

## Preface

# **SOCIAL MOVEMENTS/SOCIAL RESEARCH: TOWARDS POLITICAL ACTIVIST ETHNOGRAPHY**

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### A Line of Fault, A Place To Begin

What was a plainclothes university security officer doing taking notes at a forum on research methods? This was the question on the minds of the thirty students, faculty and community activists who came out to “Activist Research and the Sociology of Confrontation,” an event hosted by the York Department of Sociology Colloquium Committee in late 2004. The panel presentation, which took place in the university’s senate chamber, was meant to provide a space for activist researchers to discuss how to turn their intellectual skills into practical weapons for social change. In addition to this lesson, those in attendance received a concrete example of how relations of ruling are organized at York University. A security officer? At a colloquium event?

How, and by what logic, did the university administration feel compelled to send a security guard to monitor the proceedings? He sat quietly in the back and studiously took notes. What was he going to do with these notes? Why had he been sent to collect them? By what administrative logic were his actions to be justified? Was this act of surveillance a one-off adventure or did it rely upon forms of social organization that determined its course? As those at the colloquium event grappled with these and other questions a disjuncture emerged between the meeting participants and university mandated security surveillance.

For reasons that were not immediately evident, reasons that could — in the first instance — only be speculated upon, the colloquium event managed to antagonize the administration. Why? And how did they decide upon this course of action? Of course, institutions are premised upon sanctioned logics. And nothing comes out of nowhere. The colloquium event took place in the university’s senate chambers, a room close to the

offices of the York Foundation — a body whose objective is to raise funds for the university. On the board of the York Foundation sits Henry Wu, owner and operator of the Metropolitan Hotel in downtown Toronto. Over the course of the year prior to the colloquium event, Wu had become a target for York activists concerned with the deplorable working conditions at the hotel.<sup>1</sup> On more than one occasion, student activists and outraged faculty paid visits to the offices of the York Foundation to demand that Wu be ousted from the board.

Perhaps it is understandable that the administration believed that a gathering of rabble in a room adjacent to the offices of the York Foundation needed to be put under surveillance. And anyway, the composition of the panel itself posed problems. It's one thing for academics to make boisterous and radical professions from the front of classrooms. It is quite another, however, for the people speaking from the front of the room to be effective organizers, as was the case with this event. In fact, two of the presenters had played active roles in challenging Wu and the York Foundation.

It is worth considering how the colloquium event was situated in relation to an increasingly repressive political climate at York. During the same year, an undergraduate student was effectively expelled for his part in a demonstration against the Israeli occupation of Palestine.<sup>2</sup> Other students, who participated in a demonstration opposing Canadian military and corporate involvement in the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan, found themselves brutally assaulted by police officers who had been called onto campus by the administration.<sup>3</sup> More generally, the administration had turned the screws on student attempts to organize political events on campus.

Through a textual mechanism called “the temporary use of space policy,”<sup>4</sup> the administration effectively made it impossible for student groups to book space or invite speakers to campus. By extending the time required to secure a room on campus and by submitting all incoming speakers to “security assessments,” which often led to the requirement that organizers hire security to police their event, the administration managed to put a clamp on student organizing. In the given context, where York had become another zone of conflict in the ongoing battle on Canadian campuses between opponents and supporters of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the selective application of the regulatory policy helped the administration to avoid potentially damaging public relations scandals.

Given the extensive social relations that could be gleaned from the presence of a single security guard, it seemed fitting that one of the topics scheduled for discussion at the colloquium was the contribution made by the late George Smith to the field of activist research. Smith, who, in his important work “Political Activist as Ethnographer” helped to elaborate a strategy for the production of reliable knowledge for social change, would

have been pleased with such a concrete example of the applicability of his method.

One of the central propositions of political activist ethnography is that, through confrontation with ruling regimes, activists are able to uncover aspects of their social organization. Through forms of engagement that start from the standpoint of the everyday aspirations of their participants, these participants quickly come into contact and conflict with the organizational and administrative logics of the institutions they cross. Through an analysis of the institutional relations movements are up against, more effective forms of activism can be developed. The test for whether or not research has been successful is the extent to which it enables people to transform the world. And so it was that, in the relatively minor moment of confrontation in the university senate chamber, the colloquium on research methods itself became a research method. It provided a moment of breach, a point from which to begin investigating both the everyday operations of the institution and the tools and techniques to which it has recourse in those moments when it feels challenged. Although it seemed unlikely, a speaking engagement became a starting point from which people on the outside of the administration's ruling practices could begin looking in on them. Despite what we learned, this moment offers little more than a starting point. Much analysis of the social organization of university security surveillance remains to be done.

