Social Movements and Insurgent Social Theory
Making Theoretical Knowledge Through Collective Action

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Abstract: This chapter proposes that social movements are sites for the production of a distinct kind of theoretical knowledge, namely insurgent social theory. This argument is anchored in the claim that subaltern groups have always and everywhere been involved in the production of theory. More specifically, social movements are animated by a form of knowledge production that is grounded in subaltern experiences of exploitation and oppression and oriented towards bringing about emancipatory transformation. The chapter begins by discussing the relationship between activism, experience, and insurgent social theory, and then outlines and discusses the basic features of insurgent social theory as a distinctive form of knowledge. The chapter's final section reflects on how we should conduct our discussions of what different forms of insurgent social theory enable us to know and do and argues for a commitment to insurgent epistemic gain—that is, a form of engagement committed to producing theoretical knowledge that is more effective in advancing oppositional collective action towards emancipation.

Keywords: social movements, insurgent social theory, subaltern groups, activism, experience, insurgent epistemic gain, emancipatory transformation

Writing on the politics of critical social theory, the black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1995) recalls an experience from her career as a schoolteacher. Collins was tasked with teaching a class on 'The Community' to a class of African American second-graders. The problem with this task, Collins points out, was that the textbooks presented her pupils with an image of 'the community' that did not look very much like the communities that they lived in. The textbook showed suburban homes and white nuclear families where children lived safe and comfortable lives—all of which was very different from the lives that her pupils were familiar with from growing up in poor inner-city neighbourhoods. As a result, Collins asked her pupils to talk about and discuss their lived experiences from their homes and communities. This was unusual for them, she says, because they were used to regurgitating the official school curriculum and being discouraged from querying and questioning their own experiences of community life. However, in the discussions that

followed, Collins tells us, pupils opened up and began to share their experiences of growing up in underprivileged and disadvantaged homes and communities: 'Through dialogue, these children began to develop the voice, typical of any relatively powerless outsider group that begins to frame its own self-defined standpoint in hierarchical power relations of race, class, gender, and, in their case, age' (Collins 1995, x).

In recounting this story, Collins is telling us something very important: that her pupils were, in fact, making theory by identifying problems that they experienced in their communities, reflecting on how these problems were rooted in hierarchies of power and unequal power relations, articulating what she refers to as 'their own oppositional knowledge' and 'sharing deep-seated anger' (Collins 1995, x). This sounds unusual, of course. A primary school classroom is not what tends to come to mind when we think of sites where theory and theoretical knowledge are produced. It is the university, above all, as an institution of higher learning and research, that figures in the collective imagination as the primary locale for theory-making in the modern world. In these spaces, a properly qualified and officially certified elite of intellectual experts works to produce abstract knowledge, formulated as specialized vocabularies that are only really comprehensible and legible to formally trained scholars. This, we tend to think, is what proper theory is and should be.

The proposition at the core of this chapter runs counter to the logic of these assumptions. It aligns itself, instead, with what Collins suggests, that theory and theoretical knowledge can be and is made by actors other than academics and in locales other than universities. Specifically, we propose, like Collins, that theory is not only a specialized form of scholarly expert knowledge. In line with her argument, we also argue that 'historically oppressed groups' (Collins 1995, xiii)—women, people of colour, workers, queer folks, colonized people, indigenous communities, and so on—have always and everywhere been involved in the production of theory. As Gramsci (1998, 9) puts it, everyone is an intellectual; however, some groups—the wealthy, powerful, culturally privileged, and so on—find that official forms of theory serve their social purposes well enough, while others have to make their own.

The theory-making of historically oppressed groups is often fragmentary, subterranean, and ephemeral, taking place informally or incidentally to the process of struggle (Choudry 2015; Foley 1999). In part, this is what oppression means. The *sustained* articulation of theory from below, in ways that can be transmitted from one generation to the next and wielded in the struggle to transform large-scale social relationships, is a major historical achievement in this context. In the moment, it involves collectively identifying common problems in everyday life, digging deeper and reflecting on what the underlying causes of these problems are, and identifying things that can be done to solve these problems. These are key elements of collective action, which over time involve the construction and maintenance of what Marx and Engels (1974, 64) call the 'means of mental production', at whatever level (whether songs and stories, counter-histories and mythologies, movement periodicals or training schools) and different strata of Gramsci's 'organic intellectuals', whether they are experienced community organizers, shop stewards, movement journalists, popular educators, socialist activists, or black power militants.

