

Review

Insurgent Encounters: Transnational Activism, Ethnography, and the Political

Jeffrey Juris and Alex Khasnabish (eds). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. 472pp.

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Insurgent Encounters: Transnational Activism, Ethnography, and the Political, edited by Jeffrey Juris and Alex Khasnabish, opens with a vignette describing an encounter between international activists and Zapatista base communities in 2006–7. The moment, and the thick description of it in the introduction, serves as an exemplar of the ethnographic approach to studying social movements advocated in this book: at once romantic, mysterious, and radical, while also rife with contradictions, struggles, and tensions. Juris and Khasnabish have gathered together a diverse collection of work on transnational activism that highlights the importance of ethnography as a set of methods largely neglected in traditional social movement research, a mode of analysis and writing, and a mechanism for creating more effective political strategies and tactics.

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As evident from the title, this edited volume aims to help define a number of terms (insurgent, encounter, transnational, activism, ethnography, and the political) and identify the space where they intersect. With such an immense task, the editors' introduction is a must read. As they endeavor to situate the works contained within, they write in a meticulous but approachable way that results in an easy to read review of how these concepts have been articulated in past research or theorizing and how they are deployed in the chapters which comprise this book. The editors' writing will capture readers' attention and the stories, radical activist moments, and style of ethnographic writing in each subsequent case study will hold it.

While the editors lay out several admirable goals for the book, I focus on what I see as its main strengths: the gap in social movement theory that is addressed by investigating transnational activism from an ethnographic approach.

Insurgent Encounters moves beyond conventional social movement theory by investigating activism that is outside of and rejects the values of capitalist modernity, liberal democracy, and individualism. Juris and Khasnabish argue convincingly that traditional social movement methods are biased against the kind of radical change advocated by the most recent transnational movements, obscuring our understanding of the potential, aims, and meaning of their politics. By bringing the material basis of reality back into the conversation, they believe that ethnography can also add to new social movement theory's understanding of the symbolic potential of these kinds of movements.

As they define it, ethnography focuses on deep concern for lived reality of people in their sociocultural contexts. The "exploration of ethnography and activism within transnational spaces of encounter aims" to situate the method of research as "a form of knowledge that fundamentally challenges, even if it does not entirely overcome the (researching) subject-(researched) object binary" (5). Although this author is not an ethnographer, I was convinced of the potential for this method of researching social movements. While its focus is on transnational activism, the research presented in the book may serve as a model for those interested in a fresh, new approach to studying a variety of "newer" social movements. Rather than advocating the use of newer technology such as twitter or social media merely as a source for analysis, these studies suggest an approach to studying any form of activism that is fluid, multidimensional, and difficult to pin down with regard to the dimensions of conventional social movement studies (with its focus on resources, mobilization, framing, opportunity structures, etc.).

The fourteen studies in *Insurgent Encounters* also extend earlier approaches to the study of transnational activism which has tended to discuss the emergence of cross-border networks, the rise of global political engagement, and has been focused on the role of formal NGOs and transnational social movement organizations (TSMOs) from a resource mobilization perspective. Furthermore, the authors in this volume go beyond discussing the role of culture and identity in such movements, informal modes of cross-border cooperation, communication networks and networked modes of organization, and actor-network theory that has characterized the newest and most innovative work in this field.

The book is divided into four sections, each of which concentrates on a theme central to what the editors admit is only part of the academic and political terrain covered by transnational activism. The themes include: emerging subjectivities, discrepant paradigms, transformational knowledges, and subversive technologies.

The section on emerging subjectivities deals with transnational activism as a space of subjectification, exploring a revolutionary subjectivity of the multitude that is theorized to be emerging out of transnational activism. The chapters in this section take Hardt and Negri's (2000, 2004) notion of the "collective no" and "many yeses" as well as Delueze and Guattari (1987) notion of the rhizome to emphasize the unpredictable and multidimensional processes of becoming that are inherent in this form of activism. The contributors explore emerging subjectivities as "sites of liberation and foci of tension and conflict" in a variety of settings and movements, including the U.S. Social Forum (Juris), the World Social Forum (Manisha Desai), the discourse of Zapatismo (Khasnabish), and resistance to corporate globalization (Geoffrey Pleyers). Desai's piece on the Feminist Dialogues (FD), which were organized around the World Social Forums in Brazil, Kenya, and India, demonstrates the insights about social change which can be gained from rigorous, self-reflexive research conducted by scholar activists. Her work, based on participant observation in FD, reveals the opportunities for networking and organizing that participatory dialogue presents but the difficulty of converting these moments in to achievable political goals.