Just as the security guard's actions had antecedents, so too did the colloquium event. It was proposed and organized by one of the editors of this volume as a space for the further elaboration of discussions that had begun two years prior. In the fall of 2002, nearly two hundred activists, researchers, students and scholars doing research for progressive social movements gathered at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, to attend *Sociology for Changing the World: Political Activist Ethnography*. The conference was exciting and dynamic. In addition to a series of events aimed at breaking the tedium often associated with academic conferences (such as the concurrent activist video festival and dramatic presentations), *Sociology for Changing the World* also provided room for presenters to explore the content and implications of George Smith's article "Political Activist as Ethnographer" (1990, and in this volume). That gathering, and all the trouble we've managed to cause in its name since then, is the inspiration for this book. Those initial presentations form its sinews; those convictions form its spine.

### The Conference and the Book

This book aims to capture the spirit of that conference — the way it brought together researchers, students and activists; the way it paired people very familiar with political activist ethnography with others who had not yet encountered the approach. Like the conference before it, this book invites

participants to explore how sociological knowledge can be produced *for* activists, and how activists can make use of and elaborate political activist ethnography as a weapon in our struggles.

The book itself has been produced by an editorial collective working together across geographical distance to edit and write collaboratively. We have different histories and different relations to activism and political activist ethnography, and let's be clear — we don't always agree on everything. Three of us were drawn to political activist ethnography because it resonated with our experiences as activists in various movements. Two of us studied with Dorothy Smith (who produced the context for G. Smith's contributions) in different decades, and one of us worked with George Smith as an activist. One of us had her first major contact with political activist ethnography being part of the organizing committee for the Sociology for Changing the World conference. Finally, one of us came to an interest in institutional and political activist ethnography through feminist theories and qualitative research methods. We have tried to write in as non-monolithic and as dialogical a fashion as possible. Many of the chapters are explicitly practical and outline ways in which political activist ethnography can be used and developed. We have also included a list of critical thinking and discussion questions after most chapters, as well as a glossary of terms that you will find after the Foreword.

This glossary allows readers not yet familiar with political activist ethnography more easy entry into the chapters. In both editing and presentation, our goal has been to make the text as accessible as we can. We realize that, on first read, some of the language used may seem strange and unfamiliar. Nevertheless, our experience has been that many of these terms are very useful to critical social analysis and activism so we hope you will bear with us. It has often been pointed out that ruling relations rely upon a systematic denial of language appropriate to critical social analysis.<sup>5</sup> It is in light of this theft that we offer the glossary. Developing critical social literacy is about discovering and re-discovering forms and ways of thinking and acting that have been denied to us. Many of these words are vital to us when waging the struggles in which we are engaged. They are very useful to us in the practice of changing the world.

To demonstrate this point, let's investigate two words — epistemology and ontology — that are key to grasping political activist ethnography and how it is different from other approaches. Even though we don't use them in our everyday lives, they help us clarify the ways we do research and the commitments we take up as activists. Epistemology refers to the theories of knowledge — how we know what we know — that we use in research and activism. Political activist ethnographers acknowledge that knowledge is produced through a reflexive social process of mutual determination and learning from other people. In other words, we learn from doing, from social practice and from inter-acting with others. Most ruling forms of

knowledge subscribe to an objective, value-free approach, pretending that the world can be explored from some disinterested neutral place somehow above or outside the social. This produces a managerial knowledge that then can be used to regulate social problems and movements.

One example clarifies matters here. In response to the widespread rebellions by American Blacks in the 1960s against racism, poverty and police repression, as well as the growth of the Black power movement, which emerged out of the civil rights movement, the U.S. government established a series of commissions and inquiries. Using a structural-functionalist perspective, which dressed itself up as neutral and objective, the influential Moynihan report (1965) argued, that the problem was not actually racism, poverty or police repression but instead that the Black family was “dysfunctional” since it did not look like the white middle-class family.<sup>6</sup> Reports like this mandated state funding to try to “fix” the Black family but did nothing to get at the social roots of racism and poverty.