This might appear as a controversial argument by conventional academic standards. However, if we pause to reflect for a moment, it might seem less so. After all, much of the theory that is wielded in academic texts and in scholarly pursuits more generally does not, in fact, originate in the academy. On the contrary, some of the most important theorizations of the core power relations that underpin the modern world were spawned in and developed by social movements that, very crucially, set out to challenge and transform those power structures (Cox 2018, chapter 5). We can think of this in terms of an active positionality: who is the (collective) actor who theorizes, what purposes do they theorize for, and who is the implied or explicit agent whose action they seek to guide?[1]

This way of thinking involves a shift of gear (Williams 1989) away from imagining that theory, learning, and culture are the province of formal, state-backed or private educational institutions and towards a close attention to how ordinary people, in struggle, develop their own 'means of mental production', whether independent from or 'within and against' these other institutions—not least in the global South (Choudry and Kapoor 2019; Hall et al. 2012; Langdon 2020).

Marxism, for example, emerged from what Marx and Engels learned from the struggles of German peasants in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, from British Chartists and the development of union struggles, from the events of 1848 and 1871 in France, from the development of working-class parties, and from watching the drama of colonization and resistance in Ireland and in India. Thus since its inception, Marxist theory has developed in dialogue with the struggles of multiple and overlapping social movements that have been central to the making and remaking of the modern world (Cox and Nilsen 2014; Heinrich 2019).

Similarly, the once-traditional academic exposition of liberal, radical, Marxist, socialist and black feminisms, points to the different theories of change and the implicit or explicit actors involved. These are not simply 'contemplative' explanations for why the world happens to be the way it is; they are focused on *what can be done to change it and by whom*. This spectrum of different feminisms, as presented by the first generation of (second wave) feminists to enter the academy, reflects the active development of theory through movements that continually evolved (e.g., Jaggar 1983; see also Hutchings, Chapter 4, 'Gender and Knowledge (Re)Production in International Thought'). Queer theory, too, emerged out of a multiplicity of struggles for sexual liberation that challenged social orders in important ways (Lewis 2016; Penney 2014; Warner 2013).

Postcolonialism, meanwhile, is a form of theory that grows out of both anti-imperialist struggles and postcolonial social movements in the global South. Anti-imperialism, as Adom Getachew (2019, 2) has put it, was a form of 'worldmaking' that attempted to forge 'a domination-free and egalitarian international order' through decolonization. Postcolonial social movements, in turn, contested the hegemony of new dominant groups in the context of independent Third World states (see Nilsen 2015). These political aspirations are deeply inscribed in the orientations of postcolonial theory (Go 2016; Krishna 2008; Young 2001). The black radical tradition represents, in Cedric Robinson's (2000, xxx) words, 'the accretion,

over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle' against the many manifestations of white supremacy in a modernity that has always-already been racialized—from the historical revolts against enslavement in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world to the contemporary movement against anti-black state violence in the United States and beyond (Bogues 2003). Even radical theorizations of nature–society relations under capitalism—the nature–society relations that have brought humanity to the brink of planetary crisis—often originate in popular struggles against the commodification of natural resources and for environmental justice (Ebermann and Trampert 1984; Kemp et al. 1992; Pellow 2017).

In other words, social movements that change the world also change how we know and understand the world (Cox 2014). We refer to theoretical knowledge that is made in, by, and through social movements as insurgent social theory. In this chapter, we draw on previous joint work to unpack some of the core features of insurgent social theory and to discuss how those of us who are engaged in different collective struggles to change core elements of the social order can engage with one another's theories, specifically those grounded in the lived experiences of subaltern groups and their collective action to transform exploitative and oppressive structures of power (Cox and Nilsen 2014, chapter 1). Theories born in struggle of course often migrate to academia, and when this happens, there is also often a shift in their nature, from direct engagement with the strategies and objectives of social movements to more contemplative critical work, with different audiences and purposes circumscribed by traditional intellectual institutions. We use the term insurgent social theory precisely to recall and emphasize how theory *from below* is generated in struggle, rises up, and seeks to disrupt official structures and processes: it is the organic intellectual work of the popular movements of subaltern groups.

