

Movement knowledge:  
what do we know, how do we create knowledge  
and what do we do with it?

Laurence Cox, Cristina Flesher Fominaya<sup>1</sup>

It is with great pleasure that we present the first issue of Interface: a journal for and about social movements, on the special theme of "movement knowledge": how movements produce knowledge, what kinds of knowledge they produce and what they do with it when they have it.

What kinds of knowledge do movements produce?

Movements produce knowledge about the social world. More specifically, they produce knowledge from below, information about society which is inconvenient to and resisted by those above: the wealthy, the mighty and the learned (or, as we might say, states, corporations and disciplines). A crucial aspect of movement practice is making known that which others would prefer to keep from public view, be that practices of torture and extra-judicial executions, the effects of individual pollutants and the costs of global warming, levels of rape and sexual abuse, the facts of poverty and exploitation, caste oppression and racism – the list is long. On a larger scale, movements highlight new ways of seeing the world: in terms of class or patriarchy, of colonisation or neo-liberalism, of ecology and human rights.

This process reaches back at least to the "Atlantic revolutions" of the 18th century, in France and North America, Ireland and Haiti, and continues today with an immense range of movements around the world. In this long process, one

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Ana Margarida Esteves and Sara Motta for their contributions to this editorial.

measure of movement success is bringing movement knowledge into public spaces: into parliaments and policy processes, into media discourse and popular culture, into academia and publishing. As Eyerman and Jamison (1991) have highlighted, movements are engaged in a constant process of generating counter-expertise, sometimes from their own resources, sometimes through finding allies in traditional intellectual professions such as academia, journalism and the law, and sometimes through pushing the creation of new forms of knowledge.

In recent years, academic fields such as women's studies, adult and popular education, peace studies, queer studies, Black Studies, post-colonial studies, working-class studies and so on testify to this. At present, the rise of indigenous movements in the Americas, the revelations by survivors of institutional sexual abuse in Europe and North America, the Dalit movement in India, and many others are generating their own bodies of associated research.

The process is a long one, though: within the discipline of sociology alone, it is arguable that the study of society would neither have been thinkable nor necessary without the French Revolution, which overturned the taken-for-granted character of the European social order, and without the "social question" raised by the mass movements of the poor and oppressed which were variously reflected in the thinking of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Émile Durkheim the socialist, and Max Weber, a conservative concerned to maintain the delicately balanced social order of the Kaiserreich in the face of the SPD.

Movements have also, of course, reflected on their own role in bringing about social change. One of the most important forms of this reflection has been strategic: "naming the system" in order to identify what kinds of change are needed in order to overcome particular inequalities, for example, as with the debates between liberal, Marxist and radical feminisms; or the debate over revolution and reform as paths to systemic change exemplified by the polemic between Luxemburg, Bernstein and Kautsky within the young socialist movement.

Anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements have debated whether change was best brought about through appealing to imperial self-interest or through nationalist resistance; whether elite or popular movements, "moral force or physical force" were the most effective strategies; and on the relationship between ethnicity, class and gender – not to mention over the concept of nation or race itself. More recently, ecological movements have reflected tensions between "eco-socialists" and "realists", "deep" and "light" greens, and so on, combining the question of systemic analysis with that of paths to change.

The examples above are not meant to be exhaustive; they do not include, for example, the substantial bodies of reflection contained within adult and popular education movements, in community organising, in the practice of liberation psychology and "mad pride", in the long-standing anarchist tradition, within indigenous movements, or most recently within the global justice movement (Maddison and Scalmer 2005).

The rise, over the last fifteen years (since the Zapatista-sponsored Encuentros in particular) of this most recent wave of international networking has brought movements which had been largely separated into situations where they have needed to talk to each other more, on many different levels (from the organising of a protest to strategies for global change). It has also pushed forward debate within movements on how movements work, what we do, what choices we make, and so on.

At the same time, the history of the last two hundred years, and in particular of the last thirty, as there have been substantial rewards for fragmentation (co-optation into the state, the commodification of identities, academic specialisation and so on) has left us with a situation where our movements are often able to discourse with great fluency on questions of global analysis – general theoretical understandings of the social world, normative critiques of particular aspects, particular mechanisms of its workings – while largely "agreeing to differ" on the questions that have most immediate practical relevance: what should we do? What works best? How should we organise? Stretching a point, we can say that by

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the time many activists come to meet people from other movements they have already been heavily socialised into, and organisationally committed to, a particular way of operating, and furnished with "off-the-peg" critiques of other approaches.