Most movements challenge these claims to objectivity and value-neutrality by pointing out how they obscure forms of power and the different standpoints making up the social world. The social world is riven with struggles and conflicts, and the social standpoint you take up has an impact on what you can see. How you see a strike, for example, will differ if you start from the standpoint of management, or from that of the union members on the picket lines, or of the police who harass union members when they take action against management. This experience is incredibly different for the various people involved even though the social relations that organize the experience are the same. The trick is to not simply “flip the script” and validate our side but rather to begin mapping these social relations. Throughout this book, we point out how, despite the general aversion outlined above, strands of “objectivity” and “value-neutrality” manage to infiltrate themselves back into social movement research, often causing divisions and problems among activists.

Ontology is a word that points us to investigating the way the social comes into being. Some approaches argue that structures or discourse are what is primary when accounting for the emergence of the social.<sup>7</sup> In these ontologies, agency is transferred from people to thing-like objects that are no longer clearly understood as having been produced by people. In contrast, following from Marx, political activist ethnographers argue that it is “we,” as individuals and as groups of people, who, through our own practices, coordinate and produce the social world (D. Smith 2005: 49–73). This implies that we can also collectively change it. The implications derived from these specific conceptions of epistemology and ontology are key to defining the contributions of political activist ethnographers to critical social research and activism.

The chapters in this book come both from conference presenters and contributors who did not attend but who have nevertheless been engaged

in the debates that animated the conference itself. The authors include community organizers, professors and graduate students. Like George Smith before them, many of these scholars and researchers are committed activists. We hope this collection captures the excitement and energy of both the conference and the social struggles that have erupted around us. From the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle during November of 1999, to the tear-gas filled streets of Québec City in 2001, to the confrontational spirit of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and many others besides, this book has been indelibly marked by the convulsions turning our world upsidedown.

### Origins of Political Activist Ethnography

As an approach to producing a reliable knowledge of the social in order to facilitate transformative aims, political activist ethnography finds its roots in the work of Dorothy E. Smith. Contrary to the premises of official sociology, which aims to explain people using categorical abstractions like “socialization,” “social roles and norms” or “dysfunctionality,” D. Smith developed what she called institutional ethnography as a sociology *for* women, *for* the oppressed and — ultimately — *for* people (D. Smith 1987, 1999, 2005). Ethnographic work usually refers to going into another culture or society and learning from people in that culture or society about how their social and cultural worlds are put together. It is based on rich descriptions of how cultural and social practices work. Institutional ethnography proposes a dramatic reversal of the typical paradigm where the sociologist or anthropologist aims to make sense of the curious habits of the Other. Instead, institutional ethnography shows how the practices of ethnography can be turned against ruling institutions in our own society (D. Smith 1987: 151–79, 2002, 2005; Campbell and Gregor 2002). Institutional ethnography is an incitement to return the gaze (Bannerji 1995b) so that oppressed people can look back at their oppressors to see how the oppression they live is socially organized. In institutional ethnography we look upon the lookers to see how they do it.

Institutional ethnography and political activist ethnography have intimate connections to social movements and activism. For D. Smith, the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s helped to create the possibility of developing a different way of doing sociology. Since it often relied upon conceptual abstractions that served to occlude the practical dimensions of women’s experiences (experiences that often brought them into direct contact with the mundane “how” of the social world), the male tradition of sociology, for D. Smith, began to seem less like a strategy of investigation and description, and more like a practice of ruling. Not only did this sociology neglect to get to the bottom of things, it also on occasion provided a means of either justifying or ignoring social abuses. By drawing on the work of Marx, and of ethnomethodologists (who study the methods people

use to produce their everyday worlds) and others,<sup>8</sup> D. Smith helped to turn sociology on its head. Her insistence was simple: rather than contribute to the regulation of people through the application of concepts linked to textual practices (for instance, psychological classifications that can lead to harmful “treatment” regimes, or concepts of “deviance” that construct sex workers and lesbians and gay men as beyond the norm and thus in need of regulation), sociologists should aim to illuminate the textual practices of ruling regimes themselves.

