social dissent and protest. This creates particular challenges for those researching social movements as it extends the scope of their responsibility, in that they need to consider the effects of their actions on themselves as well as on those who they are working with. Certainly this is the case in all contexts, but researchers working with social movements in authoritarian regimes are particularly vulnerable.

Growing authoritarian tendencies worldwide, and advancing surveillance capabilities of states and other entities, also coincide with the intensifying repression of social movements in ostensibly democratic states. Activists everywhere are often criminalised, put under surveillance or repressed in one way or another, often regardless of the actual nature or scope of their protest. By doing research with social movements, researchers open themselves up to being

identified or misidentified as activists or sympathisers who should be subjected to the same kind of treatment as other campaigners. This may jeopardise the safety of researchers and the legitimacy of their findings. However, on a more macro level, these surveillance dynamics are very well known to social movements and hence make them often intrinsically suspicious of outside (or even internal) research. This presents a challenge of demonstrating the value of research to the social movement at the same time as proving the researcher's legitimacy and good intentions.

Social movements, by their very nature, operate in contentious fields where sides are often well defined by their opposition to each other. Arguably, this has become even more pronounced in recent years with the rise of social media. Although initially praised for its ability to mobilise wide and diverse publics, it is now commonly understood that social media breeds polarisation and can ignite and sustain conflict in society, especially by spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories. Political disagreements on social media, as in real life, are inevitable and often generative of emancipatory arguments. However, there is a difference between treating conflict as a basic feature of social life that is often necessary for bringing about human liberation on the one hand, and hyping up conflict for the political advantage of powerful players on the other. Unfortunately, thanks to its enormous reach, social media has intensified the latter dynamics. Since, at the present moment, campaigning and organising seem nearly impossible without using social media platforms, movements are now often embroiled in the powerful, antagonistic and polarising dynamics that drive social media algorithms.

It is always risky to speculate about the future and how important this problem is going to be going forward, so it may be useful to understand it in more general terms. Namely, today's social media dynamics can be seen as an example of a particular way in which we structure many of our social and political relations. The mechanism that drives this process relies on amplifying the opposite and the uncompromising positions, rather than the more nuanced and complex understandings of the matter at hand. If this mechanism persists into the future, social movements are facing a real challenge in that they may be seen as part of the problem rather than the solution. Social movements are predisposed to use the oppositional and polarising language that social media is thriving on. In the past, this has been the main (and effective) method of mobilising uninterested publics to stand up for their rights and attempt to change repressive regimes. Currently, the same mechanisms have been co-opted by mainstream party politics and act to create low-level conflict and perpetual polarisation in society as well as various echo chambers. In some places, this has reached the point where those subscribing to the terms of the debate set by mainstream politics find it almost impossible to agree on the most fundamental facts of their social and political reality.

This presents a further challenge to researching social movements, for a number of reasons. For example, movement participants may be very much invested in the polarising dynamics. They may see them as an inevitable social fact or (sometimes rightly) perceive their opposition (such as authoritarian state apparatuses, for example) as their mortal enemies. Researching social movements may inevitably contribute to this polarisation, especially – and paradoxically – if researchers do what they should do: that is, prioritise the bottom-up perspectives of the movements that they are working with. It is very difficult to understand your opponent if the only thing that you know about them is a single-dimensional, caricatured picture that your own movement created for polemic purposes. Sometimes opponents are genuinely murderous

states and fascist paramilitaries; at other times, movement success depends on creating new, strategic alliances with groups that have previously been hostile to movement gains.

Hence, social movement research inevitably faces the challenges stemming from the broader socio-political dynamics of conflict and polarisation. Social movement struggles arise out of real injustice, inequality and discrimination, so it is extremely hard to rise above that and to consider one's tactics from the point of view of their impact on the wider society. One potential research strategy which could minimise the chances that polarisation will be misused by powerful actors for political advantage may be comparative research that involves exploring other movement tactics and organisations across time and space. This should not relativise the injustices and issues that movements are facing today, but by showing their persistence throughout time and space it can reveal unexpected solutions and perspectives that may shed new light on our current battles.

Movements themselves often have internal hierarchies, and conservative organisational elites often feel threatened by work that seeks out the voices of less powerful or more radical people within an organisation or movement (and may be in a position to block access or sanction participants for engaging with research). Where movements have major internal conflicts, researchers can easily be identified with one 'side' and then find it hard to gain access to other factions within the movement, thus also making it harder for movement participants to understand their own movement from a less partial point of view.

Finally, and connecting all of these: movements are inherently contested. They exist because significant numbers of people are so strongly affected by an issue that they take extra-institutional action around it, while the interests involved in the issue are substantial enough that they cannot be overcome by simply drawing attention to the problem. At some level, then, movement research necessarily involves taking sides: whether this means listening seriously to activists in stigmatised social groups in the teeth of public discourses that present them as terrorists or the ignorant victims of manipulation, or paying attention to the voices of women, working-class people, racialised activists, LGBTQ+ people and others who are treated as 'not significant' by conservative movement leaderships seeking to appeal to an imagined mainstream.

