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Knowledge in Motion. Reciprocity, Co-Presence, Collective Analysis and Shared Authority in Research

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the praxis of collaborative research with social movements, taken here as reflexive/epistemic communities that develop their own para-ethnographic knowledge-practices. What does it entail to do research with subjects that conceive and conduct research as a key dimension of their political praxis? How does this affect the ethnographic encounter? How does it modify fieldwork? Drawing on my own research experience with social movement networks, I will discuss two challenges in collaborative research: a) the question of power, the (a)symmetry — the hierarchy — among actors; and, b) the concerns regarding the analytical autonomy of scholars. Within this framework, the article will advocate for establishing logics of co-presence and shared authority with our co-researchers.

KEY WORDS

Collaborative research, social movements, para-ethnography, epistemic communities, co-analysis.

SABERES EN MOVIMIENTO. RECIPROCIDAD, CO-PRESENCIA, ANÁLISIS COLECTIVO Y AUTORIDAD COMPARTIDA EN INVESTIGACIÓN**RESUMEN**

Este artículo reflexiona sobre la investigación colaborativa con movimientos sociales, explorando qué implica investigar con sujetos reflexivos —comunidades epistémicas— que desarrollan sus propias prácticas de investigación, que tienen sus propios mecanismos para-ethnográficos de producción y sistematización de conocimiento. ¿Cómo se modifica el trabajo de campo en estos casos? ¿Cómo se transforma el papel del investigador o investigadora académicos? ¿Es posible articular proyectos que logren ser relevantes tanto para la academia como para los sujetos-comunidades con quienes trabajamos? Basándome en mi propia experiencia de investigación, discutiré dos elementos —dos líneas de tensión— centrales en el trabajo colaborativo: la cuestión del poder en la relación de investigación, la simetría o asimetría —la jerarquización— entre los distintos actores; y, en segundo lugar, la discusión en torno a la autonomía del investigador o investigadora. Frente a estos dos desafíos, el artículo propone construir lógicas de co-presencia, análisis colectivo y autoridad compartida con nuestros sujetos de investigación/co-laboradores.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Investigación colaborativa, movimientos sociales, para-etnografía, comunidades epistémicas, coanálisis.

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Introduction

April 21, 2010, interview with Nico², Office for Social Rights (ODS) Málaga³:

[We come from] a line of reflective social movements, that not only agitate and chant slogans, but also take the time to think about how our political tools are working, what are the characteristics of the territory where we are rooted, how the great tenets of neoliberalism, the crisis of the welfare state or the increasing precarization are playing out, how they operate in a very specific way within the territory.

June 9, 2010, interview with Mario, ODS Carabanchel, Madrid:

Next Saturday we will have the workshop on the crisis⁴, the final workshop. This process has been going on since late 2008. First, we did interviews about the crisis with different people. We recorded them on video and used those interviews to organize discussion workshops, and with the information gathered in the interviews and the workshops we started elaborating a manifesto about the crisis: people thinking the crisis. Then we organized new workshops to discuss the manifesto; we debated it within the different ODSs in the city, in the Spanish language classes we do with migrants, and in our own assemblies.

2. The names of the activists cited in the article are real, as agreed during the research project/process.

3. The Network of Offices for Social Rights (ODS), which no longer exists, was made up of ten nodes in seven cities at that time: ODS of Sevilla, Centro Vecinal Pumarejo; ODS EXIT in Barcelona; Red de Apoyo a Sin Papeles de Zaragoza; ODS of Málaga, La Casa Invisible; Grupo de Migraciones y Precariedad, ODS of Pamplona/Iruña; ODS of Terrassa, Ateneu Candela; and in Madrid: ODS Patio Maravillas, ODS Carabanchel, ODS Centro Social Seco, and Asociación de Sin Papeles de Madrid.

4. Referring to the crisis that began in 2008, which in the Spanish case is simultaneously economic, political, social, and institutional. A crisis, also, of political imagination, which affected the social movements themselves, and which caused collective action to go through an *impasse* that would extend until the emergence in the spring of 2011 of the 15M event/movement.

Now we are planning to launch a final version in three or four months. All the methodology has been quite participatory; and it has been a very detailed and comprehensive process. Two years with the interviews, the editing work, the screenings and the discussion workshops, organizing new workshops to elaborate new versions of the manifesto... it has been a very thorough process. Whatever we do must be thorough.

Between 2008 and 2012, I conducted the fieldwork of a research that explored how and why social movements were redefining their political imaginaries, their narratives, organizational models, and repertoires of action. I wanted to observe how the activist praxis was being transformed, how it was being reimagined and recreated, mapping its continuities and discontinuities; what new subjectivities, discourses, and practices were being woven within the movements?

In this sense, my work was an exercise in analytical anticipation of processes that were under construction, yet to be defined, thus placing itself between the *anthropology of the near future* (Rabinow, 2016) and the *sociology of emergences* (Santos, 2006). I was also interested, and that is where this article focuses to a great extent, in thinking about the methodological dimension: what instruments/technologies of perception and analysis allow us to account for emerging processes? What tools — and what disposition, body, speed, distance — do these research situations demand of us?

I carried out my research with the Network of Offices for Social Rights-ODS, a diffuse network, entangled in an ecology of networks of social centers, self-training projects for activists, associative libraries, etc., that sought to catalyze and accompany collective processes of self-organization against precarity⁵, and building alliances (and beyond, what they called a *mestizo politics*) between the “native precariat” and the “migrant precariat,” that is, between those losing their citizenship rights and those who are denied the right to become citizens (Santos, 2006).