How do movements produce knowledge?

There have been a series of attempts to analyse the ways in which social movements produce knowledge. In general terms, they raise two kinds of question. One is to focus on the issue of subaltern knowledge as against official knowledge: what is known by the slave, the woman, the colonised, the worker, the oppressed, and so on which is hidden to – or denied by – the master, the man, the colonist, the employer, or the oppressor. The other is to focus on the specific processes of knowledge production which are bound up with social movement development: how movements generate agreed analyses of society, strategies and tactics, understandings of internal practice, and so on.

Within the Marxist tradition, these questions have been posed as issues of class. Thus the Communist Manifesto presents a developmental understanding of how class consciousness develops in the process of struggle, in opposition to official ideologies but with the development of a world-view and programme which is adequate to the class in formation: a model which it uses to understand the development of bourgeois society and thought (in part I) just as much as the future development of proletarian self-awareness (in part II).

The most developed accounts of the development of class consciousness are found in the work of Lukács, who draws on Weber's ideal types to elaborate its rationality; and in the work of Gramsci, who contrasts the practical but implicit "good sense" developed in everyday life to the contradictory and contested sphere of "common sense", and the contrasting work of the "organic intellectual" (the trade union organiser or party activist) to that of the "traditional intellectual" (the small-town doctor or priest, the manager or journalist).

The tradition of popular education, and the work of Paolo Freire, has taken a related direction, exploring how through processes of consciousness-raising people can come to articulate their tacit understandings of reality in ways that can challenge structures of oppression (see e.g. Mayo 1999 or his dialogue with Highlander Folk School founder Myles Horton (Horton and Freire 1990)).

In comparable majority-world peasant settings, but with a more pessimistic edge, James Scott (1990 etc.) has drawn attention to the "hidden transcripts" of those who, in his view, already possess a developed world-view in opposition to their masters, but are unable to express it because of the fear of violent repression. By contrast, US black feminist bell hooks (1994 etc.) argues for the possibility of "speaking truth to power" and the effect of articulating such hidden knowledge.

The question of who knows what, and how, is central to all of these analyses, as it is to the "history from below" exemplified in authors such as EP Thompson or Sheila Rowbotham. The work of feminist Sandra Harding (1987 etc.) places the concept of the standpoint from which knowledge is elaborated – who knows what – squarely in the centre of theoretical debate, giving a strong grounding to arguments about the places from which we know.

Hilary Wainwright's (1994) socialist feminist analysis pays equal attention to the processes by which social movements bring together and articulate the fragmented "tacit knowledge" of individuals in ways that challenge official understandings of reality. The relationship between knowledge from below and action from below is then a central one in this understanding.

Within social movements research, finally, we have already mentioned the widely-cited work of Eyerman and Jamison (1991), which has been fundamental to positioning social movements as producers of knowledge, both about the social world and about how to change it.

How can we produce knowledge about movements?

As social movements make their way into academia, many participants speak and write as at once activists and academics, within theoretical traditions that do not separate the two activities of knowledge-making and movement action. By contrast, contemporary social movement studies as it now exists, institutionalized as an increasingly canonized body of knowledge within North American and West European academia, has become increasingly distant from any relationship to movements other than the descriptive and analytic – despite the fact that a number of its most significant authors started from positions sympathetic to social movements, if not actually within them.

There are nevertheless still important bodies of knowledge about movements that are apparently produced within purely academic contexts. Here we say apparently because (as in all social research) it is research participants who generate data (in the documents they produce, in interviews, as objects of participant observation and so on). Thus researchers who are not themselves activists – as well as many who are – have to engage closely with movements in the work of social movements research, negotiating access, convincing people to complete surveys, and offering their services in various ways.

