

**Media Anthropology Network
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E-Seminar Series**

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E-Seminar 58

On Media Practices and the Radical Imagination

**by
Alex Khasnabish
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**Discussant
John Postill
RMIT University, Melbourne**

26 October – 16 November 2016

Dear All,

Our 58th E-Seminar is now open. We will be discussing the following paper by Dr Alex Khasnabish (Mount Saint Vincent University).

On Media Practices and the Radical Imagination

The radical imagination is the collective, dialogic capacity to envision how the world might be otherwise that sparks between people in the context of generative, critical encounters. It is also the animating force of robust, radical movements for social change. What media channels does the radical imagination travel and what is their significance? How do these different pathways shape, facilitate, or constrain the radical imagination and impact movement-building? Drawing on research conducted with radical social justice activists in the Anglophone North Atlantic over the last decade, I explore the relationship between activist media use and the circulation of the radical imagination. I consider "media" expansively, looking across a range of channels and practices including documentary film screenings, social and digital media, community discussion groups, speaker's series, print publications, and spectacles of dissent and resistance. I pay particular attention to the way that different media practices amplify or undermine the ability of radical activists and organizers to communicate with those beyond the ranks of the already-convinced. I conclude by considering important directions for engaged research in this area and the methodological issues they pose.

Dr John Postill (RMIT University, Australia) will be acting as discussant. After his response I will give Alex the opportunity to reply to the comments and then will be able to open the discussion to all.

If you are new to the list, our E- Seminars run for a period of 2 weeks and they are vibrant spaces for discussion and confrontation on a specific paper.

If you haven't had the chance to read the paper you can find it on our website EASA Media Anthropology Network - E-Seminar Series <http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

The Media Anthropology Network, European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), aims to foster international discussion and collaboration around the ... www.media-anthropology.net

Really looking forward to the discussion
Veronica

Dear all

I'd like to thank Veronica Barassi for the opportunity to comment on Alex Khasnabish's working paper, titled "On Media Practices and the Radical Imagination",

and Alex himself for taking the time to share his work with us. The paper can be found here: <http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

This paper is based on a long-term academic/activist initiative named "the Radical Imagination Project" led by Alex and his colleague Max Haiven since 2010. By radical imagination they mean 'the collective, dialogic capacity to envision how the world might be otherwise that sparks between people in the context of generative, critical encounters'. The idea of the initiative is to 'not only explore or document the radical imagination but to bring it into being – to convoke it – with radical social justice activists and organizers.' The project is based in Halifax (pop. ca. 400,000), Nova Scotia, Canada.

Alex asks in what ways specific media practices may aid or hinder the growth of a radical imagination among activists in the 'Anglophone North Atlantic'. The case study is radical activists' reactions to the public screening in Halifax of a pro-vegan film by examining two discussion threads in the Radical Imagination Project's Facebook group. What they found was discouraging. Instead of a Habermasian realm of critical rationality, they encountered some of the worst traits of the radical activist world: cliqueism, sectarianism, echo chambers. People were talking past one another and sticking to their ideological guns rather than engaging in constructive criticism, particularly those holding pro-vegan views. Indeed, their positions hardened as the exchanges unfolded. The paper ends with a call for further research into the media practices of radical activists.

A few brief comments and questions to kick off the seminar:

1. Genre. I found it really refreshing - and unusual - to read an academic piece based on ethnographic research in which the author is pulling no punches, whilst being respectful towards his research participants. This is no rant. In other words, Alex practices in his own writing what he preaches. We nonetheless get a strong sense of Alex's frustration with the discursive and political impasse (we can hear it in his voice, so to speak). In my view, the paper is a timely call for sustained activist and academic attention to the political possibilities and limitations of pursuing different media strategies.
2. Locality. I think we need to know more about Halifax as a locality to be able to place it within that vast 'Anglophone North Atlantic' region that Alex refers to. I for one would be keen to find out more about the history of its 'radical milieu' and its field of socio-technical relations. Geertz's (1973) famous dictum 'Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods ...); they study in villages' won't help us here. In fact, anthropologists study both localities and *in* localities, both 'small places' and 'large issues', as Thomas H. Eriksen (2001) puts it. So my query is: Who are these activists? Where do they come from? How does their place of residence (Halifax or elsewhere) shape their activism, if at all? etc.
3. Scale. This brings me to Eriksen's (2016) recent essay on the 'acceleration' and 'overheating' of our planet. Eriksen argues that 'while trying to weave the big picture and connecting the dots, the credibility of the anthropological story about globalization depends on its ability to show how global processes interact with local lives, in ways which are both similar and different across the planet.' Eriksen calls for

'multiscalar analysis connecting local realities with large-scale processes'. A good example of this in relation to internet activism would be a terrific essay by Susan K. Sell (2013) on the 2012 transnational mobilisation against SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act). Sell suggests that 'the Internet facilitated scaling up and scale shifting, thereby amplifying constituent mobilization [...] and expanding the sites of contention'. So going back to the paper: How do these radical activists scale up or down their struggles, if at all? What part do internet and other digital technologies play in this scale shifting?