I decided to work with this network for two reasons. First of all, the activists who made up the ODS shared the desire and determination to critically rethink and reconfigure their own political practices. I will develop this idea later. Secondly, and this is the key dimension in this text — although both dimensions are related — because of the centrality that the practices of collective thought, militant research, and knowledge production had for this community of activists that was also an epistemic

5. For a detailed analysis of the work of the network, my doctoral thesis is available in the institutional repository of the University of Granada: <http://hdl.handle.net/10481/34050>.

community, a learning laboratory that shared questions, methodologies, and theoretical references.

This second thread will allow me to reflect on the challenges involved in doing research with subjects — reflexive communities — who conceive and implement research projects/processes, taken in a broad sense, as a fundamental element of their daily political practices. Thus, in the second part of the article, I will bring up two elements — two lines of tension — central to working with this type of actor: the question of power in research, the asymmetry between the different actors involved; and the discussion around the displacement — the decentering — of the researcher and the subsequent risk of loss of her/his academic autonomy.

Militant research and situated knowledge

Academic literature draws attention to the role of social movements as spaces for experimentation, *cultural laboratories* that “pose new problems and questions and invent and test new answers” (Melucci, 1989: 208). The notion of “knowledge-practices” has underlined the intellectual work that activists deploy in “analyzing, envisioning and elaborating new ways of knowing and being in the world” (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell, 2008: 28). Similarly, Eyerman and Jamison (1991) emphasized the impact of the “cognitive praxis” of social movements on the generation of expert knowledge, making possible the development of alternative technical and scientific knowledges. Along the same lines, Laurence Cox (2014) has reflected on the implications that theoretical, epistemic, and methodological innovations produced by social movements have for our own research practices; hence, he advocates for a dialogical approach — to put our academic knowledges to converse with the knowledges of social movements — as a way to expand the creativity and relevance of our sociological work. Likewise, Arturo Escobar (1992: 419) has suggested that researching something as complex and heterogeneous as contemporary social movements will deepen the self-criticism of our disciplines, will have implications for fieldwork as well as for the political dimension of ethnographic writing — for whom do we write and how — and will allow for innovative intersections between theory and practice, knowledge and action.

This does not mean that “knowledge-practices” are central to all social movements, nor that networks that operate as epistemic communities focus solely on cognitive work. Political activism is multidimensional: thought, affection, and action are intertwined in everyday praxis. However, taking social movements as producers of expert knowledges problematizes the academic logics of validation that define what knowledges are con-

sidered to be relevant/legitimate (with whom and from where we should think), and makes untenable the fiction that presents the academic as the only actor invested with the authority, the knowledge and the “*expertise*” needed for the complex analysis of the social world.

Going back to the militant-research project that I quoted at the beginning of this article — *people thinking inside and about the crisis* — Mario pointed out that one characteristic of this network was precisely “*the spirit of sharing knowledges and always thinking about what we do (our political work) through questioning and research*” (interview, June 9, 2010). In the same way, Bea, from the ODS de Seco, in Madrid, insisted on the importance of the training and research mechanisms articulated by the different nodes of the network:

It is like an obsession to understand what is happening so that reality does not overtake us, to pursue reality closely in order to understand and be able to engage better. This is crucial, if we do not keep track of reality properly and do not understand where things are happening... reality will always leave us behind, right? Our political hypotheses and our political work will be pointless, our efforts will be misguided (interview, June 10, 2010).

The emphasis on doing politics from a situated reading of reality was a common element of the network. For Nico, this was a dimension, a reflexive gesture, which became very important “*to not talk about the crisis generically, to not speak of precarity generically, but to understand instead how they unfold and evolve*” in the specific spaces/contexts in which the ODS were located (interview, April 21, 2010). For instance, the action-research project “*Otra Málaga. Precariedad, inmigración y especulación en el territorio que habitamos,*” carried out by Precarios/as en Movimiento, one of the groups that would end up forming the ODS in Málaga, sought to “open a space for collective reasoning and analysis,” making interviews in different parts of the city in order to understand in a more refined and complex way the impact of the changes in social policy and the welfare budget cuts, as well as to map out the conflicts that were emerging in certain neighborhoods, and to rethink and redefine political practices, alliances, etc.

The “*Otra Málaga*” project began in 2004, in the wake of the publication of *A la deriva. Por los circuitos de la precariedad femenina*, a book which was the result of a co-research process developed by the Precarias a la Deriva collective, several of whose members later became part of the ODS network. In 2004, the book *Nociones comunes: experiencias y ensayos entre investigación y militancia* was also published by Traficantes de Sueños, a publisher house which was created within the same constellation of activist networks. Drawing upon different militant research initiatives de-

ployed by social movements, this book reflected on the relationship between theory and practice, between collective thought and the redefinition of the *ways of doing politics*. In 2007, the book and the critical cartography coming out of the project “Otra Málaga” got published; as well as the book *Madrid, ¿la suma de todos? Globalización, territorio, desigualdad*, a work by the Observatorio Metropolitano, another of the research labs that integrated this ecology of movement networks of which the ODS were a part.

