‘Laboratories of Learning’: Social Movement Learning & Knowledge Production in Times of Conflict, Crises & Authoritarianism

In an era of increasing global inequality, conflict and rising authoritarianism (Streeck, 2016; Piketty, 2014, Scarhill, 2013, Rogers, 2016) social movements often represent a first line of defence for some of the most marginalized communities on the planet, seeking to defend and extend the conditions for a basic and dignified human existence. The study of social movement organising, learning and knowledge production processes has been identified as one particularly relevant area for social movement analysis, which seeks to be movement-relevant (Donatella de la Porta 2018; Choudry, 2018 Novelli 2010; Zibechi, 2007; Santos, 2006). This talk will provide a synthesis of findings of an ESRC funded 3 year research project exploring the learning and knowledge production processes of 4 social movements located in 4 different countries in 4 different continents. The social movements, who are core partners in the research, are NOMADESC, a grassroots NGO based in Colombia; The Housing Assembly, a grassroots movement from South Africa; The HDK (Peoples’ Democratic Congress), a coalition of social movements in Turkey; and the Madhesh Foundation, Nepal, an organisation that works with and for the excluded Madhesh community. Each movement, in different ways, advocates with and for marginalized communities seeking to defend and extend their basic rights to education, health, housing, life, dignity and equal treatment before the law. Each movement, to different degrees, has also been victim to state repression, violence against it members and activists, and sustained surveillance and persecution. The research asks three simple, but profound research questions: How do social movements learn and produce knowledge? What do they learn and produce knowledge about? What is the effect of that learning and knowledge production on the movement, its members and the struggle the movements are engaged in? The answers to these questions provide a glimpse into the complex world of radical social movements in a period of increased authoritarianism, austerity and conflict – and sheds light on the nature, content and effect of movement learning and knowledge production on social change.

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