4. Timing. To what extent does this case study capture this particular moment in time, 2015-2016? I'm thinking of the Occupy movement and its aftermath in North America. Had this taken place at the height of the protests (Sep-Oct 2011) would the 'scene' be radically different? When I did research among activists in Barcelona in May 2011, I experienced multiple little scenes being swallowed up by this huge wave of popular mobilisation, after which the civic 'space' was never quite the same again.

5. Media. There are potentially very interesting links in this paper to be made to the media anthropology literature, e.g. Mark Hobart's (2010) work on Balinese media-related practices such as commenting on TV or theatre plays, where commenting is analysed as a significant practice in its own right, or Mark A. Peterson's (2003) work on intertextuality. Alex's example is intertextual (as well as intermedial) in that people are using a Facebook thread to talk about a public screening of a film. More thinking on transmediality would have practical political consequences, too. For instance, a few years ago a young, pony-tailed leftist political scientist at Complutense, University in Madrid taught himself the craft of TV communication. He started by appearing on low-budget alternative TV stations and then 'gatecrashed' the big conservative networks political talk shows. They saw him as an entertaining 'radical' (and the ratings went up). He then set up the new political party Podemos and used a 'transmedia' strategy to great effect, i.e. he and his team felt equally at home on the internet and on TV.

Many thanks for a great paper and I look forward to Alex's response and to the subsequent discussion!

John

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October 29th 2016

Hi all,

First of all, I'd like to thank Veronica for the invitation to be a part of this seminar and to John for his thoughtful commentary. Here I'll just pick up on some of the most important threads in John's comments.

On Halifax: John raises the point about the importance of understanding the context and radical milieu of Halifax in order to situate my arguments in the paper. I should have included something about that in this paper since it's central to both the Radical Imagination Project and the working paper at hand. One of the points we make in the Project is that there's real value in situating a social movement-based research project in more marginal locales. So much social movement research takes place in cosmopolitan metropolises but this ends up giving us a skewed view of what much "activism" actually consists of and what challenges and opportunities face in trying to make social change out of the limelight.

Halifax is one of the oldest settlements in Canada and was (in the 1700 and 1800s) arguably one of the most important economic, military, and political hubs in North America. It is situated on unceded, unsurrendered Mi'Kmaq territory and its bloody history of Indigenous dispossession is still very much alive today. Much else has changed since its founding in 1749. All of the Canadian Maritimes (the provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island) are economically depressed, characterized by youth out-migration, and resource-extraction dependent. Halifax is a bit exceptional in this setting. As the biggest city east of Quebec City, it is the regional governmental, economic, and military hub. It is the home of Canada's East Coast Navy. It is one of the only regions in the Maritimes that is actually growing in terms of population. Halifax is also home to 4 metro universities. Like the province, the city has a long and sordid history of racialized segregation, colonial violence, and is home to some of the province's wealthiest families. It would not be inaccurate to characterize Halifax's economic order as neoliberal capitalist with strong neo-feudal elements.

Halifax has a long activist history. The most important contemporary points of reference are a strong alter-globalization organizing strand in the city dating from the late '90s and early 2000s, a robust anti-poverty and anti-war activist community, and weakened but still present labour and student movements. Halifax's radical milieu is small with a core of committed activists and organizers who tend to share space in multiple organizations. There is also a fairly pronounced split in the city between more liberal/progressive/reformist elements and more anarchistic/radical/revolutionary ones. For a long time there was a commitment to working across these lines of difference but a major convergence-style protest in 2007

against a proposed east coast neoliberal "gateway" project using Halifax's deepwater port as a point of entry to North American markets resulted in a debacle that split these lines of solidarity. A small black bloc contingent confronted riot police during the convergence and was quickly demobilized with many arrested. The black bloc action wasn't coordinated with the other organizers and was widely used by poweholders to deligitimize the protest and the issues it sought to foreground. Sectarianism and infighting followed this protest with vocal denunciations hurled by activists and organizers on all sides. It was into this deeply fractured political milieu that we entered as academic-activists in 2010 with the intention of using the Radical Imagination Project as a way of intervening productively and bringing activists and organizers together again.

Halifax had its own Occupy encampment in 2011 that was the site of considerable controversy when it was forcibly evicted in November 2011 after promises by City Council to allow for occupiers to relocate rather than being evicted. There have also been other significant attempts to build solidarity between anticapitalists in the city but no meaningful success on this front as of yet. Even self-identified anticapitalists in the city regularly find themselves in opposing camps depending on their political ideology as it relates to the question of hierarchical versus non-hierarchical forms of organizing and the question of investment in electoral politics.

The radical milieu in Halifax is constituted by long-term residents of the city and the surrounding areas but there is also a significant student contingent that turns over every 4 years or so as people graduate out of their university programs. So there is continuity and disjuncture. Settler-colonialism, food security, anti-war activism, gentrification and development, and climate change activism are all important strands of political work in the city these days. The question of how this broad context shapes activism is an excellent one but depends on which segment of the broader activist community is being engaged. The example I engage in this paper (vegan activists) is one that is more peripheral to the core of activist work in the city and is more on the "lifestyle" side of things in terms of how people see social change happening, although it intersects with environmental and food security interests. That said, sectarianism and infighting have long characterized the political milieu here and so this example should be seen as exemplary if specific rather than exceptional. This has inhibited mass movement building in the city, arguably to the distinct advantage of powerholders.