These examples (and other similar ones that operated from the same coordinates) embodied the attempt to build virtuous circuits between thought and action: to weave collective reflections based upon practice that will in turn become tools to create, transform, and multiply practices (and future reflections). Over the years, this ethos shaped a wide circuit of shared notions; meetings, courses and workshops — on social rights, migration and borders, free culture, feminisms, precarity —; production and publication of texts; as well as numerous co-research initiatives. Most of the members of the network of ODS with whom I worked on my project were also involved in initiatives for self-training and militant research: Precarias a la Deriva, Nociones Comunes, Grupo de Estudios A Zofra, Observatorio Metropolitano, or Universidad Nómada, among others.

This process of production and circulation of knowledge remains active in the present; it is impossible to account for all the work produced over the last few years by these social movement networks⁶. Knowledge-practices are central for these activist communities which must be thought of also as laboratories of collective learning, producing knowledges that by definition will always be open, under construction, *in motion*. The usefulness of these knowledge will depend on its ability to generate new political tools/initiatives or to enhance the impact of the already existing ones.

Why was this facet so important within this network? How did this desire and willingness to work *from the question and the research* come about?

Building the Network of Offices for Social Rights

In his interview, Luis, a member of the Pamplona/Iruña node of the network, stated:

Building the ODS has been largely the result of a process of dissatisfaction and flight, or dissatisfaction and moving forward, dissatisfaction and the search for

6. The ODS network no longer exists as such; however, most of the nodes that made up the network today make up the Fundación de los Comunes (<https://fundaciondeloscomunes.net/>).

alternative solutions/options. [...] We have assembled ways of working, proposals and answers that are experimental, that do not have a common model, that are innovative and are based on trial and error (interview, October 6, 2010).

The ODS were created within activist communities that had already been working together for more than a decade. Since the second half of the 1990s, these communities had shared a broad set of political practices/questions/problems/notions, and they were now immersed in a collective process of reflection and experimentation aimed at reinventing their own *ways of doing* politics.

Throughout their trajectory, these activist communities had developed a double dissatisfaction. On the one hand, they questioned “old politics” (political parties, traditional trade unions, institutional practices, logics of representation), a gesture that was not unique, but was part of the common sense of many social movements. What was distinctive, and central to my work, is that at the same time and with the same intensity, they raised a deep critique from within — a critique that was also a self-critique — of the politics of social movements. In particular, they problematized the self-referential dynamics of many activist environments, what they called “the militant ghetto” formed mainly by white, middle-class and urban activists; milieus which functioned as alternative subcultures closed in on themselves, radical “ways of life” on the symbolic and discursive level, but with little capacity to actually impact and transform reality.

Taking this (self)criticism as a starting point, activists began a collective process aimed at imagining, producing and testing *other ways of doing politics*. Thus, Pantxo, of the ODS-Exit in Barcelona, claimed that for them “*the programmatic dimension is linked to the reinvention of the organizational forms and the redefinition/transformation of the ways of doing politics*” (interview, October 25, 2010).

Experimentation was thus understood as a constituent element, a key dimension in the political practice of the network. Pastora, from the Seville node, stated that the ODS produced a policy “without a manual,” based on the Zapatista “walking, we ask,” on heterogeneity (as opposed to repetition), and on the fact of sharing some theoretical-political references “*that are references that emphasize that we have to create, that we have to invent*” (interview, May 3, 2010). The main point — the programmatic — was the determination to think/observe and give shape to (embody) “other politics”; a collective effort that drew a scenario that according to the members of the network *we are still learning to name*. The “other politics” is not a ready-made program but an open imagination, a working style under construction, “ways of doing” that are expressed as

metaphors rather than as a finalized narrative. Thus, the activists spoke of a *politics of the encounter* and of *listening*, a *politics of the artisan*, a *politics of everyday life* a *mestizo* politics.

Within this context, militant research and knowledge-practices played a fundamental role. For this network, the production and systematization of knowledges were not a complement or a separate moment (a byproduct) of political action: collective thought and analysis, militant research, political experimentation, and collective action/mobilization were experienced as threads of the same fabric.

This process — this fabric — took shape at three levels. In the first place, knowledge-practices had a very strong experiential dimension. Collective thought and militant research took the concrete daily experiences of the activists as a starting point, problematizing them — turning such experiences into a question, into a problem; hence, it was an incarnate knowledge, enunciated in the first person — in the singular and the plural — and which placed the body itself (one's own life) at the center of politics.

Collective thought drew upon lived experience; the questions posed and discussed were not in the abstract, but referred to the materiality of bodies and struggles. Because of this, for instance, the notions of precarity/precariation/precariat were at the center of the debates taking place within these political and epistemic communities through the first decade of 2000. As Guillermo, from Zaragoza, put it, precarity is “*what we have to live with and what we have to fight against*” (interview, October 3, 2010). By critically reflecting on their own life trajectories — individual and collective — this generation of activists was able to elaborate a set of situated knowledges that allowed them to understand and name *what was happening to them* (and beyond), and to produce and circulate notions, narratives, and tools aimed at transforming such reality — the increasing and multidimensional precarization of life.

This experiential dimension was crucial in the trajectory of this network; however, it also carried risks: How to keep the network open, avoid becoming self-absorbed, not closing in on one's own questions, concerns and memories?

This is where the second of the three levels I want to highlight comes into play, expressed in the image of a *politics of the encounter*. Pantxo, a member of the network in Barcelona, playing with the closeness between the notions of *experience* and *experimentation*, pointed out that the cross between experimentation and the politics of the encounter allowed the network “*to strain and make more complex that space of experience that we had built during the nineties* [to see] *how that politics of experience*

could become something bigger than our own experience” (interview, October 25, 2010).