Although her premises are explicitly concrete and despite consistent efforts to clarify and further articulate her approach (most recently, D. Smith 2005), D. Smith has often been read as advocating something akin to feminist standpoint theory, which argues that a feminist standpoint has an almost privileged ability to produce knowledge of the world. Although this characterization amounts to a significant misreading of her work, it is nevertheless one that can be seen repeated in many sociology textbooks and course outlines.<sup>9</sup> At stake in this classification are the grounds upon which we might come to know the world. For feminist standpoint theorists, the unique experiences of women — punctuated by the particularities of given oppressions — provide them with a basis to tell the truth about that experience, its origins and its consequences. This leads to an epistemological approach that can argue that only women can speak the “truth” of their experience, only people of colour can speak the “truth” of their experience and so on. This truth-telling foregrounds narrative and testimony as the raw material of social analysis. Here categories and the differences between them become central. Real lives are transposed into concepts or representations. This begins to dissolve the social relations that link us together, despite our differing social locations. For D. Smith, experiences are crucial. But they cannot be taken to be the “truth” of anything, other than themselves. Rather, social experience is taken to be the starting point for investigation, a place to start investigating the social world from outside the frameworks of ruling discourse. This offers a concrete grounding for a critical interrogation of ruling relations. D. Smith’s work makes the social, rather than the “self” seen as separate from the social, the central concern. D. Smith writes that she takes up a women’s social standpoint “not as a given and finalized form of knowledge but as a ground in experience from which discoveries are to be made” (2005: 8). As she puts it, “my notion of standpoint doesn’t privilege a knower. It does something rather different. It shifts the ground of knowing, the place where inquiry begins” (Smith 1992: 91).

D. Smith is suggesting that people’s practical activities in the world, and the practical consciousness that grows from these, influences where they choose to start investigating the world, which in turn shapes what they can discover. In the *Everyday World as Problematic* she draws on Hegel’s parable of the master and servant. It is the servant and not the

master who has the practical consciousness of how to meet the master's needs since it is the servant who knows how to do the work to meet these needs. Marx extended this to point out that it is workers who have the practical consciousness through their own activities of how the wealth of the capitalists is produced. Building on these approaches D. Smith allows us to see how the practical work and consciousness of women in domestic and reproductive labour, and in the support work they do for men, brings into view aspects of the social world that remain hidden when we take up the social standpoints of men (D. Smith 1987: 78–82). This approach is not intended to privilege the essential experiences of servants, workers or women but rather to allow us to see that starting our investigations from these standpoints produces forms of knowledge that enable us to critically interrogate ruling relations. In relation to women's experiences men can learn from and take up the social standpoints of women by interrogating the ways their own social practices participate in sustaining patriarchal relations. White people can also learn from and take up the standpoints of people of colour to begin to interrogate their own participation in racializing practices (on this, see Bannerji 1995b). This is not an ethical or psychological detour. It is not about asking what it feels like to be the Other. Rather, it is an invitation to explore how the social experiences of the Other are organized.

D. Smith wanted to transform how sociology was done more generally and identified the need for a sociology for women as one vehicle for this transformation. The world of mainstream/malestream sociology, according to D. Smith, is one in which the conceptual world is divorced from everyday experience. This conceptual world is made to operate independently of experience and then aimed at organizing and regulating our worlds. Instead, D. Smith argues for the necessity of beginning with the disjunctures in consciousness that women experience between their own social experiences and the conceptual practices of male domination. People's accounts of their lives are always worked up in relation to social discourse. However, by starting with social experiences of disjuncture, it is possible to call ruling discourses into question. Starting from the everyday world as her problematic, D. Smith demonstrates how one can move from local situations to broader, more extended social relations. Starting from the realm of situated experience, institutional ethnography provides a way of moving from the local to the trans-local.

*Political activist ethnography: Extending institutional ethnography*

George Smith studied and worked with Dorothy Smith. He was an activist engaged in gay liberation struggles and AIDS activist movements in the 1980s and early 1990s. "Political Activist as Ethnographer" draws upon his experiences as a researcher/organizer in these movements and makes use of the contributions of institutional ethnography in order to outline a form of knowledge production designed explicitly for activism. George



Smith's important contributions to activist sociology were unfortunately cut short through his death from AIDS-related disorders in 1994. More than ten years later, his writing continues to inspire both those who knew him and those encountering his work for the first time. Testament to his continuing impact, the Institutional Ethnography Division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems has recently initiated a George Smith student paper award and had a special section of their November 2005 newsletter devoted to the memory of George Smith.

A number of the contributors to this book directly worked with and learned from George Smith. Others only encountered his work after his death. Throughout the text, we aim to recognize the different impacts George Smith has had and the different readings people make of his work. We have not tried to impose any conventions regarding the interpretation of his writing or life. And, although it is at odds with the current academic fashion of professional address, we allow those contributors who shared a personal relationship with G. Smith to refer to him as "George." Most important to us is that political activist ethnography not become a dogma. Consequently, there are different readings and uses of G. Smith's work reflected in this book.