On Scaling and Timing: The point John makes about scaling is important. I would suggest in Halifax there is little consideration of scale and much activism remains fairly localized. Social media has facilitated a considerable degree of connection-making between certain groups of activists in the city and beyond but many long-term organizers here remain focused on their locality. In general, I think this is a problem and part of what explains the weakness and fragmentation of the radical scene in the city. Points are to be gained here by vying for credibility against other activists and ideological positions. Media in general is not well-used by activists locally and when it is it does not tend to reach beyond radical circles themselves.

In terms of timing, there was a marked break between the pre- and post-Occupy moment in Halifax. Occupy NS brought a new generation of activists and organizers to the fore in the city and, arguably, inserted a new note of hope and optimism into

what had been a very fractious, bitter, competitive, and cynical activist milieu. Some of that energy has dissipated, although struggles against extractivist industries and gentrification have acquired new significance in the years since.

On Media: John's point about intermediality is really interesting and is, in part, what we want to explore in the next phase of our research. How do activists and organizers imagine politically across different mediated encounters? What kinds of platforms and encounters are most productive when it comes to the radical imagination? Which ones inhibit it? For now, most of the activists most comfortable with crossing multiple media platforms and using them in their organizing seem to be affiliated with climate justice activism and opposition to extractivist industries. Other activists in the city (especially those focusing on direct action as a repertoire of action) hardly engage media at all.

Again, thanks for the provocative commentary, as is probably clear from the paper there is still much I'm trying to work out here and this really helps me think through it. Looking forward to further discussion.

Cheers,

Alex

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

October 29th 2016

Hi All,

Following Alex's response to John, the seminar discussion is now open to all.

Veronica

Erkan Saka sakaerka@gmail.com

October 30th 2016

Thank you Alex for sharing your study with us.

I have a brief comment on the social media usage. I believe most of us like you may have thought engagements in social media like the ones you have highlighted do not produce really dialogic results.

I began to observe that maybe there is an indirect, hard to see benefit in these seemingly not-dialogic engagements. Many users who might be pejoratively labelled as "lurkers" do indeed follow the commentaries and deduce their own conclusions that might lead to further and more productive engagements in other contexts. If I ever engage a conversation- mostly on Twitter in my case- with a, let's say, political troll, I imagine a broader audience that watches us and try to communicate my message to that imaginary audience instead of the one I actually talk to whose intention is rarely to create a dialogue. [This all slightly reminds me Bakhtin's dissection of Dostoevsky's novels]

Maybe one should imagine new research designs to get these triggered conversations outside the existing and ongoing unproductive conversation.

In another note, I liked the way the project positioned itself in relation to activists. I feel like there is a growing uneasiness towards academics among many activists as the former - despite good intentions- treats the latter in a rather instrumentalist manner (in order to produce scholarly work for mostly benefiting the former)

Cordially,
Erkan

Jamie Coates jamie.coates@gmail.com

October 30th 2016

Dear Alex

Thank you for an interesting read that resonates a lot with my own experiences of the awkward relationship between activism and academia. I really like your frank critique here, and I appreciated the extra context you provided after John's comments. I have learnt a lot of things I didn't know about Canadian activist communities.

One thing that I wonder is to what extent the dynamics you observed relate to media interactions, and to what extent they related to the ways in which the radical imagination is constructed/shared more generally (in terms of both its mediation and its content).

You start the paper with a powerful statement regarding what the radical imagination is, but it might be nice to tease out just why the collective and fundamental aspects of this imagination are precisely what makes it so radical. This question of collectivity and its relationship to media, seems to be a really interesting question that I would like to hear more about.

In many ways, the vicissitudes of this activist community remind me of what Jean Luc Nancy talks about in 'the inoperative community'. Nancy suggests that part of the failure of leftist politics in the past related to the ways in which the collective imaginaries they relied on totalised and essentialised people's relationships to one another. He relies on some perhaps overly complex philosophical reasons for why this is (that could be read as fairly conservative), but he makes an interesting point that as soon as we declare a certain kind of collectivity we lose some sense of the ever-emergent quality of collectivity (its becoming). He also states that as we are thrust into the world in a state of 'being-with' calls to either future communities or returns to community can often suppress or conflict with shared ways of being in the world that already exist but might not be recognised as such because they aren't explicitly labelled as such. In 'Being Singular-Plural' he then argues that we need to find a way of envisioning being with that sits between the collective and the individual, something that I think sits nicely with most ethnographic research.

Long story short, your paper starts from a declaration that a turn to collectivity is the fundamental way to challenge the status quo, but you also show how the question of how we imagine collectivity is at the centre of how 'status quos' (in plural) are formed by the end of the paper. A little more signposting of this conclusion would be nice I think.

In the end you raise some really fantastic reflections on the cowspiracy debate, but they also made me think of a few questions. These were particularly in relation to how you argue that the marginal status of activist groups cause the more negative/exclusionary dialogue that emerged in the cowspiracy debate.