Much of this *Handbook* engages with this problem: How can we position ourselves within this space of conflict and controversy without simply reproducing our own pre-existing position? Celebration and condemnation are necessary parts of conflict, but they can usually be done without the added effort of primary research. Conversely, actually finding out and getting beyond our pre-existing understanding is often key to helping movements to actually do better in engaging with their own complexity and challenges, and the diversity and structures of the world their participants come from and that they are trying to change.

Against Movement (and Academic) Provincialism

We are all products of a very particular time and space. We know our own social world, how politics, ideas, culture, religion, and so on, work where we are, what kinds of things movements in our space do; but very few of us start with much of a sense of what comparable movements do in other countries (particularly those that speak other languages), what the history of our own movement is beyond the current generation, what happens in other movements, or (often) even how other organisations in the same movement operate. Activist training that brings people together across different countries and regions, different organisations and

different movements, and introduces a bit of movement history is often eye-opening even for experienced participants in a single movement organisation at a single time and space: ‘learning from each other’s struggles’ is a huge resource.

However, if we are victims of the kind of movement provincialism described here, we often do not even know it. Particularly if we live in globally powerful places – the US and United Kingdom (UK) are particularly good examples – we may be almost unaware of what happens in movements in the Global South, or movements that work through other languages, or through English but in other countries. We may well inhabit movement bubbles where most or all of what we know about movement strategy and tactics is represented by what has become normal in our own movement, or even (often) in the fragment of our own movement that we identify with and that our organisation exists within.

Put another way, it takes a huge political effort to stop normalising and eternalising the very specific constraints and possibilities available in our own moment of neoliberal crisis, our own particular forms of racialised patriarchy, the ways in which our own movements are deformed and demobilised by the state context they happen in; and to think critically about our own situation. This, of course, is why good movement thinking has always been international; it has paid a lot of attention to activist history; it thinks comparatively across different movements, organisations and traditions; and in so doing opens a wider space where we do not need to act as prisoners of our immediate context, condemned to respond to it without really being able to change it.

One other kind of provincialism and normalising of local power structures is thematised throughout this *Handbook*: academic and intellectual power structures. In the twilight of neoliberalism, movements control relatively little of their own ‘means of mental production’ (movement newspapers, periodicals, podcasts, books; movement training, education and research; spaces for debate and discussion) and are strongly dependent on the structures of the wider society to reach what often appear as major radical achievements: a particular tradition within academia, a for-profit but radical publishing or online project, the workings of particular social media platforms, celebrity effects shaped by mainstream media, and so on.

This means that all too often we allow our definitions of ‘how we can think’ to be shaped by what works on X/Twitter (see above), what kinds of radical books get attention, what can get the endorsements of activist celebrities who will boost its audience, what will find acceptance within the fragment of academia we have access to. This book pays particular attention to local academic power structures, which are not the only space where movement research happens but are certainly one of the most powerful.

Academics, even radical academics, are often themselves deeply provincial in their thinking. Many are deeply committed to the practices of a particular discipline (sociology, anthropology, geography, or whatever) as it works in their own country (often, national traditions vary hugely). A scarily high proportion of people supervising postgraduate research in social movements are not themselves social movement researchers; they may even have only done a limited amount of work around issues and policies connected to movements.

This means that activist researchers’ experience is often of being firmly told – with all the power of academic hierarchy and the appearance of radical sympathy – that there is only one possible way to do movement research. Of course the whole of this *Handbook* demonstrates the very wide range of ways – in different academic disciplines, outside academia, in different countries, in different movements, in different intellectual traditions – in which movement research is carried out.

We strongly encourage anyone thinking of doing movement research within academia to ask around and look around: talk to different people in different departments, different universities and different countries. Talk to *compañer@s*, friends and comrades who have done some research themselves about their experience. Engage with a variety of groups and organisations, and try to get a real sense of history and internationalism. Look at different examples of research on your movement and other movements, and find out where and how it was done. (Read the free, online movement research journal *Interface* and get in touch with some of the authors.) Even though we are always necessarily active in, or researching, a specific group, network, campaign or organisation (or more than one of them), we can understand that these exist within wider movements, which have a history greater than the organisation, which may have other tendencies within them and work in different ways elsewhere.

From our point of view, what is crucial in encountering academia is to keep your movement's needs in focus; as well as your own personal situation. Otherwise beginning researchers readily become clients (or victims) of individual academics and are steered onto pathways that leave them as precarious researchers, entirely dependent on what may be a very local and fragile academic marketplace for their future employment, and cut off from the movements that brought them into academia in the first place.

All of these are things that lie within our control, by expanding our reading, thinking and contacts. There are, though, other dimensions of social movements that make them 'objectively' difficult to study. One obvious one is that movements move: their situation changes rapidly and dramatically across time.