In what follows, we first discuss the relationship between activism, experience, and insurgent social theory, focusing on the significance of the grounding of insurgent social theory in the lived experiences of subaltern groups and their collective action to bring about emancipatory social change. We then outline and discuss the basic features of insurgent social theory as a form of theoretical knowledge that strives to go beyond *both* everyday common sense *and* ideological justifications of why things are as they are, in an effort to bring about emancipatory transformation. In the chapter's last section, we reflect on how we should conduct our discussions of what different forms of insurgent social theory enable us to know and do, and argue for a commitment to insurgent epistemic gain—that is, a form of engagement committed to producing theoretical knowledge that is more effective in advancing oppositional collective action towards emancipation.

Activism, experience, and insurgent social theory

Insurgent social theory is fundamentally different from conventional scholastic theory in many ways—not only its grounding in subaltern experiences of exploitation and oppression, but also in the fundamental knowledge interest that drives its production, the implicit subject who asks the questions, and what action they take based on the theory. While conventional social theory is mainly concerned with explaining the organization of the world as it is—and in many cases,

to affirm this organization and the power structures that sustain it—insurgent social theory is oriented towards emancipatory transformation. The fundamental question for insurgent social theory is not *only* 'why is the world the way it is?' but *also*, and arguably more significantly, 'what should we do to change the world?'.[ii]

This conception of theory entails a specific understanding of activism—one that is predicated on understanding activism and the process of becoming activists as primarily a process of collective learning (Barker and Cox 2002). Initially, people become activists because they find that something is not right in the world, and more specifically that it cannot be fixed within the normal channels. To become an activist, then, is to learn that the system does not work as it claims, and to move towards the understanding that to achieve change, it is necessary to organize and create pressure. For some, though not all, activists this learning process continues, as they find that the system is itself part of the problem and that its resistance to their struggles for change is not accidental or contingent but, at some level, fundamental to its nature. This experience—of finding that they must face off against a system, and that that system is both powerful and fundamentally opposed to what they want to achieve—raises some very large questions, and these questions must be answered if their movements are to come together as more than isolated and sporadic acts of localized resistance, progress, and achieve results. These are questions about the nature of the issues that they mobilize around, about the opposition that they face from above, about the relations between their own struggles and those of others elsewhere, and, most importantly, questions about how to bring about the changes that they want to see in the world. In answering these questions, activists produce theory, and they do so for insurgent purposes.

In practice, conventional theoretical knowledge too is not simply the dispassionate drawing of conclusions from abstract ontological principles or empirical observations, even though this self-understanding is a powerful legitimating tool. The theorizing of those who Gramsci (1998) describes as 'traditional intellectuals'—professionals whose employment is rooted in institutions that claim to represent the social totality, such as universities, the media, medicine, or law—routinely reflects this static and conservative understanding of the totality as an integral part of its own self-image. Put another way, the interests of the powerful, the wealthy, and the culturally privileged are represented in mystified ways as being those of the whole society. Often too, at a more mundane level, we can observe how routine theoretical production is geared to the development of individual careers, forms of (often masculine) display, and the commercial strategies of academic publishing.

By contrast, insurgent social theory as articulated by the 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci 1998) of movements from below is grounded in subaltern experience—not just in a passive sense, as what happens *to* people, but in an active sense, as what people *do* with and about the things that happen to them (see Thompson 1963). Experience, on this reading, is the practical and tacit knowledge that we as human beings generate about our social world through our encounters with it; it is what we know, about how we can meet our needs—of whatever kind— in the specific worlds that we inhabit. It is also, crucially, what we discover about the obstacles that we face in our attempts to do so, and about the things that we can and must do to overcome these (Wainwright 1994).

This practical and tacit knowledge, in turn, informs our consciousness—that is, our way of perceiving and acting (or not acting) in relation to the world we inhabit. As E. P. Thompson (1978, 9–10) put it, our experience of our social being—and notably of changes in our social being—impinges upon and breaks against existing forms of social consciousness, and in doing so, it also 'exerts pressures upon existent social consciousness'.

The understanding of experience that we propose here is of course a fundamentally materialist one. It assumes an epistemological realism in which the world is understood as existing independently of our knowing it. Our knowledge of this world is developed through the practical process of experience, the development and discovery of needs, and our attempts to resolve problems that we encounter as we try to satisfy those needs. Indeed, if a materialist theory of consciousness is to mean anything, then surely it is this: that it is the problems that we experience in our everyday lives which push us to think, and which push us to think *differently* when our current ways of thinking are not working for us (Marx and Engels 1970). As we try to make sense of and move beyond these problems, we are forced to reflect on our problematic, changing, and local experiences and develop a more thorough, articulated understanding of these experiences.