How does the form/content of imagination contribute to the political dialogue we see in the facebook discussion? Does a radically collective imagination (in itself) also act as a source of small group norms, hegemonies and toxic social relationship.

I would suggest that it is not only that participants 'need many more and better opportunities to cultivate their radical imagination in common' but that they also need better tools and opportunities to reflect on what shape this radical imagination in common might take. At the end of the paper you raise a list of provocative ideas about shared responsibilities (in terms of care and materiality) but I think this would be strengthened again if you spent a little more time teasing out why a shared politics is radical.

You show how 'toxic social relations characteristic of dominant society' can be reproduced within a mediated group. But I also wonder whether the toxic social relations formed within these projects are uniquely characteristic to other calls to collectivity. The discussions that took place surrounding cowspiracy remind me of evangelical Christian groups and passionate gamer communities as much as they do activist groups.

Do you think this would be a mischaracterisation of what happened here? If so why/why not?

I admit it's a slippery slope to raise staid arguments that compare old leftist politics with new forms of activism, but as a China specialist, I can't but help reflect on how the discussions that took place here were reminiscent of practices found within the revolutionary politics of Maoism (of writing and pasting critical essays on the walls of universities; of arguments about who is a 'good' revolutionary, and of competitions over who's revolutionary vision was too included within the canon of Maoist politics). What this reflection makes me wonder is how much is this a 'new' phenomena, and how much is it a newly mediated form of an older problem/social practice endemic to radical political visions?

Further, what historical precedents are there in these kinds of activist community problems? Your response to John's comment helped solve this question a little, but I'd like a little more perhaps.

In summary, your paper mentions how calls to radical politics can go wrong, but I'd really like to see a closer analysis of what internal dynamics contribute to this (as opposed to the largely external causes you mention).

Your discussion of the 'scene' and the 'echo chamber' are brilliant in this regard, and I'd like to hear more of this sort of stuff (maybe even put it up at the beginning). I also would like to hear a little more about how the content (or semiotics, concept or whatever term you prefer) of the radical collective imaginaries you posit here

contributes to the shape these practices take.

Thanks again

Jamie

Ella Taylor-Smith E.Taylor-Smith@napier.ac.uk

October 31st 2016

Hi

Really enjoyed Alex' paper and the comments so far.

However, what I'm missing is the sense in which the media -say Facebook in this case -is influencing the register of these comments, rather than characteristics of the topic or the posters.

I'm making this comment based on my experiences of socialising with radical vegans in the 1980s, when we were all *young*. Although the discourse took different forms -e.g. posters, flyers, bands, f2f -it wasn't so different from the more black and white comments in Alex' paper.

Alex also mentions the dialogic dimension of his project. This seems, to me, to be a fundamentally different approach to deliberative discussion or to presuming that people will sooner or later do what seems right to us, because of either moral or logical imperatives. I wondered if the project covered the local activists' awareness of and attitudes towards dialogic approaches...

What do you think?

-Ella

Dr Ella Taylor-Smith

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October 31st 2016

Thanks to Ella, Erkan, and Jamie for some very important insights and thought-provoking questions. Let me offer some thoughts here.

1) On the issue of the construction and content of the radical imagination and what makes it "radical."

Since the radical imagination is something people do together rather than something they have there's no specific content to it. It's only "radical" when it assumes the form of collective, grassroots inquiry that aims to get to the root of the problems identified by a given collectivity. In the Radical Imagination Project we've always gone to great lengths to avoid thinking of the imagination as a thing. We've also intentionally avoided trying to freeze or capture it at one specific moment in time. One could do this but our question was always "to whom would such freezing/capturing be useful?" and it seems to us the answer is only cloistered experts, the state, and repressive forces of "law and order." So we've avoided collecting information about its specific

content this way. I think it is possible to talk about specific crystallizations of the radical imagination but then perhaps we're talking about specific radical imaginaries, not imaginations. From the perspective of the Project, we have been much more focused on how activists and organizers think about where they've come from, where they are now, and what their political horizons are then what the content of their political thinking is at any particular moment.

The point about the way the radical imagination plays out is very important thought. The way in which any given collective facilitates its radical imagination is absolutely central to what this imagination makes possible and what it inhibits or obscures. For example, the persistence of patriarchal gender relations within avowedly radical activist spaces often produces the effect of foregrounding class-based relations of exploitation and minimizing oppression experienced across a range of other axes. In other writing we've done on the Project we've discussed how notions of movement or activist "success" and "failure" are deeply and problematically tied to dominant notions of the same, thus reproducing the value system attached to the status quo rather than challenging it. So I'd just say that, yes, the way the radical imagination is facilitated in lived encounters has tremendous effects upon the shape it takes and the implications it offers for social action.

2) How much of this dynamic is specific to activism? How much of this is new?