Anna's experience is a good example here. She moved to Ireland to do research just as the Occupy movement began, and switched her strategy to research Occupy, in Dublin and Oakland, California. However as we now know with the benefit of hindsight, Occupy did not last very long (the Dublin Occupy, which lasted five months, was one of the longest-lasting globally), so that while she was able to participate and contribute to this extraordinary experience, by the time it came to do interviews it was already in the past and she was talking to people who had been in Occupy and were now finding other organisational forms to take the project further.

Alberto's experience was pretty much the opposite. In 2008, he started conducting fieldwork in a relatively small activist network in Spain. He was not studying a specific movement, but rather exploring what he (pompously) termed 'the emerging logic and practices of collective action', that is, how and why certain grassroots networks were collectively rethinking and transforming their practices, discourses, organisational forms, and so on. In 2011, after more than three years of fieldwork, the 15M Movement unexpectedly erupted across the country, replicating in a much larger (incomparable) scale and intensity many of the practices – the ways of doing politics – that up to that moment had only existed as political experimentations in small activist communities. Alberto's research, and the activists he was working and thinking with, were completely and happily overtaken by a massive wave of mobilisations.

For other researchers, however, movements have been broken by severe repression (it may even become unsafe to carry on research on the subject), have gone from being lively grassroots projects to narrowly defined non-governmental organisations, or may decide to refuse any cooperation with researchers. Social movements do move, and we need to be aware of this if we want our research projects to survive some of the changes that are likely to happen in the period between writing research and funding proposals for different bodies, and actually starting our fieldwork.

HOW THIS *HANDBOOK* WORKS AND WHAT YOU CAN DO WITH IT

We have edited this *Handbook* (and supported authors to write) in ways which assume that you as reader have good reasons for researching movements, but may not be familiar with any specific political, intellectual or academic language or theory. Too much academic work, in particular, is implicitly written ‘for God’, in a way intended for teachers and examiners, to seek the approval of senior researchers and funding committees; just as too much movement work is implicitly written for likes, to be seen as a morally worthy person, in order to ring familiar rhetorical bells that people automatically respond to, to signal membership in a particular space. We have tried instead to produce a book that you might find helpful in developing your own practice.

You may never have done social research before, or only have read about one or two ways of doing research (perhaps in the natural sciences). You may have some ideas about epistemology – what makes something true, how we can claim to know things, and so on – but very few people outside of a handful of academic disciplines are likely to even use that word.

Not knowing a particular word, or a particular intellectual language, does not mean that you do not know anything. If you are already thinking about researching movements, you probably know a lot (though sometimes it may not feel that way, faced with intimidating texts). You have already thought about major issues in society and may be actively engaged in trying to change them. You have a sense of this process as being a movement, something more complex than a one-off campaign, and which actually needs research. You may have done a lot of your own reading around things that you think are relevant to your movement practice; maybe you are heavily involved in strategic or theoretical debates within your own movement. You may have written for activist publications or recorded podcasts. And beyond this, maybe you are a creative writer, an artist, a musician, a performance poet, or someone who thinks deeply about how human relationships work: within your movement, community, family, friendship circles, and so on.

All of this knowledge will stand you in good stead when researching movements, even if there is often an unnecessary intimidation and infantilisation that comes from academic hierarchies. We do need to do a bit of unlearning – or rather standing back from our own perspective and coming to see it as something that can also be expressed in other ways, and that stands alongside many different perspectives – if we want to learn how to speak in a new way. Learning any new language is challenging, and it can be helpful to remember that it sits alongside what you already know, the world in which you are a skilled and respected activist, a valued and thoughtful friend, a writer who is taken seriously by people whose opinion you value, and so on. Paradoxically, in changing we both become more grounded in ourselves, and freer in relation to tighter definitions of who we are. We hope that this *Handbook* speaks to you in ways that are helpful from this point of view.

Part-by-Part Overview

We have divided this *Handbook* into an introduction and three parts, covering three different needs that we remember ourselves having, and experience others as having, in coming into movement research. We have sought out authors who we respect for their work in the field; both long-established academics and newer researchers, engaged scholars and activist researchers.

We have deliberately looked across many different movements, political and intellectual traditions, asking potential contributors across the Global South and semi-peripheral locations such as Eastern and Central Europe. The result is by no means fully representative: many hierarchies shape research, including shaping who is in a position to contribute to a collection such as this. To say (as we believe to be the case) that to date this is the most diverse international collection on researching social movements in terms of race and ethnicity, gender and social class, is not to say that we are happy with the final result. It is to say that this *Handbook* itself, like much of our own work, is also intended as a contribution to widening participation, not only in academic movement research, but also in movement-based research.

This chapter, written by the four editors, consists of an extended introduction to the field, explaining what social movement research is and why methodology is a challenge. We are grateful to the publishers for making this first section available free: particularly important for movement activists who do not have access to university libraries, and to people trying to put together research and funding proposals before they have that kind of access.