'Experience, rather than simply yielding facts which confirm or falsify general laws', Hilary Wainwright (1994, 7) writes, 'provides clues to underlying structures and relationships which are not observable other than through the particular phenomena or events they produce'. Making sense of experience therefore by necessity entails trying to go beyond the immediate and situated nature of specific experiences, to burrow into the underlying structures and relationships that have given rise to these experiences, to understand how these structures and relationships work. Specifically, insurgent theory seeks to understand how they work to generate exploitation and oppression and why they thwart the needs of people in the communities and positionalities that activists think from. It also seeks to understand the barriers to change—why do simpler strategies of highlighting injustice, expressing outrage, raising awareness, using existing channels and practices, and so on fail to work?—and so moves towards theories that highlight what *underlies* the obvious: interests, ideologies, structures, and so on. This in turn enables more realistic strategies for how it might be possible to change these structures and relationships. This is how insurgent theory germinates.

The ABC of insurgent social theory

The insistence on going beyond immediate surfaces and appearances to understand the wider ramifications of and underlying processes that give rise to concrete experiences of problems in our everyday lives and prevent their easy resolution is the hallmark of insurgent social theory (Lebowitz 2003, 20). In this perspective, insurgent social theory is, most fundamentally, a form of knowledge that (i) is consciously developed out of the experience and practice of movements from below; (ii) has been worked through using these as touchstones; (iii) has become explicit and articulate; and (iv) has been brought to a level where it can be generalized and shared. Most fundamentally, it is a form of theory that strives to go beyond *both* everyday common sense

and ideological justifications of why things are as they are, in an effort to bring about emancipatory transformation.

If insurgent social theory is defined by its ability to grasp the essential nature of social structures, then this in turn depends on the practical problematization of those structures through the oppositional collective action of subaltern groups, and the potential for expansive development that is inherent to this collective action. Social movements from below grow out of people's experience of a concrete lifeworld that is somehow problematic relative to their needs and capacities, and from their attempts to combine, organize, and mobilize to do something about this. These attempts reveal what Gramsci (1998, 327) referred to as the 'good sense' of subaltern groups. Good sense, Gramsci argued, was a 'healthy nucleus' of subaltern practical consciousness about the workings of the social order and how to counter the logic of these workings in everyday life, which can range from covert evasions of power, for example among workers on the factory floor, to more articulated cultures of resistance embodied, for instance, in mutual support networks and active community-building (Cox and Nilsen 2014, 75–76).

In some contexts, the good sense of subaltern groups animates overt acts of defiance and opposition, which take the form of specific conflicts over particular issues in a given place. However, movements from below are not static entities. They change and develop, and a crucial feature of this is the possibility of moving beyond forms of collective action that are limited to specific and locally circumscribed grievances, demands, and objectives. In the process of organizing and mobilizing, activists may come to join the dots between their situated experiences and the underlying structures that engender these experiences. In doing so, they may also come to join hands with other groups[iii] engaged in oppositional projects elsewhere by 'forging connections [and] finding conceptions that resonate across differences' (Cooper 2000, 218). This in turn can lead to changes in the form and direction of collective action towards more encompassing movement projects seeking to achieve more radical forms of change (Cox and Nilsen 2014, 72–87).

This is a transformational model of social activity, which assumes that whether social structures smoothly reproduce themselves or are transformed is crucially related to how we understand these structures. Social movements first of all '*mobilize* people who were not previously active' and, second, often also '*radicalize* people who were previously content with a view of the world designed for situations of relative quiescence' (Barker and Cox 2002, 21–22). The process in which people shed their illusions about extant structures and institutions is basically one in which reflexive self-activity brings about a distancing from the hegemonic elements of common sense. This process typically entails learning that mildly reformist tweaks, such as a greater presence of women in corporate boardrooms or more people of colour in positions of political power, do little, if anything at all, to address the systemic roots of the issues that are crucial for popular participants in the movements that are offered these concessions (e.g., Jaffe 2013; Taiwo 2022). It is also a process in and through which the 'good sense' of subaltern groups is rendered 'more unitary and coherent' (Gramsci 1998, 328). And when this happens, subaltern groups also become 'detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously' (Gramsci 1998, 275).