Not much actually. Sectarianism, a politics of purity, militant defense of group identity, self-righteousness and hyper moralism are all long standing characteristics of activist spaces and as other commentators have pointed out they're by no means limited to them. I think social media merely amplifies and reinforces them. As I trace in the working paper, this particular FB engagement isn't a product of social media, rather, social media reflects a form of engagement that has become a defining feature of many avowedly "radical" political scenes across the global North. But there is also something special about the kind of encounters that social media facilitates that super-charge forms of political performance that privilege denunciation, moral righteousness, shrillness, and outrage. I think there's also something pernicious about social media that allows for the performance of "public" debate and engagement but is really much closer to the dynamics of the echo chamber. Social media outrage is almost an inverse index to activists' power in the lived world, it allows for feelings of power when we are in fact far from it in our day-to-day lived realities.

3) The value of non-dialogic encounters as forms of public pedagogy.

I definitely am sympathetic to the perspective that we engage in non-dialogic encounters especially in social or other media not to foment dialogue but to participate in a form of "public pedagogy." At the same time, I wonder about how effective these forms of engagement are. Who is listening? For whom are we performing? And what do people learn about social and political change from these engagements? I think it's also worth keeping in mind that these socially mediated performances occur in vernaculars that are already worked over by a host of power relations and by reproducing them we reproduce those relations. In any case, it's pretty clear no one builds social movements this way even if some people's thinking is stimulated in different directions by it.

Cheers,

Alex

Elisenda Ardevol eardevol@gmail.com

November 1st 2016

Hi, thanks Alex for this inspiring paper and for sharing with us this thread of your facebook project!

Some questions arose to my mind when reading the paper and the comments posted in this discussion.

First: I did not understand why did you chose that film for your "experiment". If it was not addressed to discuss the vegan's position, which was the "activist" public you were trying to reach? Did you want to reach any kind of activists? Leftists activists? Anti-capitalist activists? Animalistic activists? Change climate activists? Social justice seekers? What seems clear is that you did not look for vegan activists, but vegan activists did go to see the film and did take over the Facebook thread as they felt interpellated to do so. They do not only participate, but one of them create one new thread.

Second. My impression is that your performance (screening a vegan film presented by "carnic" speakers) was very provocative. Some vegans felt threatened and react just as anyone would expect: trolling and claiming against such a "provocation". My feelings are that at some extent I could understand them. It will be the same case as presenting a pro-life documentary by a pro-abort activist. I think that pro-life activists would react as well to "this" kind of provocation in a not agreeable and tolerant manner. Pro-life is a radical movement in the sense that there is no grey-zones: The life of the unborn has to be respected always, even in the early stages of conception. I think that Vegans are also a radical movement in that sense: there is no possible grey zones (the example in facebook showed it very clear). But have/practice they a "radical imagination"? In the sense Alex suggest that that it is a collective work to develop "the capacity to envision that which does not yet exist, to conceive of how we might live in ways other than we do now"?

Third. Dialectic versus dialogic. I like Sennett distinction between those two terms. Dialog is based on dialectics, that is: in confronting positions some agreement has to be produced (a synthesis) while in the dialogical case (Benjamin) it is not necessary to reach a common understanding, but a mutual understanding of the other's position. I wonder if dialogic can be a method for not imposing one's view, but for making it understandable to those that do not share it and don't wish to share it. Just an idea.

Four. Morality. My impression is that the radical imagination project takes a strong moral position. It has great "good intentions" but it departs from a vision that "we" academics can teach "them", the activists something that we think its valuable for them. But that does not mean that we have the "right vision"? That we are not go to them for learning something from them, but for teaching them? Is not perhaps this "pedagogical" movement enclosing some kind of moral superiority? What kind of intervention can we imagine that does not implicitly wear some kind of moral

judgements?

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November 2nd 2016

Thanks for your comments and questions Elisenda. A couple of points of clarification:

1) the film screenings are not "experiments," and the Facebook engagement isn't either. They are both outcomes of our research and public education commitments in the Radical Imagination Project. So we run a documentary film series (now in its third year) not as a "research site" but as an effort to create spaces of encounter to circulate radical ideas and stories of struggle and then to facilitate a dialogic process for people to think through these issues. We are currently embarking on a research-based intervention in the film series that I discuss in the paper briefly but this hasn't started yet (examining documentary film as public pedagogy and "tracking" 3-6 non-activist attendees over a period of 6 months to explore the relationship between film screening attendance and political work in the wider world). We screen films as part of the global political documentary network Cinema Politica - the films we choose to screen are all "radical" in some sense (that is, they express perspectives that see the complex of crises and problems we currently confront as structurally rooted and in need of systemic solutions) but they do not necessarily or even often align with our political commitments. The point is critical engagement and dialogue, not propaganda or conversion. The public we engage through the film series is diverse and we don't imagine it to be homogenous in any way. When we invite speakers to comment on the films we show they aren't brought in to "support" the film, they're brought in to offer perspectives that complement the films and stimulate critical thinking and political engagement.