Part I consists of eight short chapters, focusing on what we call research methodology. Like the word ‘method’, ‘methodology’ is used in very different ways in different disciplines, languages and political traditions. In this introductory chapter, we talk about methods of data collection, meaning how you actually go about collecting interviews, doing focus groups, researching documents, looking at online material, and so on. That is different from research methodologies in the sense that we use it for Part I, meaning broader perspectives on what we think we are doing when we do research: how do we think knowledge is produced, how do we see its relationship to the social world, what kinds of things do we think can be researched, what are the ‘politics of knowledge’? However in some contexts people use ‘methodology’ to mean ‘method of data collection’, or use either word (method or methodology) to mean both, often without explaining this.

In Part I we have chapters on how feminists and Marxists think about social movement research; what it looks like from an Indigenous or global point of view; activist and pluralist ways of understanding this activity; how research works in repressive contexts or in a specific global region (Southeast Asia); and how we can see movements as themselves producing knowledge. These chapters are not intended to bounce you into choosing the ‘right’ approach; they are placed side by side in order to create a space where you can reflect on how you understand the project you are starting to think about.

Because research is a very practical and challenging activity that reshapes your understanding as you do it, how you think about methodology should change as you go from simply consuming research to producing it; but you cannot take the first steps without having some provisional sense of what you are doing, any more than you can simply ‘do art’ or ‘have a relationship’ from a completely blank slate. These chapters, written by people who have lived with these questions for a long time, share valuable experience that can help you to orient yourself and make the choices you have to make when committing to a research project, which will always be quite specific in terms of what movement you look at, where and when, which parts of it and what you are interested in, what data you will collect, how you will analyse it and what you are going to do with it. The emphasis in Part I is: why are we doing this and what do we think it is?

Part II presents 16 chapters on different methods of data collection and analysis, answering the question of ‘how to do this’, as well as, of course, showing what the strengths and challenges of particular methods are. The possibilities are very wide-ranging: surveys and

qualitative interviews, ethnography and visual research, counting protest events and looking at grey literature, exploring identities or outcomes, analysing frames and ideologies, thinking in historical or narrative terms, looking at how particular movements act, the back-and-forth of research, or the practice of critical oral history.

You might find that Part II offers you a method that you can simply adopt and apply in your own context; or you may find that you need to develop your own synthesis, based on one or more of these possibilities that will work for the movement situation you are researching, the constraints you are working under, your own pre-existing relationships and strengths. The chapters in this part are rich in examples of concrete research projects that can help you to think about your own research needs.

Finally, Part III asks: what is it good for? While purely academic social movements research sometimes avoids this question, this *Handbook* takes the view that – like many other fields of research, from nursing to architecture – research about human practice is enriched intellectually by engaging with practitioners. As many of our authors note, there are also important political, ethical and methodological imperatives for doing so: turning people’s lives and struggles into raw material for our own individual career advancement is pretty repugnant behaviour.

In this part we have asked experienced researchers to share something of their own understandings of how movement research can work in movements. These seven chapters discuss the history of action research and contemporary participatory action research; community-based research and research that feeds into movement learning; how movement organisations use research, research on movement outcomes, and how to make our research more useful.

We do not imagine that most people will read this book from end to end; this is not what handbooks are for. We do, though, encourage readers who have made it this far to explore some of the different approaches to movement research in Part I, consider some of the different methods of data collection and analysis in Part II, and take seriously some of the possible contributions that research can make in Part III. A good social movement researcher is not just someone who knows how to collect data and analyse it; they are also clear why they are doing research and what they mean by that, and they are someone who has a good sense of how their own activity will help practitioners and, ultimately, the wider world.

Chapter-by-Chapter Overview

This book has three parts, 32 chapters and a mix of emerging and experienced researchers and activist scholars from both the Global North and South.

Following this introduction, Part I discusses the methodologies of movement research. It opens with Geoffrey Pleyers’s (Chapter 2) comprehensive analysis of how globalised movement activism can be researched. Drawing on the author’s previous research across five continents, the chapter asks how to engage in a dialogue on how to transform the world into a better place. An intersectional feminist perspective is used by Özge Yaka and Sevil Çakır Kılınçoğlu (Chapter 3) to explore two different cases of social movement mobilisation in Turkey and Iran, discussing the methodological principles and strategies helping us to construct gender as an analytical category in social movement research. Xochitl Leyva Solano and Axel Köhler (Chapter 4) challenge the dominant theoretical and power constructions in social movement literature, drawing on Indigenous research in Latin America and the contributions of the Zapatistas to decolonise knowledge. In a related vein, Alberto Arribas Lozano (Chapter 5)

elaborates on the richness of collective learning, research and autonomous knowledge-making within social movements in Spain and Peru, emphasising the continual cycle between thought and action that takes place in/through struggle.