The idea of going beyond everyday common sense and ideological justifications can be unpacked by borrowing an example from Stuart Hall's (2022) discussion of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings of texts—constructed around the example of watching TV news about a strike. A dominant reading will share the media message that strikes in general are bad things and that this particular strike is bad. An oppositional reading, on the other hand, will take issue with the assumption that strikes as such are bad and formulate solidarity with those who are actually out on strike. Many people operate with a negotiated reading—that is, they are unable to distance themselves from the general assumption that strikes are bad, but nevertheless make a particular exception in the case of a particular strike, perhaps for personal or family reasons.

The difference between Hall's dominant and negotiated readings is one of how we understand ourselves in relation to society. The person who identifies with the dominant reading may not ultimately benefit from doing so; however, they have not learned to see themselves as producer rather than consumer, or to identify as employee rather than boss. Those who hold the negotiated reading are at least able to understand themselves, or those close to them, as employees or producers who might go on strike—an ability which cannot be taken for granted. The difference between this negotiated reading and the oppositional one, however, is one of *theory*: the person who negotiates their reading has a sense of how things are for them, or for people close to them, but does not generalize this, e.g., see that others are in a similar situation, identify with those others, or draw more general conclusions about the world. The oppositional reading, in its ability to oppose the media message that strikes as such are bad, draws on a theoretical understanding of how the world is structured, of the general features of being an employee, and of the structural sources of conflict.

The shifts from dominant, via negotiated, to oppositional readings constitute a process of radicalization and can be compared to how subaltern collective action develops in an expansive way, from struggles over specific issues in particular places to counterhegemonic struggles. The key point is that these shifts are propelled by knowledge production in social movements (Cox 2014). On the one hand, activists garner knowledge through their experience of encounters with opponents. This is first and foremost a process of learning through the failures and successes of the strategies deployed in these encounters (Choudry 2015). Such successes and failures say something about the adequacy or otherwise of the means through which movements seek to realize their ends. And this enhances self-understanding within movements. Strategic successes and failures also reveal the inherent limits of a given social order, both in terms of what dominant groups are prepared to or capable of accommodating in terms of challenges from below, and in terms of the cracks, fissures, and weaknesses in a given social order that social movements can exploit to develop momentum and leverage around the challenges they bring to bear on this order. On the other hand, activists garner knowledge through the sharing of experiences and discussions, dialogues, and disputes over practical questions internal to the movement.

Knowledge production in movements, especially as it is articulated by movement intellectuals, is characterized by two kinds of argument: first, 'the ideological and moral justification of the movement, the promotion and elaboration of its ideas and their defence

against attack' (the polemic space which has historically been identified as agitation), and second 'the strategic and tactical proposal' as 'a complex proposition which links together a reading of the nature of the present situation … with an action plan … for the movement in the immediate future' (Barker and Cox 2002, 6). These arguments are in turn validated internally in social movements, through their dismissal, acceptance, or modification by activists, and finally and ultimately through the practical test of actual movement activity.

It is at this point that the nexus between experience and theory converges with the character and dynamics of social movement practice. Theoretical knowledge enables us to grasp the character of social structures of power. And in doing so, it also enables us to move from dominant and negotiated ways of knowing and acting to oppositional ways of knowing and acting. We say knowing *and acting* quite deliberately, because, if theoretical knowledge is justified with reference to its ability to grasp the character of social power structures, then this in turn depends on problematizing those structures through social practice. In fact, without this practice, those structures cannot become clearly visible to social actors: 'education', in the classic activist division of agitation, education, and organizing, here has the specific meaning of analysing social structure so as to identify both *what has to change* in order to resolve a problem and *what stands in the way of that change*—such as interests, ideologies, structures, and so on.

Finally, there is theoretical activity specifically tied to 'organizing': there are many different possible conclusions that can be drawn from identifying these structural problems and barriers to change. Questions arise around which social actors are capable of mobilizing effectively to overcome these barriers, defeat these opponents, and transform these structures; what kinds of organizing strategies are most likely to work in a given context; what alliances are worth pursuing towards this overall goal; and so on. The complex histories of the world's radical lefts, its multiple feminisms, the varieties of anti-colonial struggle, the competing histories of black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) self-organizing in different times and places, and so on testify to the centrality of this question—as do, of course, the many defeats of movements which had succeeded in large-scale mobilizing and in elaborating critical theoretical accounts of capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, white supremacy, and so on but not in finding organizing strategies adequate to the challenge.