With political activist ethnography, G. Smith aimed to develop an "insider's" knowledge of ruling regimes based on the daily struggles and confrontations that social movements are already engaged in. His premise was that, even though most social movements are to some extent "outside of" (or in rupture with) ruling relations, political confrontation provides a means for activists to investigate the organizing logic of the ruling regimes they oppose. By providing a concrete practice of mapping out the social relations of struggle — both the dynamics of ruling regimes and of movements themselves — political activist ethnography enables a grounded social knowledge for more effective forms of activism.

In order to begin from where activists develop forms of knowing suitable to the task, G. Smith called for both an epistemological and an ontological shift from conventional sociological research methods. As mentioned earlier, political activist ethnography requires a shift in perspective about how the social comes into being, and an ontological perspective that recognizes how the social world is produced through people's practical activity.

Processes and tools for mapping the social are paramount in moving past positivism — the epistemological approach relying on the methods of the natural sciences to study the social world. But this is not enough. We also need to move past the limitations of philosophical idealism — where ideas and concepts are prioritized over the material practices by which these ideas are produced. The ontological shift proposed by G. Smith is a break from traditional ways of knowing. For example, G. Smith's work encourages us to break with the individualized notions of being elaborated

by liberal philosophy. In its place, he offers us a complex theory of social being rooted not in ideas but in doing and practice. Individuals emerge as social individuals. What is needed is further dialogue about the ways in which the social and individual mutually occur. However, the placement of doing, activity and agency at the centre of this social mapping suggests that these theories of being and knowing are worked out in the practical action (praxis) of everyday struggles. When we speak here of agency, we don't have in mind the individual agency that some liberal philosophers associate with an innate drive for human freedom. Instead, agency, as we envision it, is always related to social action, organization and struggle (see Bannerji 1995b). For instance, the practice of culture-jamming, or of subverting the dress and meanings of capitalist-defined popular culture, can never be simply individual or isolated in character. Invariably, such a practice can be read in reference to the social and cultural contexts created by, for instance, anti-globalization and social justice protests against the capitalist colonization of social space (Bowes 2004).

Political activist ethnography takes up this ontological commitment and views people's practices as central to how the social world comes into being, thus recognizing that people have the capacity to change the world. This is in contrast to other ontologies of the social. For instance, one can read Judith Butler's influential poststructuralist *Gender Trouble* (1990) as saying that discourse produces or speaks our gender *through* us. Gender is then a discursive effect. This denies that gender relations are broader social accomplishments (on this see Kessler and McKenna 1978). But if we are simply the puppets of social structures, discourse or "systems," as structuralist and even poststructuralist theories suggest — if "society" and official discourse causes us to act in regulated ways — there is not much hope for social transformation. Our goal is not to deny the social power of the forces of social regulation but to point out that social organization is also based on the activity of oppressed and exploited people ourselves. There is no realm of freedom beyond the social, and this social is produced through the activities of people.

As a result of these contentions, political activist ethnography has a very distinctive methodological and theoretical character. The standard academic distinctions made between "theory" and "method" are here troubled in order to foreground their interrelation as part of an investigative practice. Social movements and their confrontations with ruling regimes become important sites for mapping the social. We wish to trouble the "theory" produced about social movements that takes them as objects of analysis. Rejecting forms of knowledge that posture as being "neutral" and "objective" but hide a standpoint based in ruling social positions, political activist ethnography aims at developing knowledge about social organization from the standpoints of movements for social justice and the oppressed themselves.

Although this book engages in critiques of, and debates with, other approaches to producing knowledge regarding social movements, its focus on how to put political activist ethnography to use in doing research *for* social movements. This project is pursued at a methodological level and through concrete application to specific movements and struggles.

### Troubling Social Movement Theory

As George Smith points out in “Political Activist as Ethnographer,” political activist ethnography does not start within the existing academic discourses about “social movements” and “social movement theory.” Despite their differences, the various social movement theories all construct social movements as objects of analysis and focus their attention on social movements themselves rather than on explicating the social relations of struggle in which these movements are engaged. In contrast, political activist ethnography is rooted in movement action and experience and does not convert movements or activists into objects of analysis or theory. From here we begin. Nevertheless, some dismantling of social movement theory is necessary given the pervasive problems it can produce for activist based research and knowledge production.