A fascinating chapter by John Krinsky (Chapter 6), drawing on popular movements in the US, shows how Marxism can help us to think through different forms of challenge to oppression. Paola Rivetti (Chapter 7) takes us to Iranian and Turkish political landscapes, between 2005 and 2022, discussing the various stages of how to do social movement field work traversing state violence where movements seek to assert autonomy. Gabriel Facal, Catherine Scheer, Sarah Anaïs Andrieu, Joel Mark Baysa-Barredo, Giuseppe Bolotta, Gloria Truly Estrelita, Rosalia Sciortino, Saskia E. Wieringa and Wijayanto (Chapter 8) examine how social movement research is configured in a particular (Southeast Asian) regional context, exploring co-creation and collaboration in different forms of research on and with social movements. They show how social struggles come about to build a cross-sectoral activist dialogue embedded across disciplines. Moving from this empowering chapter, Donatella della Porta (Chapter 9) elaborates on the growth of social movements studies and in particular the practice of methodological pluralism at the Centre on Social Movement Studies (COSMOS) in Italy. This chapter sums up the first part of the book, on approaches to researching social movements.

Part II of the book brings together contributions on data collection and analysis in movements research. The part starts with an extraordinary story of developing a critical oral history of the US civil rights movement by Geri Augusto, Danita Mason-Hogans and Wesley Hogan (Chapter 10). They highlight the many dimensions involved in recovering the struggles of the past for the needs of the present. John Postill's Chapter 11 captures the complex area of using digital ethnography in movements research. Postill uses online/offline data to study Spain's *indignad@s* movement in 2010–2011, and for an ongoing online study of the right-wing 'anti-woke' movement. Cinzia Padovani (Chapter 12) contributes a chapter on how to research social movements' media and communication activism. Similarly contrasting case studies on progressive and ultra-right movements in Italy, she discusses the importance of using multiple kinds of data for effective ethnography. Carlos Y. Flores (Chapter 13) draws on his fieldwork experience using visual methods with Mayan social movements in Guatemala, who are currently defending their political and socio-cultural rights to land. Such methods have gone from being produced from above by privileged outsiders, to dialogical ones and centring participants' own video material. Magdalena Sztandara (Chapter 14) uses militant ethnography as a politically committed approach to do research among and within activist networks in the former Yugoslavia, using multiple identities and roles that shift between reflective solidarity, empathic insight and analysis. Her chapter reflects on how researchers can relate well to activists who are subject to exploitative research but are themselves also knowledge producers.

Sutapa Chattopadhyay's (Chapter 15) focus is on narratives as a decolonial and feminist method to study Indigenous (Adivasi) oustees in the Narmada Valley anti-dam movement. She highlights the importance of centring the story-telling of Indigenous people affected by the dominant narratives of development. Keneilwe Phatshwane's Chapter 16 highlights the often unacknowledged cultural assumptions of the conventional interview. She shows the potential of alternative methods, rooted in the conversation styles of Indigenous cultures, for research in such communities. Minati Dash (Chapter 17) explores the ambiguities in interviews of Indigenous participants in a movement against mining corporates in eastern India.

She highlights how these show the contradictory meanings of social movement participation in the Global South.

Emily Rainsford and Clare Saunders's Chapter 18 discusses how researchers have attempted to tackle the challenge of carrying out surveys of demonstrators. Presenting and updating the 'caught in the act of protest' methodology used across six European countries, they offer a contemporary response to this research challenge. By contrast, Tiago Carvalho's Chapter 19 introduces the method of protest event analysis, which aims to give a systematic overview of most protests in a particular period and place; in his case, Spanish and Portuguese protests during the European financial crisis from 2008 onwards. He similarly offers a survey of recent innovations in the method. Aurora Perego and Stefania Vicari (Chapter 20) discuss a range of approaches used to analyse movements' discursive frames, the way they articulate and seek to spread their view of the world, and outline the approach developed by Vicari and used in Perego's research on LGBTQIA* movements in Spain and Italy.

Ayse Sargin's Chapter 21 discusses how to research identity and culture in local grassroots movements resisting the hydropower boom in Turkey. This chapter offers a practical perspective on how to plan and carry out such research, with particular reference to place-based struggles. In Chapter 22, Susann Pham explores the challenges of researching the ideological dimension of movement activism. How can we understand and research the contradictory nature of ideology in movements, as activists both operate within but also contest, reconfigure and break with hegemonic ideologies? In Chapter 23 Arnab Roy Chowdhury takes a spatio-temporal, cultural, historical and institutional context-specific approach to studying movements' repertoires of contention: the tools, strategies and techniques they use; in this case of the Narmada Bachao Andolan in India. Following this, David W. Everson and Robert M. Fishman (Chapter 24) discuss the challenges of comparative research, exploring the cultural and political contexts that explain movements' different impact; in their case, the American Indian Movement's impact in different US states (Everson) and the impact of different pathways to democratisation in Spain and Portugal on movements' effectiveness today (Fishman). In the concluding chapter of Part II, Stefan Berger (Chapter 25) highlights what social movements research misses by ignoring history, core dimensions of historical methods and some key empirical and theoretical contributions that historians have made to understanding movements.