The will to exit the “militant ghetto,” to break with the usual composition of social movements and to get involved/affected/engaged/transformed with and by others in the process of producing *other ways of doing politics* was a key element of this experimentation. Within this context, the network combined periods of intense connection with other actors/subjects and more inward-looking moments; “*almost like the heartbeat, systole and diastole,*” said Marta, a member of another node of the network in Madrid; moments of proliferation followed by more quiet periods allowing for the collective reflection on what the network has produced/achieved (interview, June 12, 2010).

The politics of the encounter involved *working and thinking together with* others to produce shared analysis and self-organization. The goal is to recompose the social bond in contexts marked by fragmentation; to weave a “common” that appeared dissolved, burst, broken. This gesture will imply, and this is fundamental, the displacement of the network. In a politics of encounter and listening, the network will lose its centrality as subject of enunciation; instead of proclaiming “what needs to be done” it will learn to embody the “walking, we ask.” It could be said, in fact, that the Zapatista “walking, we ask” *is* the other way of doing politics. As Silvia pointed out from another of the nodes in Madrid:

It is very different to think about the future of the ODS believing that you are the one who has to proclaim something, that you are the legitimate subject of enunciation for, I don't know: “addressing the political hypotheses that will give us the key to such and such,” or believing instead that you are — let's say — a space that is inventing itself, little by little, without a preconceived idea of what “needs to be done” or what “politics should look like.” A space that is mainly listening to what is happening in the social realm to be able to problematize certain situations together with other spaces/subjects (interview, June 8, 2010).

The last level that made up this fabric of “knowledge-practices” refers to the way in which these epistemic and political communities related to academic knowledge. Both the knowledge based on the activists' lived experience (including their political praxis), and the knowledge produced with others through the politics of the encounter, the thinking together, were in continuous dialogue with technical and academic knowledges. Academic knowledges were re-appropriated in a profoundly undisciplined way; it was an “impure” connection, an assemblage bringing together all the types of knowledge that may help the activists understand a situation in a more complex and creative way.

The skills to intertwine these different knowledges — experiential, technical, militant, academic, popular and so forth — which include the micro and the macro levels, the reflection on individual life experiences and the analysis of structural dynamics, allowed the activists to connect biography and history, sociological imagination and political imagination. Thus, the network was able to read rapidly changing contexts and to problematize the present in order to transform it: to expand the field of what was possible and what was thinkable in a given situation — the limits of imagination and praxis.

Para-ethnography and research collaboration

The cross between technical and academic knowledges (law, sociology, social work, pedagogy, etc.) and the knowledge-practices of the network was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews. According to Juan, a lawyer at one of the ODS located in Madrid, this crossing meant “*the exercise of technical knowledges from another perspective, from other approaches, and the attempt to build counter-power practicing our techniques, our disciplines*” (interview, May 18, 2010).

Along the same lines, Nico, from the ODS in Málaga, stated that:

In almost every ODS there is a research space, or they are closely related to collective research spaces. It is a research that makes use of — steals — certain technical knowledges that are characteristic of sociological research, or even anthropological, ethnographic, of how to approach a particular context, how to equip oneself with a certain methodology at the time of researching, how to articulate the most qualitative questions, the discussion groups, the interviews; and, on the other hand, more intuitive knowledges that are born out of militancy and that are also very rich and very valid. These two dimensions are mixed in the types of militant-research conducted by the less dogmatic social movements, that try to permanently update their discourses and their knowledges, and put them to the test.

Thus, these social movement networks produced knowledges which they circulated through multiple channels: books, courses, cartographies, articles, images, workshops, reports, reading groups, interviews, audio, or video recordings, etc. In a precise example of what Douglas Holmes and George Marcus called ‘para-ethnography’ (2008: 82), the ODS network described, analyzed, and explained in its own terms both the characteristics and the transformations of its praxis, its organizational culture, and its relationship with our world and our time, deploying for this purpose

a repertoire of intellectual practices and technologies very similar to those that define and constitute the work of the social scientist.

The figure of the “para-ethnographer,” a collective actor located outside the Academy who develops their own knowledge-practices, their own analytical and conceptual work, producing and mobilizing expert knowledges, fundamentally changes the nature of the ethnographic encounter. It will place us in a situation where the academic researcher must be open to *relearning* their method by working and thinking *together with* the research subjects as “epistemic partners” (Holmes and Marcus, 2008: 84). Hence, research collaboration must be understood as a process of knowledge co-production. It implies affirming the reflexivity and the ability to produce knowledge of the subjects with whom we work, and demands taking their epistemic and political locations, their own interests and questions, and not only academic or disciplinary interests, as a starting point for our research projects⁷.

Research collaboration requires building spaces for dialogue and placing as the axis of research the issues and questions that emerge from said dialogue: negotiating and articulating a common agenda, defining objectives that are — at least partially — shared in relation to the design and implementation of the project. In this context, the aim is to stress/destabilize the asymmetries of the subject/object divide in research and give way to a relationship, a space of dialogical reflexivity, between *subjects in process* (Ibáñez, 1990).