Positioned as the authoritative academic voice on social action, social movement theory (despite moments of insight) has rarely moved far beyond academic discussions. This tradition is based on a hierarchical practice, where the researcher is not required to participate in movements and often writes about them as an outsider. Consequently, the knowledge created by social movement theory is often of little use to activists inside social movements and does not allow them to map out the social relations of struggle. By researching social movements rather than the social world that movements aim to unsettle, social movement theory often reifies activists and movements and establishes regulatory practices within academia by classifying activists and their work. Within new social movement theory, which we investigate more specifically in a moment, some movements are identified as being “new” while others are seen as “old.” Some are slotted into the “cultural” while others are seen as having to do with “economics” or “resource allocation.” These arbitrary distinctions often result in an inability to describe and account for how social movements actually work and tend to increase the divide between “activist” and “researcher.” By critiquing or justifying movements, as if their worth is determined by what an observer thought of them, social movement theory regulates activism by slotting it into categories, rather than explicating the importance of what a movement produces in the social world and what its confrontations with ruling relations bring into view.

Social movement theory can be roughly divided into three recognizable, but overlapping periods. The first period (roughly 1946–1960 with earlier roots), often referred to as “collective behaviour theory,” character-

ized movements as “social problems” in need of explanation. Researchers in this period often relied upon psychological concepts in order to make their evaluations. For example, collective behaviour theory would often understand crowd members as otherwise “normal” people who happened to be reacting in unusual and “irrational” ways while in a crowd. This early theory, which had no contextual understanding of oppression, solidarity or struggle, sought to claim movement participants as “deviant.” Consequently, this approach often produced knowledge suitable to the regulation and policing of social movements.<sup>10</sup>

In the post–World War II years, partly as a result of the Black civil rights movement and a series of Third World liberation struggles, social movements began to be conceived in more productive and rational terms. Viewing social movements as extensions of institutional action, “resource mobilization” theorists became the successors to collective behaviour theorists. Resource mobilization theory, which drew upon a certain reading of Marxism (Canel 1992), attempted to integrate political, sociological and economic theories. During this period, social movement theorists examined social action more structurally, while providing some critique of capitalism. The focus rested principally on the capacity of social movements, conceived as rational actors, to mobilize resources in their attempts to advance their struggles. By portraying activism as rational in character, resource mobilization theory began to break from codings of deviance. However, it also tended to narrow our focus on movements to questions of access to “resources” and how these resources were organized and mobilized. In addition to this conceptual delimiting of the scope of investigation, resource mobilization theory continued to construct movements themselves as the object of study.

The 1960s saw an explosion of movement struggles — youth, student, anti-war, feminist, lesbian and gay, ecological, prisoner rights and more — that did not seem to be directly related to questions of class (or at least not the narrow political economy notions of class then prevalent in the left). This moment of insurgency created the basis for new social movement theory influenced by the then emergent post-structural and post-modern approaches to social problems that focus on difference, fragmentation, discourse, language and culture (Canel 1992). These analyses contest Marxism (and sometimes feminism) as no longer relevant, or as “master-narratives” that merely produce the world they seek to “explain.” As Otero and Jugenitz argue, “Postmodernism, by denying the existence of real social facts and focusing on the meaning of movements, rather than their causes, challenges the continuing legitimacy of modernist theories, and in particular, of traditional Marxism” (2003: 506). By emphasizing what was “new” and distinctive about these movements, new social movement theory often obscured their connections with earlier forms of organizing (Weir 1993). With a focus on the cultural and identity aspects of these move-

ments, new social movement theory tended to overlook the connections of these movements to class relations and struggles. Often this produced a binary opposition between older movements (which were thought to be based on a narrow notion of class and economics) and these newer movements based on culture and identity. The result was a situation in which it became difficult to grasp the social and historical connections between class and culture (see Bannerji 1995b). This division is in part rooted in the epochal split of the 1960s, constructed as being between the old versus the new left. For instance, within the culture/class binary, lesbian and gay struggles are often classified as belonging to “culture.” The result is a theory that disengages these struggles from the material circumstances of queer people’s lives. From here it can operate as a regulatory practice that defines cultural issues and identity, but not poverty or class relations, as legitimate queer questions.

New social movement theory is often portrayed as a period of deconstruction in which unitary and ruling social categories are taken apart. New social movement theory concentrates on the formation of identities and their trajectories towards collectivity and autonomy, for instance in the feminist or lesbian and gay movements. Unfortunately, this move to deconstruct has, for some, become synonymous with a suppression of class analysis (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 159). As a result, new social movement theory has been critiqued for displacing questions of class relations and state formation, and for its rather narrow focus on identity and the cultural (see Adam 1997; Canel 1992; Mooers and Sears 1992).