Part III of the *Handbook* is on the uses and applications of social movement research. It starts (Chapter 26) with three activists, Tokelo Mahlakoane, Eustine Matsepene and Mmathapelo Thobejane, who together with Jane Burt deliver a riveting account of community-based environmental defenders resisting mining corporations in South Africa. They do so by following the activist research done by the Sekhukune Environmental Justice Network (SEJA), and draw on their own transformative learning experience from the process. Following this chapter, Anna Szolucha (Chapter 27) discusses her community-based research on fracking in the UK, outlining what such research means in practice. She argues for the crucial importance of centring the stories and experiences of communities impacted upon by environmental damage. Joanne Rappaport (Chapter 28) then explores the distinctly Latin American approach to participatory action research that emerged in the early 1970s out of the collaboration between Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, and peasant and Indigenous organisations, especially the National Association of Peasant Users.

Participatory action research in social movements today is explored by Laurence Cox (Chapter 29) as a reflective, engaged approach to research, drawing on 25 years of supporting

activists researching their own movement practice in Ireland and beyond. Movement consultant Natasha Adams (Chapter 30) reflects on her own experience in the UK to explore how researchers can most usefully intervene in a movement, and how research can be used by other movement actors as a strategy to strengthen their organisations. Katrin Uba (Chapter 31) discusses the challenge of researching the outcomes of social movements. How can we distinguish social movements from everything else that is happening (such as voting), rule out other possible causes of change and, finally, demonstrate causal relationships between movement activity and outcomes in many different aspects of social life? Finally, veteran scholar-activist Steve Chase (Chapter 32) starts from the debate over violence and non-violence between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to explore the development of civil resistance research in dialogue with movement activists, highlighting the importance of a ‘movement mindset’ for researchers who want their work to support the advancement of justice and freedom.

THE FUTURES OF MOVEMENT RESEARCH

Above we have highlighted some of what we feel are the defining challenges of social movements research in the 2020s: the relationship between researchers and movements, the problem of overcoming Northern-centric perspectives, the difficulties of research in authoritarian contexts, the misleading overlap between social media’s polarising tendencies and movements as more substantively conflictual agents, movements’ own internal hierarchies. Good movement research is already engaging with these in many ways, and these issues reappear in the research reflected in many of the chapters of this *Handbook*. We want to conclude, however, by noting some themes that to the best of our knowledge are not yet systematically considered by research, but will have to be in the future, as they characterise key elements of the movements that are now being researched.

Already before the COVID-19 pandemic, research suggested that levels of movement mobilisation globally have reached a historic high (Ortiz et al. 2022; Silver et al. 2021). The global ‘movement of movements’ against neoliberalism, inaugurated by the Zapatista uprising in 1994, saw large-scale mobilisation in many countries, notably in Latin America, North America, Europe and India, in the early 2000s; in Latin America this fed into a ‘pink tide’ where movements influenced states in a wide range of different ways. Following the 2007–2008 financial crash a new peak, mostly on a national scale, was reached in the uprisings of the Middle East and North Africa around 2011, coinciding with the ‘movement of the squares’ in Spain and Greece in particular, and the rather smaller Occupy movements of the English-speaking world. US media and academia, with their global reach, tend to signal-boost local events as if they were global; after the decline of Occupy, they started to pay more attention to protests, with local events such as the Women’s March after President Trump’s inauguration, resistance to his Muslim travel ban (both 2017), or more recently protests around the right to abortion (2022–2023). However, the US is far from being the centre of social movements globally, in either absolute or relative terms.

Massive struggles such as the uprisings in Chile (2019–2022), the second Hong Kong uprising (2019–2020), protests defending Muslim citizenship in India (2019–2020) or resistance to the military coup in Myanmar (2021–present) dwarf US levels of mobilisation, but without receiving the same degree of sustained attention. The very extensive *gilets jaunes* movement in France (2018–2019) has been increasingly overshadowed in media attention elsewhere by

the right-wing appropriation of the symbol in Anglophone countries. We can also mention the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall decolonisation struggles in South Africa, and then in the UK (2015–2016), women’s protests against authoritarian regimes such as the Saudi government (2018), massive feminist mobilisations in Spain (2018–2019), women’s protests against the restrictive abortion laws in Poland (2020–2021), or the Swat Valley struggle for girls’ right to education in Pakistan (2009–present). Proportionately, Ireland’s decade of social movement mobilisation (resisting the commodification of water in 2014–2016, for marriage equality in 2016 and for abortion rights in 2018) have been on an extraordinary scale; while revolutionary situations such as the Zapatistas (1994–present) or Rojava (2012–present) involve massive and continuous levels of popular mobilisation in many forms.

Other movements were international from the start: the Fridays for Future school strikes (2018–present), for example. Extinction Rebellion, by contrast, presented by its UK media supporters as a global event, remained largely an Anglophone in-joke (Gardner et al. 2022). The #NiUnaMenos (2015–present) movement against femicides, begun in Mexico and Argentina, spread throughout the Spanish-speaking world and beyond. On International Women’s Day (8 March) 2023, huge numbers of women from Mexico to Iran took to the streets in protest against femicide. Standing against the repression of global feminists that panned out during the pandemic, women and LGBTQI* people organised trans-feminist marches across the world, refusing to submit to the multiple forms of violence.