In this way, collaborative proposals resignify collaboration — which is by definition inherent to ethnography — to explicitly position it as the backbone that guides each phase of research: from project formulation to fieldwork, analysis, and writing (Lassiter, 2005). In collaborative practices, fieldwork goes from being a space/time for data production, prior to and separate from the moment of analysis, to being a space/time where dynamics of co-analysis, co-theorization, and co-conceptualization (Rappaport, 2008) take place between the different actors involved in the project. However, there is no standard formula for “collaborating”; collaboration — which always presents a certain experimental vocation — is going to materialize in a particular and specific way in each research situation. Every project, depending on its own characteristics, challenges, limitations, and strengths, will explore different techniques, show different degrees of co-definition of the research process, combine more collaborative moments with more conventional ones, etc.

7. This logic has a long history within social sciences research. It is present, with varying degrees of intensity, in participatory action-research; feminist anthropology; the decolonial approach; indigenous methodologies; socio-praxis; activist or militant ethnography, etc.

Finally, integrating the questions, analysis, and interests of the subjects with whom we work, creating spaces for co-decision throughout the entire process, means that the researcher will have to give up/lose a significant part of their own control over the project. How is the role of the academic researcher modified in collaborative situations/relationships?

The question of power in research

Collaborative logics aspire to disperse power within research situations. That is their goal, that power is distributed instead of concentrating on the researcher coming from the academic field.

Collaboration gives centrality to the questions of for what and for whom knowledge is produced, how it is produced, and what knowledges count — with whom do we think, what criteria make a certain knowledge to be considered valid (or disposable, not important). Faced with the epistemic violence of an Academy that consciously or unconsciously, openly or underhandedly, tends to capture/appropriate/extract subaltern knowledges, collaborative logics open up the possibility of articulating other research relationships. Collaboration demands weaving and sustaining other links between the actors and with the process itself, and allows researchers to move toward practices of reciprocity, critical dialogue, mutual care, and collective learning: working and thinking “together with” instead of “on.”

However, these statements should not make us think of naive images of smooth horizontality; collaboration neither avoids nor overcomes the complexities that run through all social relationships. Questioning asymmetry does not automatically build symmetric relationships; problematizing the concentration of power does not imply that power is distributed. We must be careful, and we must articulate the mechanisms that will allow us to collectively recognize and reflect on the tensions that run through practice — remembering that there is no practice without tensions.

It also does not make sense to think that, by default, power is only in the hands of the academic researcher. That stance, which is born somewhere between paternalism and guilt, makes the agency of the actors with whom we work invisible. Again, each project is different, but I think there are some general reflections that are worth sharing.

Jesús Ibáñez, a key reference in Spanish critical sociology, pointed out that those who are most likely to “be studied” are those “*who have been positioned as objects, those who do not have the right to speak,*” while “*the powerful who have that right [to speak], and the rebels who fight for*

that right, are difficult to interview” (Ibáñez, 1990: 61). The “powerful,” because they can keep the researcher at a distance, they are not easily accessible; the “rebels,” because — by becoming subjects — they can refuse to answer, reject the question, or end up questioning the questioner (changing the rules of the game).

As we know, current anthropology is marked by the combined effect of two major criticisms experienced by the discipline in recent decades, which forced its redefinition. One of them, generated within the discipline itself and known as the “crisis of representation” — which I will not develop here — focused, to put it briefly, on deconstructing the micro-politics of ethnographic representation (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). The second, driven in this case from outside the academic community, was the “rebellion” of the research subjects: the groups studied by anthropology, generally subaltern collectives, began to systematically problematize the extractive and colonial character of the discipline. Tired of being thought of and treated as objects, and wearied of having their ability/legitimacy to construct their own stories about themselves denied, these groups began, as Eric Wolf put it, “*to question both the rights and the intentions of anthropologists who wish to gain access to them*” (2001: 79). A questioning made possible, said Wolf, because now those populations *have become sufficiently mobilized*. They have become subjects and can, in fact, refuse to answer, or even subvert the research relationship and take on the role of the one who asks: who are you, why are you coming to study us, and for what, for whom, and how are you going to do it?

Reflecting on the case of Colombian anthropology, Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe affirmed that this process, which in this case was the result of the emergence and consolidation of the indigenous movement, had seriously questioned whether anthropology could continue to develop “*according to the criteria and interests of the ethnographer*” (2002: 707). By becoming subjects, subaltern groups were demanding greater control of both the construction process and the final content of the representations made about their ways of life; they also demanded the articulation of more egalitarian and negotiated research relationships and practices, sometimes even producing their own research protocols which were expected to be complied with by academics.

In this regard, it is interesting to highlight, for instance, the position of the Afro-Colombian organization, Black Communities Process (PCN) within the project “Otros Saberes [other knowledges]” a collaborative initiative between academics and civil society organizations coordinated by the Latin American Studies Association. The PCN, a clear exponent of a group that has become subject through self-organization and struggle,

also stands out for the importance it gives to collective thought and the production of knowledges that, in its own words, “*move from the problem to the theory, questioning from where is this knowledge produced, and with whom one wants to think, feel, and mobilize*” (Castillo, Grueso, Rosero and Cifuentes, 2013: 133). Within this framework, the activists and leaders of the PCN clearly delimited the conditions of possibility for a dialogue between academic knowledges and the knowledges produced by the PCN. Thus,

It was agreed to undertake the research according to the following criteria: (1) to assume the political-organizational principles of the PCN as a starting point; (2) to systematize the thought and praxis of the PCN drawing upon its own experience and its own self-understanding; (3) to conduct the project as an affirmation of the knowledge/thought produced collectively by the organization (Castillo et al., 2013: 130).