Pursuing insurgent epistemic gain

If we accept that insurgent social theory is a particular form of theoretical knowledge that is grounded in the lived experience and collective action of subaltern groups and that aims at advancing emancipatory social change, then what would an engaged intellectual ethic look like? That is, how should we conduct our discussions of what different forms of insurgent social theory enables us to know and do?

Far too often, exchanges and engagements between different bodies of insurgent social theory take the form of competition between its respective proponents. In other words, discussions between activists and scholars who are committed to seeking more justice and more freedom come to be shaped like scholastic debates, in which interventions are motivated by a

desire to defend and vindicate one form of insurgent social theory as being superior to other forms of insurgent social theory. This is particularly salient today where such debates take place on the terms of mainstream institutions—within academia, as debates ratified in purely scholastic terms; on social media, as debates ratified by the algorithms of capitalist corporations; or in for-profit radical publishing (whether print, podcast, video, or other), geared towards the construction of paying audiences and markets (Cox 2019).

One variant of this competition is the tendency to argue that a particular power structure is more important than others, and that theories that focus on this power structure in its pure form are therefore more important than and superior to others. This, of course, is what some Marxists do when they argue that structures of class power are somehow more significant than structures of power based on race or gender, and that Marxist theory is therefore superior to, for example, postcolonial theory or feminist theory (Chibber 2022). The key fallacy of this approach is the assumption that power structures exist in a state of singular and abstract purity, as opposed to being, as the Combahee River Collective (2017) put it, always 'interlocking', and further that struggles could somehow be conducted outside of this lived experience of interlocking power structures and conducted based on an abstract uniformity of interests.

Another variant would be the tendency to assess the validity of a given form of insurgent social theory in terms of its provenance in the world-system or, similarly, the tendency to mobilize simple identity categories in order to write off theoretical knowledge distilled from popular struggles as irrelevant to genuine emancipation. The key fallacy of this approach is that it erases the extent to which different bodies of insurgent social theory have travelled and cross-fertilized between movements and struggles, regardless of provenance and identity—in no small part, of course, because these movements and their organic intellectuals think of their struggles as being interconnected. In short, the making of theoretical knowledge in anti-systemic movements is far too complex and much too capacious to be adequately grasped by this style of engagement.

There is also a deeper fallacy, which is a failure to notice that the subaltern evidently do *not* automatically possess the knowledge they need to overcome their subordination. If that was the case, radical struggles would be both much more widespread and more effective than they in fact are. In practice, however, working-class racism and sexism, religious fundamentalisms speaking for majority world populations, boardroom feminisms and pink pounds, and a dozen other forms of asserting a narrowly defined group interest within the confines of the broader structures of oppression and exploitation are widespread. Indeed, this trading of general support for localized concessions is necessary for the construction of hegemonic power.

This is a space where Marxist approaches have much to offer, because they *start from* the practical awareness and acknowledgement (born in organizing) that most workers do not, much of the time, get beyond a general grumbling about their lot to an awareness of the nature of capitalism and a commitment to the kind of structured struggle that won weekends and welfare states. It takes struggle *within* the working class to get to this point. Meanwhile, appealing to external audiences (in academia, on social media, or in glossy magazines) to agree about the already-existing worth of one's own group serves both to ignore and deny all elements of collusion (in one's own subordination and that of others) and to resist the need for serious

discussion, grounded in practical experience of struggle, of what works—with all too predictable effects.

More generally, the problem with exchanges and engagements that take the form of competition is that they risk ignoring the precious learning of earlier generations of struggle. This learning is immensely valuable because it contains practical knowledge about how to change the world. As Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah (2020, 16) put it, it offers us the possibility to 'collectively think through earlier periods of resistance, past political trajectories and lessons learned, and to recognise how they continue to shape our present'. Often, this knowledge was produced in and through movements that were closely interwoven with each other—by no means in perfect harmony, but certainly in a shared orientation towards creating worlds with more freedom, with more justice, and with more democracy. Since the struggles for emancipation that have done so much to give shape and direction to the modern world remain in so many ways fundamentally incomplete and because of the very high stakes that define the perilous and consequential conjuncture that we live in, we cannot afford to waste this knowledge.