These are just a few examples of the growing levels and significance of social movements around the world in recent years. Globally, academic movement research – and most movement organisations – date to the period after the last such huge global surge, of 1968 (Mohandesi et al. 2018). While researchers and activists in some contexts are familiar with local or regional surges of this kind (1989–1990 in the post-Soviet bloc; the protests of the early 2000s in Latin America and Western Europe; the events around 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa, Spain and Greece), it is only the last of these that is still alive in movement research, and then only in specific areas. A more general conception of movements that stretches to encompass events on this scale both numerically and globally is absent in most research approaches.

In this context we are faced with the challenge of conceptualising a huge diversity of themes, actors and tactics in a spatially complex situation. As suggested above, the world can seem very small from London or New York; or rather, local events can seem universal. Conversely, it is absolutely true that some movements, starting locally, are picked up in many different contexts; while others again are organised internationally. In a world which is deeply unequal economically, politically and culturally, ‘globalisation’ is not a flat process between equals.

This is no less true for movement actors: if journalists and academics easily notice the concerns and activities of people who are socially close to them and can mistakenly universalise a mobilisation which is socially very local, sometimes the activities of highly visible groups (not always privileged ones, as in the case of US Black activists) find a global resonance. Effective movements, of course, are networks (of individuals, informal groups and formal organisations; Diani 1992) and very often alliances, growing out of intersectional situations of oppression and exploitation, or bringing diverse coalitions together. Some of these movements became global, notably the Black Lives Movement from 2020, which resonated as far away as Australia around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody, and the #MeToo hashtag (2017–present) highlighting sexual harassment in the workplace and elsewhere.

Indigenous struggles against fossil fuel extraction and transport in the US and Canada (Standing Rock, Wet’suwet’en, and many others) are small in absolute numbers but hugely

significant, not least given the intersecting oppressions faced by their core participants, who are nonetheless able repeatedly to resist militarised policing on a brutal scale. These struggles have been continuous and multiple across North America for many years. Around the world, Indigenous struggles challenge many of the assumptions of a methodological nationalism that is also common in social movement studies. In Canada, for example, from the Oka Crisis to the Gustafsen Lake stand-off, Idle No More, the Ipperwash crisis, the ‘Water is Life’ movement and the Keep it in the Ground movement, to the Land Back movement, First Nations struggles have been a crucial dimension of the social movement landscape. Indigenous movements operate very differently in different contexts: in settler states such as the US and Canada, Australia and New Zealand; in postcolonial nation-states; in the ‘pluri-national’ experiments of the Andean region; or in the post-Soviet space, for example. Within all of these, too, Indigenous activists conflict with one another over the best strategies to pursue. Despite these complexities, Indigenous movements represent an autonomous exercise of political agency, an assertion of collective rights and a challenge to dominant accounts of world and local history: this decolonising demand, building on half a century of increasingly global solidarity between Indigenous movements and on half a millennium of effective resistance, is a powerful voice in the 21st century.

These processes have messy, uneven, erratic and long pathways, grounded in an attention to place, context and history which is often lacking in researchers and activists from dominant populations. A focus on Indigeneity is therefore transformative for movement research, understanding how some people’s everyday lives in place become new geographies of resistance that intersect with power in surprising ways. For example, Biocca (2023) explores how one Indigenous people has consistently resisted capitalist accumulation through dispossession, while another has a long history of negotiation and clientelism.

Part of the hope of movement research is that attention to the overarching patterns of social movements can help to identify the sort of problems and places that inspire solidarity building and new knowledge and relationships that germinate from solidarity practices. How solidarity is framed remains central to how movements are performed, and how the micro practices and macro politics of movements in key sites matter, for what sort of alternatives. Solidarity initiatives are revolutionary and transformational; they build new political fora which seek to contest the structures of oppression and establish new networks, connections and relationships.

For example, at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic the refugee-led South Sudanese United Refugees Association (SSURA) drew on a diversity of resources to feed refugee families, ignoring government restrictions; while another community-based organisation, Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID), distributed food, cooking oil and other basics to refugees in Kampala. Similarly, organisations such as No Name Kitchen (NNK) have been feeding refugees trapped in the most restricted western Balkan migratory border. While the coronavirus and its spread threatened populations across the world, these solidarity initiatives were organised to care for families trapped in limbo (see *Interface* issue 13(1)).