Yet the practice of social movement studies, as a sub-discipline, includes virtually no explicit acknowledgement of this practical relationship, and a far sharper separation between the kinds of canonical knowledge produced by academics and the informal or activist knowledge produced within movements than in many other fields. University-based research in (for example) adult education, women's studies, social work, nursing or media studies – to stay reasonably close to home – expresses far more respect for practitioners as intellectual producers, and typically involves far more distribution of academic knowledge to the broader community of practitioners than is now the case within “social movement studies” in its institutionalized form.

In academic terms, then, Interface positions itself as a journal of dialogue between researchers and practitioners, which recognizes that both are intellectual

producers in their own right (and indeed that practitioners themselves engage in research). Similarly, rather than a one-way relationship where the knowledge produced by movements is drawn on for purely academic purposes within an essentially closed discourse and the results of research are typically restricted to university libraries, our goal is to make relevant research public, without charge and in languages which seek communication rather than accreditation.

In this issue

The articles in this first issue highlight some of the issues raised above, and can be read as a dialogue between activist researchers who are all deeply involved in the process of knowledge production with, and within, their own movements – whether they are formally based in movement institutions or in universities, or both.

Often missing in social movement studies is an explicit reflection on methodology and the consequences different research techniques and standpoints have on the analysis produced. Mayo Fuster Morell's article on action research, which opens this issue of the journal with an overview of the different action research tendencies within the global justice movement, is an important exception. Covering a wide range of movement knowledge projects, she argues that these tendencies are complementary rather than necessarily opposed to each other, but that there are substantial distinctions between individual and collective forms of knowledge production and ownership.

Budd Hall's article draws on adult education perspectives to explore learning processes in social movements, documenting a seven-country action research project on learning within environmental movements – perhaps the largest such project ever undertaken. His article highlights some of the themes and practices articulated within these movements' learning processes, arguing that not only is learning central to social movements, but that social movements are central to society's learning.

The Portuguese-speaking group, currently composed by scholars and activists from Portugal and Brazil and in a process of expansion to Portuguese-speaking Africa and East Timor, then presents three articles that problematize some fundamental and understudied aspects of knowledge production by and about social movements.

“Extensão universitária” (Continuing education) by Jose Ernani Mendes and Sandra Carvalho analyses how universities can support struggles within the popular classes as centres of production, democratization and diffusion of counter-hegemonic knowledge and projects. It focuses on the history of continuing education in Latin America, the impact of neoliberalism and current strategies of resistance in Brazil, in joint projects between the MST and the State University of Ceará.

Ilse Scherer-Warren, in her article "Redes para a (re) territorialização de espaços de conflito" (Networks for the (re) territorialization of spaces of conflict, shows how social movements produce and contest the notion of "territory" in the framework of struggles over land rights, with particular reference to the MST and MTST in Brazil.

The article "Movimentos sociais existem?" (Do social movements exist?) by Antonio Pedro Dores claims that mainstream social movement theory is currently focused on the agency of leaders. Claiming that social movement outcomes are the result of the interaction between the activity (or lack of thereof) of all movement members and an often unstable, unpredictable environment, the author advocates for a more comprehensive model of analysis of the role of social movements in processes of social change that takes into account that often they are neither the cause nor the engine that bring about the outcomes that they aim to promote.

Our section of action and research / teaching notes is designed to change the pace and style of knowledge within Interface, sharing practical experiences and skills developed in specific contexts in short and lively articles. The four articles in this



section show something of the diversity and creativity of contemporary movements.

Michael Duckett's action note documents the ongoing "Wor diary" project, which aims to record local struggles in the Northeast of England in diary format, and discusses some of the practical issues involved in the process of production.

Süreyya Evren's action note chronicles a postanarchist group's experiences with various publishing strategies: an underground / informal approach, an attempt at subverting mainstream media, and independent publishing strategies. It reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

Caspar Davis' action note explores the experience of wisdom councils in Canada, introducing the concept and the practical methods involved, and discussing the way the councils developed and what their outcomes were for the future.

Alejandrina Reyes' Spanish-language teaching note on community education comes from a group of educators who attempt to turn 'education on its head'. Knowledge is created by ordinary Venezuelans in the process of reflection on their participation in social movements and community struggle. Knowledge in this context is knowledge for social emancipation, dignity and political transformation. The note gives a practical introduction to their work and a contribution to widening our own sense of educational praxis.