Frustrated with the imposition of these theoretical frames, and with the impetus of the global justice movement, some activists and researchers have turned to doing ethnographies of social movements. Despite the promise of this approach, some of these attempts remain trapped within the local (not only as starting point but also as the end point of analysis) and, as such, are unable to make the necessary connections to broader social relations. Some of these ethnographers end up re-imposing aspects of a structuralist or system based analysis, thereby distorting their own attempts to explore these institutional relations in an ethnographic fashion.

Others, who have made aspects of the social relations of struggle visible, are still trapped within the confines of social movement theory and especially new social movement theory. In her insightful ethnographic investigation of the Metro Toronto Network for Social Justice, Janet Conway (2004) develops an activist ethnographic approach to coalition building that allows us to see some of the connections between local and more global social relations. She moves far beyond the ethnographic researcher as a neutral and uninterested observer. While she is able to develop an important focus on the importance of the knowledge that social movements produce, her version of activist ethnography is largely

inflected by new social movement theory with its emphasis on meaning and the cultural. This approach largely (although not entirely) displaces class relations and is therefore unable to map out the concrete conditions (what we call the social relations of struggle) in which activists find themselves engaged.

In relation to globalization and global justice movements, there has been the emergence of what is referred to as “global ethnography,” which uses an extended case method to try to develop ethnographic analyses that can capture the connections between various local settings (Burawoy et al. 2000). This approach acknowledges that ethnographers are participants in the processes they observe, and are in dialogue with others involved in these settings. The global ethnographer also observes settings over extended periods of space and time and views them as part of broader social processes. Despite the insights to be gained from these approaches, global ethnography is not knowledge produced from the standpoints of social movements resisting capitalist globalization. It is a form of knowledge that still takes up the position of observer in relation to these struggles. It is about the movements and their participants and *not* about what these movements learn. As mentioned before there is a shift as inquiry moves from the local to the global, from the “life-world to the system,” in which ethnographic investigations are supplanted by the imposition of theoretical constructs of a “system world” (D. Smith 2005: 35–38). The brilliance of the more locally based ethnographic work is subverted by the imposition of system-based theory onto the inquiry.

We find these turns towards activist and global ethnography refreshing and important. At the same time, we feel that political activist ethnography provides a clearer means by which ethnography can be mobilized for activism and for changing the world. This is knowledge that not only interprets the world differently but that can be actively used to transform it (Marx 1975: 423). Political activist ethnography makes very clear that the problem is not the social movement but the ruling social forces within which it is in confrontation.

Currently, there is little writing available that starts from the standpoint of social movements and that develops sociological knowledge for activism. There is no current book for activists, researchers and students that outlines and explores how to *do* social transformation. This is the gap that *Sociology for Changing the World* seeks to fill. It aims to provide a resource and reference point for developing sociologies for progressive social movements. This book is a marked break from those approaches that designate progressive social movements as deviant in character. It is part of the re-orientation of inquiry that instead focuses on troubling and disturbing the social relations of normality (among others on this, see Brock 2003). Breaking free of the conceptualization of deviance this book also does not define social movements as ‘objects’ to be studied from the

outside. Instead, social movements are here engaged as active subjects<sup>11</sup> (as are activists within them) and they are a crucial part of the solution to how we can change the world.

### Mapping the Book's Directions

Following a foreword by Dorothy Smith that outlines George Smith's work and its continuing relevance, *Sociology for Changing the World* is composed of three sections that conform to the movement involved in doing political activist ethnography. The first section, "Beyond Ideology and Speculation," which includes George Smith's "Political Activist as Ethnographer," sets out the distinctive methodological and theoretical features of political activist ethnography and how this approach does not start with speculation or with the ideological, or socially ungrounded, ways of seeing that dominate in society and often in social movements. Instead it begins with people's social practices and experiences. The crucial notions of an epistemological and especially the ontological shift required for this kind of activist research that we have already touched on are set out in this section.

This is followed by "Research as Disruption," which pursues political activist ethnography by explicating how the confrontations of movements with ruling regimes are a crucial resource in mapping out the social relations of struggle in which movements are engaged. Disrupting or breaching ruling relations becomes a crucial form of research as connections are made between ethnomethodological breaching experiments and social movement knowledge creation.