Inherited Northern concepts of social movement, often assuming that basic needs are more or less met and identities are more or less fixed, often fail to engage effectively with how solidarity in crisis reshapes movement activism; an issue which is not restricted to the coronavirus or migrant populations, but which climate change, intensifying neoliberal destruction of the social fabric and multiple forms of raced and gendered violence are generalising to many parts of the world. Moreover, these are deeply emotional situations: solidarity networks are shaped by activists’ emotional labour to create shared feelings of outrage, love and solidarity,

even across distance. Solidarity is not just sameness; it fosters connections across difference and distance. The practices, emotions and imaginaries embodied in these connections work to transform ‘uneven relationships between here and there, us and them’ (Koopman 2017, p. 344). Here again, though, the nature of emotions in traumatic situations and deep solidarity may be hard to grasp, let alone conceptualise, for researchers whose lives are more sheltered or less marked by active solidarity.

Finally, we can mention the continuing need to overcome methodological nationalism in social movements research. Despite the complexities of an uneven and interconnected world, most research remains national in focus. This certainly responds to the partial turn away from international mobilisations following the 2007–2008 crash: despite attempts at international solidarity, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) uprisings, *indignad@s* and Occupy movements were all largely organised at a national scale, with national media and governments in the focus, even though their cultural resonance was wider. If researchers’ first step needs to be moving away from universalising their personal experience to exploring the specific dynamics of particular, often national, social and political contexts, the second step has to be thinking how globalised movements operate in this uneven but interlinked context.

As noted above, the new global upsurge in popular struggles is deeply shaped by specificities of many kinds: Indigenous contexts, national states, the desperate situation of particular social groups. Yet it is also interconnected: in revolts, mobilisations, marches and blockades, actors adopt new tactics and new repertoires that forge new ideals of real democracy, popular agency, substantive justice or the practice of rights. The latest round of (re-)globalisation of movement activism is configuring itself in new ways that are not always easy to grasp through organising approaches and research strategies developed in the previous wave of alter-globalisation activism from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s.

One obvious change is the near-ubiquity of smart and relatively accessible digitised devices. Communicative actions, click-through action links, participatory geovisualisation, personalised tweets and open street mapping have created change both in virtual militant spaces and in personal spaces. Sexuality, indigeneity, class, race, caste, disability and gender intersect here in unexpected ways across cultures, largely using corporate but immediate platforms rather than the self-organised email lists, bulletin boards or Indymedia sites of 20 years ago. One remarkable recent example is the Milk Tea Alliance (2020–present), connecting activists in authoritarian contexts such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, Myanmar, the Philippines and Indonesia, sharing both memes and tactics.

Finally, of course, engaged research faces the ongoing challenges that movements themselves face: how to make more transformative connections between movements, how to incorporate many voices narrating their part in movements, and how to think from and for movements without excluding difference and diversity. Also, we encourage scholars to continue exploring the many ways in which research can support and advance existing struggles for social justice; learning and working together with activists, and helping to create bridges across movements, issues, geographies, and activist experiences and knowledges.

REFERENCES

- Arribas Lozano, A. 2022, 'Collaborative ethnography with social movements: Key dimensions and challenges', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, v. 23, n. 3, <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-23.3.3908>.
- Bevington, D. and Dixon, C. 2005, 'Movement-relevant theory: Rethinking social movement scholarship and activism', *Social Movement Studies*, v. 4, n. 3, pp. 185–208.
- Biocca, M. 2023, *The Silences of Dispossession: Agrarian Change and Indigenous Politics in Argentina*, Pluto, London.
- Cox, L. 2016, 'Studying movements in a movement-become-state: Research and practice in postcolonial Ireland', in O. Fillieule and G. Accornero (eds), *Social Movement Studies in Europe: The State of the Art*, Berghahn Press, Oxford, pp. 303–310.
- Diani, M. 1992, 'The concept of social movement', *Sociological Review*, v. 40, n. 1, pp. 1–25.
- Gardner, P., Carvalho, T. and Valenstain, M. 2022, 'Spreading rebellion? The rise of Extinction Rebellion chapters across the world', *Environmental Sociology*, v. 8, n. 4, pp. 424–435.
- Hale, C.R. (ed.) 2008, *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Juris, J. 2007, 'Practicing militant ethnography with the movement for global resistance in Barcelona', in S. Shukaitis and D. Graeber (eds), *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations, Collective Theorization*, AK Press, Oakland, CA, pp. 164–176.
- Koopman, S. 2017, 'Social movements', in J. Agnew, V. Mamadouh, A. Secor and J. Sharp (eds), *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Geography*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, pp. 339–351.
- McAlevey, J. 2016, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Mohandesi, S., Risager, B. and Cox, L. 2018, *Voices of 1968*, Pluto, London.
- Ortiz, I., Burke, S., Berrada, M. and Saenz Cortés, H. 2022, *World Protests: A Study of Key Protest Issues in the 21st Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Rappaport, J. 2008, 'Beyond participant observation: Collaborative ethnography as theoretical innovation', *Collaborative Anthropologies*, v. 1, pp. 1–31.
- Silver, B., Karatasli, S. and Kumral, S. 2021, 'A new rising tide of global social protest?' *UCSB Global Studies Colloquium*, 18 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8srlvrrL5fg> (accessed 13 October 2023).
- Thompson, E.P. 1968, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, London.