What we want to propose, therefore, is a different approach, which is geared towards what we call insurgent epistemic gain—in a nutshell, theoretical knowledge that is more effective in advancing oppositional collective action towards emancipation. As we move into zones of engagement from our particular experiential and theoretical starting points, our ethics should start from acknowledging that—just as the particular insurgent social theory that we are most familiar with is orientated towards finding better answers to the question of what is to be done to make other and better worlds possible—so are those of our interlocutors. If we acknowledge this, our engagement should be informed by a desire to understand what other insurgent social theories have to offer that might enable us to develop more encompassing projects for achieving this. This does not exclude disagreement and debate—anyone with a minimum of experience with activism knows that these are fundamental to movement democracy—but it does mean approaching disagreement and debate with a sense of mutual respect grounded in the fact that different forms of movement theory all stem from actual attempts to change the world in an emancipatory direction.

To achieve insurgent epistemic gain, we must constantly ask ourselves *what an idea does and for whom*—and recognize its social reality and political purpose. Within such an ethic of engagement, winning an argument—if winning is even the right word here—means grasping how our interlocutors have come to have their perspective within our own specific understanding and how their perspective in turn might expand our own understanding of what emancipatory transformation is and how we might achieve it. In essence, this practice is about solidarity—about making the connections to the real struggle that our interlocutors are trying to articulate, and trying to articulate our own struggles better. By basing ourselves on these connections, we can enable common counterhegemonic movement projects to develop. What makes good theory is not just 'if everyone agreed with me things would be fine' but rather 'given that we don't agree with each other, how do I need to think about my own position in relation to others so that we can all find ways of moving forward together?'. Ultimately, it is

in doing so that we prove the truth—that is, what Marx (1995, 207) referred to as 'the reality and the power, and the this-worldliness' of our thought—and create a better world.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an account of insurgent social theory as a specific form of theoretical knowledge, which, due to its grounding in the collective action of subaltern groups, is different in important ways from conventional social theory. Insurgent social theory, we have argued, emanates from situated experiences of exploitative and oppressive power structures, crystallizes through collective endeavours to understand how these structures work, and is defined by its orientation towards achieving emancipatory transformations. Significant critical theorizations of the foundational power structures of the modern world originate in the struggles of social movements that have organized and mobilized to change, in part or in whole, those structures of power. In terms of its essential features, we have argued that insurgent social theory, at the most fundamental level, is a form of knowledge that (i) is consciously developed out of the experience and practice of movements from below; (ii) has been worked through using these as touchstones; (iii) has become explicit and articulate; and (iv) has been brought to a level where it can be generalized and shared.

In closing, we proposed that discussions of insurgent social theory should be approached on the basis of an ethical commitment to advance insurgent epistemic gain—that is, to produce knowledge that enables us to more effectively bring about emancipatory transformation. Insurgent epistemic gain, we argued, can be achieved if our theoretical engagements are informed by an orientation towards tracing out the connections that exist between different insurgent theoretical perspectives, and grasping how these perspectives might expand our own understanding of what emancipatory transformation is and how it might be brought about. Ultimately, this is a labour of solidarity, geared towards the construction of durable latticeworks of counterhegemonic struggles that can make other worlds possible.

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Notes

[i] In one ideal formulation, these three will in effect be identical: a group theorizes on its own behalf and around its own current and future action. Often, though, under conditions not of our own making, a movement only involves *part* of the working class, *some* women, *some* BIPOC people etc. but seeks to broaden that engagement—and for this reason must theorize a wider interest than that of those currently active. Meanwhile, a movement's existence is often an indicator of its *present* inability to overthrow the oppression, exploitation, or cultural hierarchy it targets, and hence the need not only for better strategy but also for wider and deeper mobilization and radicalization.

[ii] It also, of course, implies a different 'we': not those involved in a particular discipline or sub-field, but a social movement or a community in struggle.

[iii] It is important to remember that 'groups' in this sense (with some degree of shared identity and action) are not given but are collective achievements, as in the title of Thompson's (1963) *Making of the English Working Class*—people may start in situations of objective proletarianization, but recognizing this, overcoming occupational, status, and geographical differences and coming to a shared sense of 'the working class' as an active and conscious agent was a long and drawn-out process. Neoliberalism has put much effort into reversing this process, constructing fragmentation and particularism.