2) I agree with you that the vegans in attendance clearly were deeply, morally insulted by the choice of speaker and the fact that we weren't just promoting the perspective of the film (which is, in fact, deeply and factually flawed, but that's a story for another day). But my point in representing the Facebook "debate" that followed the screening isn't to call them out as unique but to hold this exchange up as a moment that crystallizes the dynamics that inhabit much radical activism in the Anglophone North Atlantic world these days. So the ontological split that you point to about how vegans or anti-choicers view life and sentience is an important one but my response and that of other radicals to it is that we cannot simply trump other ways of being, knowing, and living in the world with our own. In this regard, veganism is often a problematic political scene because of its unquestioned whiteness, its racialized overtones with respect to other people's relationship with non-human animal life, its denunciatory character and shrill moralism. So the challenge for a project like ours is not to convert people to veganism (or any other political issue we raise) or to denounce veganism

but to create a space and a process where conflicting positions can be brought into dialogue in an effort to clarify our points of solidarity, our political practices, and our visions and strategies for social change. So I guess I'd say that the vegan community here exemplifies some of the most problematic tendencies of the contemporary radical left in this regard in terms of its insularity, its shrill moralism, its denunciatory character (sometimes particularly directed toward others who are not actually its "opponents" but fellow travellers who have points of affinity but don't agree entirely), its martyr-like character, and its celebration of marginalization and isolation as badges of honour and radicality. That's the larger point I'm trying to make in this paper.

3) I wouldn't characterize the Radical Imagination Project as taking a strong moral position at all actually. Both my co-director and I eschew moralism in our own political work and in our collective work through the Project. We're obviously far from perfect in holding to this all the time but I think there's an abundance of reasons to walk away from a politics based on moralism, not least because it just doesn't work and has fairly gross, religious, and pedantic overtones. We're unabashed about our commitment to radical anticapitalist, antioppressive politics in our work and what we want to do through the Project is to provide people with the time and space they so often otherwise lack to clarify their political visions and practices and learn to work better with others to advance them. We want to raise critical issues relating to struggles for radical social justice and human liberation more broadly but we don't seek to determine what these issues are or how people should think about them. I would say we need to be clearer about what our political horizons are - toward what imagined goal are we walking in our struggles? - but this is very different than imposing a moral order on the terms and form of struggle.

Thanks again for the discussion.

Cheers,

Alex

Elisenda Ardevol eardevol@gmail.com

November 3rd 2016

Thanks, Alex, for clarifying these points!

However, I think that you open for the debate very suggesting threads:

1) Intervention as a research methodology and a collaborative device. (I was referring to "experimentation" in this sense).

2) The use of media as a way to engage activists in the research. Also a methodological question, in particular, the facebook group discussion. There is a tradition in digital ethnography to create discussion threads by the researchers, generally to gain knowledge about their values, etc. but it seems new to me to analyse these threads as in discourse or content analysis.

3) Morality. I must insist in reflecting about the moral values that sustain our methodological decisions and data analysis, in this case I would like to know more about the very challenging conceptualisation of the "pedagogical" as an instrument or

as a way of collaboration.

Yours,
Elisenda

Alex Khasnabish Alex.Khasnabish@MSVU.CA

November 3rd 2016

I guess I'm a little unclear about point 1 - can you clarify the question?

With respect to the issue of morality, I suppose I'd say that our morality and ethics always informs what and how we seek to research. But I find institutional approaches to ethics little more than institutional attempts to mitigate liability and morality is too small and individualized a notion for me to really be interested in. I'd say again that I think the best illustration of this is from activist scenes themselves - morality and moral disciplining of other activists or the non-activist public is a quick way to marginality and irrelevance because it constantly mobilizes shame but does very little to provide people with concrete courses of action to make a difference in their worlds. Morality too often floats at the level of individual behaviour and choices (like anti-consumerist movements shaming people for shopping at certain places, for example). Our methodological choices in the Project have always been informed by our political commitments which are explicitly radical: anticapitalist, antioppressive, decolonial, antipatriarchal, and antiracist and for the maximization of human liberty. So our methodology is political in that sense and it is also strategic - as academic-activists we simply identified what we saw as a gap in radical organizing in Halifax and thought that this was something that academically-based research could actually help out with. That is, we could help provide resources, facilitation, time, and space for people committed to radical social justice to come together to cultivate their radical imagination together and so sharpen their struggles and their impact. Unlike conventional social movement studies which really speaks not at all to activists or the public but only to other specialists and, to be honest, frequently seems more valuable either as academic capital or as intelligence for state repressive forces, we wanted to mobilize the time, space, and resources of the academy to enhance struggles already going on around us. Our speaker's series, workshops, films, free schools, and more are all in this vein too. So that's what I mean by public pedagogy - an approach to education that is radically egalitarian, social justice-committed, and dedicated to movement-building rather than corporate training.

Rebecca Carlson carlson@temple.edu

November 3rd 2016

Dear Professor Khasnabish and the list,

This is a small, perhaps superficial, note to insert into this conversation, but I also interested in the way forums like Facebook and other message board spaces structure the possibilities of dialogue, which in turn redirect resistance onto itself--or more accurately, resistance is increasingly channeled against individuals (moral outrage) and away from social structures of inequality in a reproduction of hegemonies (in this case "toxic social relationships").