The second section takes on the discrepant paradigms—the sets of political and intellectual assumptions, concepts, values, and practices—that make up this book's alternative approach to studying social movements. The activist ethnographers in this volume are not content to replicate dominant orders or narratives. Instead, they offer up

radically different models of social change modeled off of indigenous peoples (Sylvia Escárcega), marginalized forms of political protest (Vinci Daro), or analytical frames which resist a local/global dichotomy (David J. Hess). Escárcega's examination of two case studies in the Global Indigenous Movement (GIM) documents the ways in which "Indigenous activists are proposing new paradigms that challenge us to transform our understanding of humanity, the world, and nature" (130). These "paradigm wars" offer alternative solutions to the global climate crisis that are presented as radical alternatives to Western narratives about our relationship with nature. Escárcega argues that these alternative paradigms are often infused with the language of human rights and emerged out of engagement with the United Nations. They illustrate the importance of transnational networked spaces for the creation of global political movements and the fertile ground of dialogue for the creation of new paradigms.

"Transformational Knowledges," the third section, emphasizes the work of social movements and activists as knowledge producers: "subjects deeply invested in reimagining and reconstructing their worlds as they resist the violence of the neoliberal order" (20). Contributors to this section consider: how transformative ethnography can create transformative action (Giuseppe Caruso); feelings of solidarity, commitment, and obligations among activist ethnographers (Paul Routledge); the importance of mutual understanding among movements and ethnographers as actors in a crowded field of knowledge production (Casas-Cortes, Osterweil and Powell); and the ways in which ethnographers can enhance our understanding of transnational political dynamics (Janet Conway). Caruso's chapter contributes to our understanding of transformative ethnography and the debate over ethnography and social change. In particular, he argues that ethnographers trained in the communicative practices of mediation can use these theoretical and practical tools to help activists, academics, and the public make sense of movement issues, highlight areas of concern, engage critics, and ease tensions. He uses his experience working in the Mumbai office for the India World Social Forum (WSF) as an example of how tensions within an organization can lead to volatility, escalating conflict, and disaffection as well as camaraderie, intimacy, and adaptation. Dealing with the individual histories, political, cultural and ideological dispositions involved in interpersonal conflict led Caruso to the principles of transformative ethnography as a means for improving democratic participation and internal communication processes in transnational movements.

Finally, the section on subversive technologies explores new digital technologies and the way they have affected the “cultural logic of networking” that characterizes global justice movements. In particular, these movements have been particularly adept at employing such technologies to enhance collaborative practices, produce and distribute knowledge, and to democratize organizational structures. One contributor to this section explores pre-internet civil society in order to assess the aspirations and contributions of the struggles for information freedom through digital technologies. Among the types of digital technologies examined include free/libre and open-source software (FLOSS) (Jeffrey Juris, Giuseppe Caruso, Stéphane Couture, and Lorenzo Mosca) and Indymedia, an internet-based social change project (Tish Stringer). The collaborative examination of FLOSS by Juris and his colleagues reveals the political nature of seemingly technical matters. The case study reports on the tensions, struggles, and conflicts surrounding software and technology within the WSF between developers, technological support teams, and users of FLOSS. As an activist strategy, free or open-source software might allow movements to challenge monopoly control by software corporations but without further democratization of basic knowledge, skills, and technology, it is not always possible to avoid situations where expert technicians can exert disproportionate power over other movement actors.

This collection represents an important advance in the study of social movements generally and transnational activism specifically as it is the first book to focus on the methods, perspectives and theoretical insights generated by ethnography. Although the editors and many of the contributors to *Insurgent Encounters* are anthropologists, there was a concerted effort to recruit work by individuals who reflect the transnational network of activists that is its object of study: they represent younger and more established scholars, scholar-activists and activist-scholars, and a range of disciplines (including anthropology, geography, political science, and sociology). As a result, the variety of issues, forms of activism, disciplines, and movement moments represented in this single volume will interest a wide variety of scholar-activists and activist-scholars. Even readers unfamiliar with traditional or new social movement research will be transported to the contentious moments vividly described in ethnographic style throughout *Insurgent Encounters* enabling them to grasp the infinite possibilities for change contained in each encounter and the larger social movements of which they are a part.