Thus, scholars involved in the project had to accept the objectives and organizational principles of the PCN as the starting point for research collaboration. The interests and needs of the movement (and its struggle) were located at the center, not disciplinary questions or debates. Academics had to subordinate their agenda to that of the organization. Assuming that the authority of the ethnographer is equivalent, sometimes even subordinate, to that of the subjects with whom they work, is precisely the element that allows for the redistribution of power in research contexts; it is through this gesture, says Vasco Uribe, that “*relations of domination are changed by joint action, by a real dialogue through confrontation*” (2002: 688).

We find similar situations in other geographies equally marked by the colonial wound — a wound in whose production and reproduction the technologies of knowledge/power played and still play a central role. Thus, indigenous and racialized peoples’ organizations across all continents explicitly problematize (erode, dismantle) Eurocentric epistemologies and methodologies, and deploy alternative approaches that privilege indigenous knowledges and voices, experiences, and methodologies (Smith, 1999). It is with this goal in mind that the organizations of the First Nations in Canada have developed, for example, the OCAP research protocols — Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession — which carefully detail the principles to be followed by academics.

These are actors, indigenous peoples in one case, Afro-descendants in the other, who have become subjects through struggle, and who deploy as part of their political praxis their own knowledge-practices, their own para-ethnographic mechanisms of knowledge production. This gives them

the capacity — the power — to exercise greater control over both the process and the outcomes of research.

Every research process is affected by multiple asymmetries concerning gender, race, class, age, etc., which (ideally) are negotiated and renegotiated within each particular project. However, we should not underestimate the agency of the subjects with whom we work. If reflectiona (even if it has a critical tone) revolves only around our power as academics, we run the risk of making invisible examples that illustrate — and would help us put into practice — *other ways of doing research*. Unless we pay attention to situations that emphasize the agency of the subjects with whom we work, research collaboration will mostly look like a gesture of good will (or some kind of activism) on the part of the scholar — a serious mistake.

In my experience, it will be easier to articulate collaborative research relationships when we work with subjects that already exist as a group/collective/organization prior to the research project, and when these actors function as reflexive communities, who give importance to the collective production of knowledge based upon their own experiences and practices. The solidity of collaboration will largely depend on the presence or absence of these two dimensions. There may be collaborative projects that arise from other coordinates, but both the elaboration of a common agenda and the deployment of the processes of co-analysis and co-theorization will be more complicated.

Another key element to build and sustain collaboration is the level of trust between the actors involved in a project. In my research with the ODS, the question of power was quite peripheral. As I described, it was clearly a subject-group, long-standing activist networks/communities that considered collective thinking and knowledge-practices as central to their political action. It could be said that, in fact, they were an ideal case of ‘epistemic partners.’ Besides, regarding trust, other elements must be taken into consideration. Before developing this project, I had been part of the movement networks in which the ODS were eventually created. At the beginning of the 2000s, I spent several years living in another country, and I stopped having an organic relationship with these spaces. When I returned and began my research, the nodes that had joined the network during my absence did not know me, but for many other activists I was a friend and/or an old fellow activist. I was never part of an ODS, but the fact that the ODS were created within networks that I had been part of for years meant that I was somehow — simultaneously — an external and internal actor to the network: I belonged and did not belong, and this particular location was key to the successful development of the project.

To a large extent, it was a relationship between equals. In some cases, we had known each other for years; in general, we were part of the same generation, we had shared experiences, we inhabited a similar cultural universe and political horizon. At many levels we spoke the same language. It was a paradigmatic case of the *objectively attuned dispositions between researcher and respondent* that Bourdieu (1999: 530) pointed out as a basic condition for “non-violent” communication.

Years later, in 2015, as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg, South Africa, black students began a powerful cycle of mobilizations demanding the decolonization of the university at the level of academic curriculum, language policy, teaching staff and pedagogies, institutional culture, etc. Fascinated by what was happening, I envisaged the articulation of a collaborative research with the students in struggle; I was aware, however, that it was an almost impossible project. The whole situation was the opposite to what I described in relation to my work with the network of ODS: There were no shared experiences with the students; there was no relationship of proximity or trust — I was a newcomer, they did not know me at all. We communicated in a language that was neither theirs nor mine; our experience of the world was (for many reasons) different; and in fact, symbolically and structurally, I — white, male, European — represented exactly what they were struggling against.

These two cases, extreme but real, can illustrate some of the elements/dimensions that will facilitate, hinder, or make research collaboration impossible.

On the autonomy of the researcher

As I mentioned earlier, the figure of the para-ethnographer profoundly transforms the ethnographic encounter, opening a scenario marked by the challenge to “to integrate fully our subjects’ analytical acumen and insights to define the issues at stake in our projects as well as the means by which we explore them” (Holmes and Marcus, 2008: 86).

For this “integration” to be possible, and to be real, the academic researcher must lose a significant degree of control over the research process. Collaboration requires a particular disposition, a specific way of putting the body. Scholars must question their automatisms (analytical, methodological), unlearn their authority — and their privileges — to be able to negotiate, modify, and in some cases subordinate their objectives, plans, and expectations to the interests and needs of their collaborators. Thus, the politics of the encounter and listening, and the art of decentering oneself proposed by the activists of the network will also challenge, with

intensity, those academics willing to explore research collaboration (understood as knowledge co-production with our research subjects taken as epistemic partners).