The third section, "Blowing up Social Relations," focuses on how doing political activist ethnography can illuminate social relations and points to paths of action for transforming the world. Covering a diversity of sites of struggle and movement organizing this section allows us to see the insights that can be gained from doing political activist ethnography.

This last section is followed by a conclusion by William Carroll and an afterword by the editors, which explores new directions for activist research and catalogues the debates and challenges coming out of this book. We take up the need to move beyond the insider/outsider divide in doing research for social movements and detail some of the regulatory regimes that activist research finds itself up against. We invite you to participate with us in devising ways of subverting these regulatory regimes and developing knowledge for changing the world.

We remind readers that the chapters in this book are not unitary or homogenous. Instead, they are diverse and varied expressions of different relations to political activist ethnography. Some contributions are well versed in institutional ethnography. Others are more grounded in the political activist ethnography elaboration of institutional ethnography. Still others make use of modes of investigation in which some institutional

and political activist ethnographers are critical. We try to map out some of these dimensions in our section introductions. This expansive approach is crucial to our pedagogical project of making political activist ethnography as broadly relevant as possible to activists and researchers.

## Notes

1. On this see the Metropolitan Hotel Workers site at <<http://www.metropolitan-hotelsworkers.org/>>. (Accessed Dec. 2, 2005.)
2. On this see <[www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue\\_05.13.04/city/york.html](http://www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue_05.13.04/city/york.html)>. (Accessed Dec. 2, 2005.)
3. On this see <<http://thelink.concordia.ca/article.pl?sid=05/01/25/036244>> (accessed Dec. 2, 2005) and the resource page on this at the Autonomy and Solidarity website at <[http://auto\\_sol.tao.ca/](http://auto_sol.tao.ca/)>. (Accessed Dec. 2, 2005.)
4. On this see <[www.yorku.ca/secretariat/legislation/u\\_pol/spaceuse.htm](http://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/legislation/u_pol/spaceuse.htm)>. (Accessed Dec. 2, 2005.)
5. In "A 'Bad Writer' Bites Back," an op-ed written for the *New York Times* on March 20, 1999, Judith Butler makes the following point about difficult language: "Herbert Marcuse once described the way philosophers who champion common sense scold those who propagate a more radical perspective: 'The intellectual is called on the carpet... Don't you conceal something? You talk a language which is suspect. You don't talk like the rest of us, like the man in the street, but rather like a foreigner who does not belong here. We have to cut you down to size, expose your tricks, purge you.' The accused then responds that 'if what he says could be said in terms of ordinary language he would probably have done so in the first place.' Understanding what the critical intellectual has to say, Marcuse goes on, 'presupposes the collapse and invalidation of precisely that universe of discourse and behaviour into which you want to translate it.'" The point, of course, is not to deliberately obfuscate but rather to recognize that the world of common sense has its own language and the uncritical use of that language will likely serve only to uncritically reproduce the world of commonsense itself. Needless to say, such a reproduction would in nearly every instance be at odds with activist projects.
6. Also see D. Smith, "The Standard North American Family: SNAF as an Ideological Code," in D. Smith 1999: 157–71.
7. For important examples of structuralist Marxism, see the work of Louis Althusser (1971, 1977). For a poststructuralist focus on social discourse, see Michel Foucault (1979, 1980a).
8. Especially crucial to D. Smith's taking up of Marxism was her re-reading of *The German Ideology* (1976). Crucial to her taking up and moving beyond ethnomethodology was her engagement with Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967) and other work. On the development of D. Smith's approach to sociology, see Campbell (2003).
9. To the best of our knowledge, D. Smith was first lumped together with feminist writers discussing standpoint theory in Sandra Harding's book *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986). It is unfortunately all too common in both sociological and feminist work for D. Smith's contributions to be collapsed into an unlikely amalgam that includes the rather different work of Nancy Hartsock (1985) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990). Also see D. Smith's recent commentary on this problem (2005: 7–26).
10. At the same time Georges Sorel (Horowitz 1961) and others argued from the left for a different understanding of mass psychology and crowd dynamics that



did not classify participants as “deviant.” While Sorel’s work contains insights it nevertheless has the drawback of collectivizing the psyche in an extrapolative fashion.

11. We use “subject” here in the double-sense of active social agency on the part of oppressed people that Paulo Freire (1970) and Bannerji (1995b) write about but also as “subjects” in the sense that Foucault (1979, 1980a) describes it in much of his work as being the subject of official discourse and discipline. This notion of active agency in our view is always in tension, struggle and transformation.