This of course also relates to what Professor Khasnabish mentions in his introduction as a "cycle of crisis response", which is certainly a product--and productive--of,

trending now categories and the other ways our attention is shaped by the immediacy of status updates and news circulation; even Google's frustrating predictive search algorithm is indicative of a narrowing and temporalizing of dialogue and an increase in gatekeeping that is part of the "echo chamber" that Professor Khasnabish illustrates in the paper. Of course these are just my superficial anecdotes, and there are certainly exceptions. But vitriolic episodes that seem increasingly part of an online milieu--Gamer Gate for me is a good example of "naming and shaming"--are signs that resistance is codified by redirection and therefore, perhaps, ultimately being negated. A good parallel example I encounter in my own teaching is the fetishistic focus on individual behavior in many public and global health initiatives. Global health inequalities in this frame then, are seen not as a product of unequal social structures and the histories that created them, but as a result of willful ignorance on the part of the sick.

I intensely admire what Professor Khasnabish and his co-director are attempting to achieve with The Radical Imagination Project and see it as a method for working with others to build tools for dialogue and engagement that can go beyond these limitations. It seems to me a critical future for anthropology to head in, if we are to contribute to the world outside of the academy in a more significant way, rather than merely continue to "capitalize" on it.

Rebecca Carlson

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

November 8th 2016

Dear All,

We have decided to extend the seminar for another week, until Tuesday 15th of November.

If you haven't had the chance to read Dr Alex Khasnabish's paper On Media Practices and the Radical Imagination yet, you can find it here <http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

Looking forward to your comments and thoughts.

Veronica

Alex Khasnabish Alex.Khasnabish@MSVU.CA

November 8th 2016

To Rebecca and the list -

Rebecca, thank you for your comments, I couldn't agree more with the examples you provide and the deeper dynamics you cite. While I would need to explore it much more rigorously than I do in this paper, I think the dynamics you talk about in terms of the hyper-individualizing, moralizing political response does intersect powerfully with the scope and temporality of social media exchanges and the platforms upon which they depend. I'm really intrigued by the notion that prevalence and intensity of this hyper-individualized, hyper-moralistic politics of denunciation is an index of

activists' sense of their own marginality and powerlessness and that it's reproduced and archived on social media. Thanks for your kind words about the Radical Imagination Project too, we think it's a pretty modest contribution but it's been satisfying to be a part of.

Cheers,

Alex

Todd Wolfson wolfson@gmail.com

November 14th 2016

Hi Alex,

I really appreciated this article. I find your commitments inspiring and the work is very compelling. What emerges most powerfully to me in reading this paper is your belief in political praxis at its most fundamental level and I join with this vision as a vital and underappreciated mode of scholarly engagement. And, in turbulent moments like the one we find ourselves in here in the United States, and across the globe, I think engaged, praxis-driven mode of scholarship and action are more and more necessary. I also think the way you have harnessed the university largesse to support community and movement work is inspiring and something all academics should find a way to emulate.

As someone who aims to create a productive dynamic between my research and my political work, the thing that struck me the most in reading the paper is the powerful resonance of your concepts of Scene and Echo Chamber. I have been in spaces and experienced many encounters that support your argument.

A few questions/comments that emerged in reading the paper:

1. Early in the paper I see you draw a dichotomy between defensive and offensive forms of struggle. You write, "While urgent responses are necessary to fend off attacks on hard won gains or those directed at vulnerable and marginalized individuals and communities, this kind of activism does not lend itself to building longer term visions and strategies essential to fundamental and lasting social change." I would like you to explain this further, I see these two footings as deeply entwined. I tend to believe that you must secure today to build for tomorrow and the only way to build mass movements is to meet the exigent needs of the people you want to build with and then move into bigger networks and visions of struggle. So in my mind, a truly visionary political project must be in touch with these two mutually constitutive aspects of the work. Is there a reason you see these two forms of struggle in a binary? And arguably not seeing these two poles in relation might be the reason movements stay small and cannot build into mass struggle. Can you say more here?

2. Another point I want to connect with and ask you to discuss in more detail. You argue that the toxicity of left scenes results in isolation and cliquish affinity groups instead of mass movements. I agree with your argument that these "scenes" and the echo chamber partly emerge out of the powerlessness of the community. But I also saw something else in my research on the Global Justice Movement and in my political work, which I want to put out there as a complimentary part of this analysis.

I believe the class position of the “activist class” and where they are situated structurally, makes them ask for things and fight in a way that alienates them from the mass of humanity that are suffering in more material ways. Here I borrow from the work of Peter Marcuse (2009), building on his father Herbert Marcuse. Peter looks at the deprived and discontented within left-based social movements. He argues that while they both are oppressed by the logic of neoliberal capitalism, they are oppressed differently due to their different structural position. The deprived are oppressed materially while the discontented are superficially integrated into society and thus oppressed by the terms and conditions of a society dominated by the logic of profit. Consequently, one group tends to fight on the grounds of material needs while the other group tends to fight on more ideological grounds fighting for freedom and fulfillment of self in a one-dimensional world. While the binary they create is not perfect, as there are serious overlaps across these groups and the categories are not quite right in 2016, I do think it elucidates some of the problems in activist scenes. In the Global Justice Movement, much of the strategy was driven by the “discontented” and their strategy, vision, and forms of governance, created a wall that did not allow for the development of a mass movement with the sea of humanity fighting on material grounds. I am trying to quickly mark a complicated discussion so apologies if it is not clear, but I see echoes of this in Halifax from your writing and I wanted to get your thoughts.