We close this issue of the journal with two substantial review pieces reflecting on contemporary movement knowledge – as it is written, and as it is researched.

David Landy's review article on anti-Zionist writing in the Jewish diaspora explores the relationship of this writing to the developing Israel-critical movement within the diaspora. He argues that these writers reflect a Lacanian "mirror stage" of the movement, in which it comes to know itself through a focus on its own identity and its legitimacy within mainstream Jewish thought, but that this comes at the cost of a failure to include the voices and experiences of Palestinians, even where as activists the authors work closely with Palestinian groups.

Fergal Finnegan reviews Janet Conway's recent book *Praxis and politics*, which explores knowledge production within the Canadian Metro Network for Social Justice. He highlights the strengths of her popular education approach politically and theoretically as well as drawing out its difficulties in articulating strategy.

Read – or listened to – as a series of voices coming from related experiences but each spoken or written within their own language and tradition, these various pieces highlight the intellectual robustness and practical grounding of contemporary movement knowledge and research in this area.

Where to now for research on movement knowledge?

Our experience in working on this issue has convinced us that one of the key directions for research on movement knowledge has to be in the direction of what de Sousa Santos (2006) has described as an ecology of knowledges. There is a strong temptation, in particular for academics interested in this field, to attempt to develop a perspective which marries our own political commitments to a perspective which will gain us disciplinary status. The result, of course, is to increase our academic capital and distance our intellectual work from social movements – or divide it into two parts: as Gramsci put it, one kind of work for the “simple” in our own movements and one for the elite in the universities. The political outcomes of this are fairly clear to see<sup>2</sup>.

There is of course also a political version of this, which marries a sense of intellectual superiority to various kinds of organisational sectarianism or an insistence on a single model of knowledge production as inherently superior to all others. The weakness of this approach is that it elevates technique above all else – or uses technique to elevate us and our own projects above the very people we

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<sup>2</sup> Another variant of this is what can be called “radical quietism”: an apparently sophisticated critique of the construction of discourses, identities, practices and so on which is not part of an attempt to develop and improve movement organization but serves instead to justify passivity, by positioning the writer as morally superior to all actual struggles and movements.

should be seeking to build alliances with, and their modes of knowledge production, which will be different from ours.

At this point, of course, the question arises of who “we” are. If knowledges are situated, any individual writer – or any collective – has at some point to take responsibility for naming the place they are speaking from, whether this is identified in terms of a social-structural situation, a political strategy or something else. Our interpretations of reality – if we are good researchers – are not arbitrary, but neither are they universal or uncontested. “Owning” our own analyses in this sense is the first step away from positioning ourselves as having a uniquely authoritative understanding of reality.

Thus we want to argue that the attempt to “own” knowledge production from above is fundamentally mistaken. If social movements are knowledge producers, and generate ways of knowing grounded in particular experiences and for locally practical purposes, then (as activists and as researchers) we cannot know a priori “how to know”, still less how other people should know. What we learn in our own movements, as we work on particular projects, campaigns and strategies, is new to us, and what we learn from our allies doubly so – since it is grounded not in a remaking of our own worlds but in their remaking of theirs.

This does not mean that we all have to stay fixed in our own different spaces, with no possibility of communication - or disagreement. It means that the product of these processes – of the encounter of different movement knowledges, and different intellectual traditions – is not foreseeable in advance, and is generated in an encounter which (if it is effective) leaves the different knowledges and languages involved changed; not merged, but changed. If we are serious about tackling the larger structures and systems that govern our lives, not simply tinkering with our local circumstances, this is the direction we need to go in.

This means two things for research on movement knowledge. One is that it needs to be programmatically inter-disciplinary in relation to academia. Similarly, in relation to the multiple intellectual traditions and local contexts of our different movements it needs something like a linguist’s approach to these multiple

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“languages”: rather than focussing on the differences, and making the political equivalent of jokes about how other people speak or what their languages sound like, we need to find ways of communicating across and between languages.

Secondly, we need to avoid a split between the “elite” and the “simple”. Recalling that growing up multilingual is a normal situation for perhaps the majority of the world’s population, and that learning languages is not simply a privilege of the rich but often a necessity for the poor (as migrants, or as those subjected to greater cultural or political power), we can look for politically effective ways of restating what we know about movement knowledges that respect and draw on the skills of our friends, fellow activists and allies.