Leaving behind the informant/researcher relationship and building instead a dialogue of reflexivities with our co-researchers fundamentally transforms the role of the ethnographer, who goes from “expert” to facilitator, transducer, or other possibilities to be defined in each project. Here, the ethnographer becomes an expert among experts, who learns (and unlearns) by accompanying and being accompanied. In this sense, research collaboration aims at building an ecology of knowledges (Santos, 2006). This does not mean that all the types of knowledge put into play within a collaborative project are equal, what it means is that none of them is considered *a priori* to be more important than the others.

Decentering oneself — for scholars trained to think that, as intellectuals and technicians, their knowledge is more valid and accurate than other knowledges — is an exercise that generates anxiety. It opens up a space of vulnerability that (the fiction of) being ‘the expert’ somehow managed to hide. Our disciplines do not teach us to inhabit that fragility (to “sustain ignorance,” to use Rancière’s formula). The process of dispersing and sharing power in research causes vertigo, multiplies doubts. However, it also opens up new possibilities for thought and action. To decenter oneself is not to disappear, to erase oneself as researcher, but to imagine and test logics of co-presence together with our research collaborators; a co-presence that will be articulated in different ways in each project.

Collaboration was not the departure point of my research. My fieldwork period was divided into two phases. The first one lasted (intermittently, since this project was combined with other jobs) from May 2008 to February 2011; I did participant observation in meetings, mobilization events and daily activities of the ODS, as well as 31 ethnographic interviews with activists from the ten nodes that made up the network at that time. The second phase ran from February 2011 to May 2012, and was marked by a “collaborative turn” in the project, an entirely different scenario where the members of the ODS had a direct role in defining the type of knowledge that should be produced, how it should be produced, and for what purposes.

The conditions of possibility for collaboration began to take shape at the end of 2010. The social, economic, political, and institutional crisis had been unfolding in Spain for more than two years, and social movements had not had the capacity to articulate any solid responses; neither the tools nor the narratives available seemed to have any effect, collective action was at an *impasse*. In this context, the network nodes decided to

launch a process aimed at rethinking and transforming their praxis, they were determined to redefine their *ways of doing politics*, and they believed that the work that I had been conducting could be useful for this purpose. They considered, for instance, that the interviews I carried out systematized the work of the different nodes — at the level of their political imaginary and at the level of the analysis of the practices — in a way that was not available before, and for that reason this material was a good starting point for reflection.

In February 2011, the activists decided that in the fall of that year there would be a meeting of the entire network to begin the process of collective discussion, and it was agreed that before that date each individual node should analyze the interviews in order to prepare for the upcoming meeting. In this way, my project (which was less “mine” from that moment onwards) became integrated into the knowledge-practices of the network, an assemblage between my interests and theirs which allowed for a certain collaborative turn in research.

I then began to design together with the different nodes a series of workshops that would be the axis of the second phase of fieldwork. In order to make the workshops as significant as possible, and to adjust to the particular needs, demands, and realities of each node, the activists would decide both the content and the work methodology for every encounter. Thus, I accompanied this process instead of directing it, and I negotiated/coordinated with every node what my role should be in each workshop.

Finally, we organized six workshops. Two with all the network nodes located in Madrid, in June and October 2011; two in Seville, in October 2011 and January 2012; a joint workshop with the Zaragoza and Pamplona/Iruña nodes, July 2011; and the last meeting in Terrassa in February 2012. In a previous article (Arribas Lozano, 2018) I presented a detailed account of the workshops, what we did and how we did it, also highlighting how the project was impacted by the emergence of the ‘15M’ event/movement in May 2011, just three weeks before the first workshop.

Each workshop was unique, and my role was also different in each meeting. In some, I actively participated in the design of the work methodology, the analysis of the interviews, and the elaboration of the cartographies/maps (of concepts, lines of tension, alliances, etc.) that emerged out of the collective discussions. In those cases, I became part of the dynamics of co-analysis, co-theorization and co-conceptualization deployed during the workshops. In other cases, even at other times within the same meeting, my role was to facilitate the debates, to connect the different phases within a workshop, or to link the discussions taking place with

those that had been held at the other nodes — so that the activists could get a broader picture of the questions, problems and insights existing throughout the network. There were also a couple of cases in which the activists put together the work program, defined the objectives and the methodology, and took on the necessary tasks to facilitate the workshop, and I simply participated as a guest, taking notes, recording the process, and providing some specific information when requested. This is how the notion of co-presence took shape within this project.

This loss of control over the process — the *appropriation* of the research by the members of the ODS — was the condition of possibility for a *collaborative turn*. Collaboration has a strong component of experimentation, and in that sense it is fragile; “appropriation” does not guarantee the success of a project, but if some degree of appropriation does not exist, it will be impossible to articulate and sustain collaborative proposals. The more the network activists appropriated this phase of the project, the more “theirs” the workshops, the richer the analysis proved to be. This dynamic was of interest to all the actors involved in the project. It was useful/important for the ODS by contributing more elements to their (self-)reflection process. It was crucial for me, on the one hand, by allowing me to observe how the network activists reviewed and redefined the categories/notions/images that informed their political praxis; but also, on the other hand, by giving me the opportunity to explore the possibilities afforded by collaborative engagements in research.