3. One final point: I appreciated your analysis of the discussion thread on FB and I really liked your argument for the materiality in which the radical imagination exists. I find your argument here compelling. "What is clear is that if social media is not “the problem” in terms of the relative marginality and fragmentation of radical social justice struggles across the Anglophone North Atlantic it is certainly not the solution to it either. Finding ways of reaching persuasively and effectively beyond the narrow confines of already established networks and communities is essential to any serious project of social justice and social change.” One thought though to build on this, as the media practice folks would argue, is that there are multiple roles for social media, and while it certainly doesn’t lend itself to healthy discussion across divides, as you so clearly show, it might play important roles in information sharing, bearing witness, mobilization and coordination. Have you seen this?

Sorry that was a lot. But thank you Alex. I was excited by this paper as I have been by your broader work over the years. This is also the first time I have chimed in on this list which has been a wonderful space for critical discussion and exploration. Thanks Veronica, John and others.

All the best,
Todd

Alex Khasnabish Alex.Khasnabish@MSVU.CA

November 8th 2016

Hi Todd (and all!),

wow, thank you for these rich comments and questions. I will do my best to reply to them with something approximating the generosity and critical insight that you have offered them with.

1) Defensive battles vs. long-term struggles for social change

In short, I would say you're absolutely correct here. There is no dichotomy (or, at least, there shouldn't be) between struggles in the "here and now" to defend hard won gains and those aiming to construct radical alternatives to the status quo. That said, the way we've been thinking about some of this in the Radical Imagination Project is in terms of different temporalities of activism and social change work. In other words, the urgency, crisis-mode-type organizing and interventions that accompany struggles to defend rights or gains under imminent threat (or, say, to defend someone from eviction or deportation) is necessarily different in terms of its orientation and timing than the work people attempting to change their world have to do to build collective visions of the possible and then begin articulating the strategies and tactics necessary to start moving toward it. Of course, there should be no necessary division between these kinds of interventions, both are utterly necessary and should inform each other, but given limited time, resources, people, etc., the realities are that certain types of struggle get prioritized. In principle, this still doesn't mean a dichotomy, but what we've experienced here is that the imminence of defensive struggles and their urgency puts them front-and-centre, deferring the kinds of time and space people need to develop their radical imagination. Visioning sessions and similar activities end up tacked on to more urgent activist work and often pushed aside altogether. The other outcome is an increasing emphasis on reform-oriented work rather than radical political action because the frame for so many urgent, crisis-mode types of organizing and action has to deal with the dominant institutions, practices, and relations of our time. So many activists and organizers end up fighting absolutely vital struggles but they're left with much less time to cultivate collective visions of the politically possible. This isn't true everywhere - for example, the Zapatistas have clearly built a struggle capable of doing both long-term visioning and radical change and immediate interventions but the lived context of their struggle is also dramatically different than that of most urban-based activists. I think it's also a problem strongly associated with the activist "scene" rather than robust communities in-and-of-resistance.

2. Deprivation vs. alienation

Again, I think you're bang-on here and your comment is perfectly expressed. This is something David Graeber has also written about and I think it doesn't get enough consideration often. Yes, this distinction between those of us who are disaffected/alienated and those who are deprived by the dynamics of the status quo is a hugely important issue and has dramatic effects for the way that struggle plays out. I think it does have a lot to say about the prevalence of, say, more "lifestyle" type activism in the north and the emphasis on marginality and identity as a political posture and ethic. This plays out interestingly in a place like Halifax and Nova Scotia because there are so many people here who are deprived materially by the operation of the status quo and yet much radical activism is youth-based and urban. An interesting intersection is provided here, I think, by some of the opposition to capitalist extractivism that has brought together Indigenous people, settlers on the land, and radical activists. Radical climate justice struggles I think do this work too. To some extent struggles against gentrification in Halifax have also provided possibilities for this coming together but most of those have been undermined by an

inability of people to form organizations and movements committed to struggling together for an alternative vision of the city over the longer term.

3. I absolutely agree that social media can be an invaluable tool for witnessing and circulating struggles that otherwise would be stymied by corporate media blockades. Again, land and water defense struggles here have clearly made vital use of social media in this way. While I'm fundamentally wary of the creation of media spectacle, used in a grounded way these media channels can be indispensable to movements.

Thanks again for the excellent commentary, I'd love to continue this discussion in person!

Cheers,

Alex

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

November 16th 2016

Dear All,

The seminar is now closed.

First of all I would like to thank Dr Alex Khasnabish for his thought provoking paper, and apologise for not being able to contribute. The discussion gave me a lot of food for thought and hopefully we will have the occasion to reflect on these issues again in future seminars.

I also would like to thank John for his comments and all of you who contributed with your thoughts and questions.

All best

Veronica

Alex Khasnabish Alex.Khasnabish@MSVU.CA

November 17th 2016

Hi all,

yes, thanks so much to all who participated and especially to Veronica and John for putting this into motion, organizing, and starting things off with such thoughtful comments. It was my sincere pleasure to have taken part in this, thanks again for the opportunity.

Cheers,

Alex