The experiences of the Zapatista Encuentros, People’s Global Action, Via Campesina, World Social Forums, Indymedia and many other recent movement networks highlight how many other people are making this same attempt along with us in their different ways. Turning to the past, Linebaugh and Rediker’s (2000) history of the formation of the revolutionary Atlantic, as indigenous people, slaves, sailors, soldiers, artisans and others found themselves not simply parts in a structural play written by others but frequently rewriting the script, developing new ways of cooperating and communicating, and transmitting knowledge from one side of the world to the other.

Origins of the Interface project

Interface was conceived in the context of an annual conference on Alternative Futures and Popular Protest in Manchester, that brings activists and academics into fruitful and sometimes explosive dialogues about the movements they study and participate in. What is perhaps unusual for a small conference is that many participants keep returning year after year. What is it that draws them back? While Manchester is a nice place and the organizers are great people, clearly there are some other compelling attractions.

From our own experience, we find that for those working in academia it provides the opportunity to present work to an audience with first hand experience of the movements in question and no compunction about dispelling romanticisms, demanding an empirical grounding for high-flown theoretical abstractions or providing useful examples, counter-examples or relevant literature. But it also provides a place for activists engaged in their own movement based-knowledge production to develop that knowledge in a useful and stimulating context, and to learn from academics who have dedicated themselves to studying and reading about a vast array of movements.

For academics, there is a degree of freedom to try out new ideas or pursue “marginal” (or marginalized) aspects of social movement study that is often missing from other academic forums. For activists, it provides an opportunity - often unavailable in movement forums - to step back from short-term political agendas and reflect systematically on movement practice and learning. The volumes of proceedings produced since 1995 (Barker and Tyldesley 1995 etc.) are a powerful reflection of the richness of these joint explorations.

For many of us, this experience has shown us that research and politics are not as sharply opposed as some of our own comrades and colleagues – in our own organisations or disciplines – would like to have us believe; and that it is possible to be both a good activist and a good researcher at the same time, whether in a university, in a movement organisation, or both.

This space between academia and activism provides a rich terrain for learning about social movements. That spirit of open communication between academics, activists, and academic/activists is what we hoped to capture in this journal project.

The shape of the field

There are some excellent social movement journals already in existence; yet (as many observers have commented – e.g. Bevington and Dixon 2005) social

movement studies has become an increasingly self-referential sub-discipline with a largely closed canon, and less dialogue with movement practitioners than it had at its inception. Remarkably little of this research is of use or interest to movement activists, who are typically pursuing different kinds of question in their own theorising (Barker and Cox 2002). Concurrently, some of the most innovative approaches to movement study are now being developed outside of this "social movement studies" framework: the International review of social history (2007) special issue devoted to humour and social protest is a case in point. Geographer Jenny Pickerill's work on the use of ITCs in social movements is another (2004).

Similarly, there are a number of very high-quality movement periodicals out there. Yet in many intellectual traditions there is now an overwhelming focus on the analysis of the social world and of discussion of the issues movements campaign on. By contrast, within those traditions that pay close attention to methodology and structure, this is typically done within a taken-for-granted analysis of movements. All too little attention is paid to learning from other movements, or to learning from the past – except within the "origin myths" of particular schools of thought, explaining why all the major questions about movements have already been answered.

Paradoxically, while there are still movements that independently transmit their own origin myths to participants, they are increasingly generated and reproduced in university settings training students in particular disciplines or theoretical perspectives – or sold as part of acquiring particular, high-status "radical" identities. One of the implications of this is that a priori commitment to a particular understanding of movement organising is often underwritten by career and lifestyle choices which make alternative strategies literally unthinkable.

There are then, of course, both movements (and disciplines) that simply accept, without criticism or reflection, parameters set from above around the scope and nature of movement action, and which are to that extent committed to actively avoiding discussion of these issues, or are not even aware that they are

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uncritically adopting already established and possibly counter-productive practices (see, for example, Flesher Eguiarte, 2005).