If reflexive actors/communities, such as those I worked with, have the opportunity to participate in the design of a research project that concerns them, to co-define its goals and methodology, and to get involved in its implementation, then they will contribute to the quality and significance of the whole research process. In this way, collaborative methodologies enrich both the social relevance and the interpretive power of our projects.

However, the notion of *appropriation* tends to generate strong resistance among scholars. The argument is that subordinating academic work to the interests and demands of the research subjects will erode our autonomy, and it is therefore incompatible with the independence and analytical distance essential for producing quality academic work. I believe this is a legitimate concern, a real risk, and one that demands constant attention from us; along these lines, Xochitl Leyva and Shannon Speed (2008), must-read authors for those who want to explore other ways of producing knowledge, have written about the closeness between the notions of the researcher “aligned” with a social movement and the researcher “alienated” by a social movement.

However, I also believe that research collaboration (and there is no substantive collaboration without “appropriation”) does not necessarily imply a loss of analytical autonomy for the researcher. There are many elements that mediate between these two elements. Speaking about his experience of participatory action research in a worker cooperative, Davydd Greenwood (2000) explained that, along with a small group of academics and students, 45 cooperative members/workers became part of the project team and were actively involved in the process of knowledge production, and he added:

My participation was entirely driven by the collaborative agenda created among team members, and my observations were not my own, but observations shared and confronted by others, who were also participating observers. We agreed that any writing on the project would be jointly developed or would have to be approved by team members. Thus, any idea of mine had to go through the critical and severe analysis of the internal members of the cooperatives, great connoisseurs of the topics dealt with (Greenwood, 2000: 42).

These 45 cooperative members were working and thinking together with the rest of the research team around a problem that was fundamental to them. According to the author, the fact that the workers contributed their experience and knowledge about the functioning of the cooperative was a key element for the success and relevance of the project. In his text, Greenwood did not complain about the loss of autonomy caused by subordinating himself to the agenda created among the team members. On the contrary, his article emphasized the richness of “knowledge co-generation” with our research subjects, and advocated for the articulation of projects in which the needs, interests, obligations and rights of every actor involved are negotiated and agreed upon as part of the process. In this context, the author pointed out the *fascination* he felt when seeing his collaborators suggesting, discarding, modifying or synthesizing the categories that were put into play in the project, and concluded: “*I cannot imagine a richer way than this to deepen the knowledge of a community*” (2000: 46).

Conclusion—for further conversation

I felt a fascination similar to that expressed by Greenwood during the second phase of my research, as the “collaborative turn” started to materialize. The interviews I conducted at the beginning of my project generated a great deal of quality information, but the co-analysis and co-theorization work-

shops designed and implemented together with the members of the ODS, included a much larger number of activists reflecting on how to redefine their political praxis — which was precisely the center of my study.

In the workshops, the activists collectively reviewed their ideas, narratives and practices in order to re-signify them; there, they shared their insights, doubts, and proposals; there, they decided what to do next and how to do it. In the workshops, I had the opportunity to see those maps being created and displayed in front of me. I walked alongside the members of the network, thinking together with them, listening to (or asking, discussing, questioning) the reasons why they took certain decisions instead of others. In the workshops, the metaphors and images employed to name this way of doing politics were carefully dissected, and the coordinates that guided thought and action were redefined. Accompanying the activists and being accompanied by them through this space and time of dialogical reflexivity and experimental collaboration was an extraordinary learning experience on a theoretical, epistemic, and methodological level.

The appropriation of the project by the network made it possible to produce knowledge that was relevant both for academia, contributing to the analysis of collective action and contemporary social movements, and for the activist-collaborators. A key element was the shared understanding that the project was going to generate products aimed at different contexts. Not everything coming out of this research had to work for everyone. For instance, my academic articles are of very little use to the network; in turn, the network used the research materials as it saw fit, materials which were (and I would like to think that they continue to be) used in situations in which I was not involved in any way.

It is important to underline once again that research collaboration is a complex, fragile practice, crossed by multiple tensions. Collaborative research should not be idealized; we must avoid talking about this approach in a normative or programmatic way: discussions have to be based upon the critical analysis of concrete research projects, contextualizing both the achievements and the limitations faced along the process, the blockages, those initiatives where collaboration was not possible or where results were not as expected.

On the other hand, not all research can be collaborative. Through the text, I have pointed out some doubts and challenges that arose from my own work: is it possible to collaborate with actors who are not constituted as a group/collective/organization?; How to articulate a process of co-analysis and co-theorization with actors who do not produce their own knowledge-practices, who do not operate as epistemic communities?; How to work and think together when there is no prior relationship of mutual trust,

when we are not rooted in the communities with which we want to do research?; Taking up the example I mentioned about my time in South Africa, how much social distance — in terms of class, race, gender, age, etc. — can collaboration support?; On the other hand, how can we sustain the disposition (the listening, the care) and the timing that collaboration demands when we are trapped within the accelerated time of neoliberal academy? How should we manage the usually contradictory expectations and demands coming from the academy and from our co-researchers? How to make sure that we do not end up replicating an extractivist approach even if we use other discourses, other words? Or, from another point of view, when we work with social movements — as it is my case — how do we sense if we are still doing ethnography and not propaganda?

Thinking collectively around these questions (and others that may arise from future projects) is the path that will allow us to imagine and give shape to other ways of producing knowledge. This is the challenge and the richness of collaborative methodologies: to be able to articulate and put to work logics of reciprocity, co-presence, collective analysis, and shared authority in research.

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