With Interface we hope to provide an alternative outlet for work that is relevant to both movements and academics, and that draws from a range of literatures, disciplines and experiences that might not find expression in other social movement specific journals – while simultaneously providing a meeting-place for theorists and knowledge producers involved in a range of movements, and often individually isolated within their own organisations, to encounter others working on the same problems from different starting-points.

There are now a wide range of different approaches to carrying out "movement-relevant research", particularly those collected in Croteau (2005) and in Graeber and Shukaitis (2007), and those discussed by Fuster (this volume). We see this as a source of richness rather than a weakness, so long as these different approaches are in dialogue with one another.

More generally, our goal is to develop a living interaction between the different types of knowledge produced in and around movements, the different academic disciplines interested in the area, the different kinds of knowledge, language, culture and intellectual traditions involved, and so on.

Because of the diversity of people's working situations, we work with a diversity of article types. Many are double-blind peer-reviewed, enabling effective feedback which is not based on personal connections, as well as allowing for academic recognition of high-quality work irrespective of its origins. Alongside this, however, we publish action notes, transcripts of discussions, interviews and key documents, highlighting the practitioner emphasis of the journal; as well as review essays, reviews and teaching notes, intended as useful for movement educationalists as well as teachers in a range of situations. We remain open for proposals for other types of articles that may better suit particular situations and needs.

The journal is programmatically multi-lingual; while this issue only has articles in English, Spanish and Portuguese we are able with our current team to accept

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and review submissions in Catalan, French, German, Italian, Maltese and Norwegian. With individual editors able to work in Russian, Afrikaans and Zulu, we are actively seeking to expand our linguistic range to include material in Asian and African languages in particular.

The journal is organised as a series of autonomous regional groups, covering Western Europe, the Portuguese-speaking world, Spanish-speaking Latin America, South Asia, Oceania, North America, the Mediterranean, East and Central Europe and Africa respectively. Each of these groups commissions and reviews articles independently, is responsible for its own linguistic realities, and makes its own decisions as to the best way to organise relationships between movement theorists and academic research, based on the very different situation in different contexts.

We are keen to find new collaborators for the African, Mediterranean, North American, Oceanian, South Asian, Spanish-speaking Latin American and East and Central European groups in particular; please contact the relevant editors as listed on our homepage.

Issue two: civil society versus social movements

Our theme for issue two is "civil society vs social movements". By this we mean the increasing tension between officially-approved versions of popular participation in politics geared towards the mobilisation of consent for neo-liberalism – the world of consultation and participation, NGOs and partnership – and the less polite and polished world of people's attempts to participate in politics on their own terms, in their own forms and for their own purposes – social movements, popular protest, direct action, and so on. In drawing this distinction, we realise that things work differently in different countries, for example in those Latin American states where governments see themselves as acting with social movements, in post-Soviet states where "civil society" has been directly opposed to the state, and so on; the purpose of this special issue is not to



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impose a single interpretation, but to develop a discussion between activists and researchers in different contexts around this phenomenon.

Hopefully, by now you will be eager to dive into this issue. Before we go, however, we want to take a moment to thank everyone who has been involved in this project, which has run entirely on a volunteer basis. We also are aware that we have only begun to scratch the surface of the possibilities for dialogue across movements. As an ongoing project, we encourage any of you who feel you can contribute to this project in meaningful way to get involved.

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About the authors

Laurence Cox is involved in networking between social movements in Ireland, in particular the Grassroots Gatherings of anti-capitalist movements. He runs a PhD-level programme of participatory action research into social movement practice at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Email:

[laurence.cox@nuim.ie](mailto:laurence.cox@nuim.ie). Website (in need of update):

[www.iol.ie/~mazzoldi/toolsforchange](http://www.iol.ie/~mazzoldi/toolsforchange)

Cristina Flesher Fominaya is assistant professor in sociology at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. She has a PhD in sociology from UC Berkeley and has researched and published work on the British anti-roads movement, autonomous politics, and the anti-globalization movement. She is currently researching victim commemoration, cultural trauma and collective memory following the terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004) and New York (2001).

[cflesher@polsoc.uc3m.es](mailto:cflesher@polsoc.uc3m.es)

URL for this article:

<http://www.interfacejournal.net/2009/01/issue-one-editorial-movement-knowledge.html>