



Shoes, walking & reflections on subtle conflicts within social movements

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In my research, I have found myself walking constantly – primarily because the city where my field site is set breathes with mobilizations these days. Consequently my choice of footwear has become surprisingly important, and not only for comfort.



One day I may be marching with thousands of students, teachers and workers on strike. When we get to the parliament building, we are supposed to take our (preferably very old) shoes off and throw them towards the parliament, a symbolic gesture of solidarity for the two teachers arrested the day before.

However, the square is full of riot police, and those leading the march start to discuss how to proceed. While they are making their decisions, a friend of mine from a feminist group tells me to put on the high-heels that I was told to bring with me. I quickly change my footwear, and start holding a banner for the crowd of female activists who perform a pantomime about abortion and structural control of female body. Some people clap, some look away in slight awkwardness, or even obvious discomfort. The crowd is soon joined by group of activists who engage in the fight with the riot police, causing the march to disperse.

This change of footwear illustrates how – because of the diversity of involved groups, initiatives and goals within these social movements -strategies of resistance are constantly being renegotiated.

The work of activists, of course, goes miles beyond protests and acts of disobedience. Yet, observations from protests illustrate the subtleties of conflicts within these social movements. In a country where the former dictatorship still lives on in conservative attitudes, abortion and the female body in general as an object of repression are still sensitive issues for many.

Class differences resonate in the forms that actions assume during protests – young students from less privileged background whose lives have been affected by police checks and house controls often engage in clashes with riot police. Others are continually haunted by the ghost of dictatorship as they fight for justice for their tortured or disappeared parents. Some avoid clashes with the police and choose journeying as their form of campaigning, others view confrontations as natural and inevitable.



Photo by Mina Baginova

However, these differences do not necessarily indicate a deviation from the more general practices of social movements. Rather, conflict is an essential element in the fibre of all social movements as “a space of both opportunities and limitations directly experienced by activists everyday” (Maeckelbergh 2009:102).

Thus, conflict bears a potential to become a source of creative energy and ideas – even if in practice restructuring conflict as a source of innovative strategies is rocky. As a researcher, I am constantly aware of the need not to juxtapose activist practices against one another. Rather, I need to understand that a large social movement such as the one I study *depends* upon complex structures, diverse strategies and multiple visions.

Social Movements and ‘Radical Imagination’

I have entered the fieldwork in Chile with the notion of ‘radical imagination’, which forms a conceptual and analytic tool through which I aim to unearth the social and political activities of student social movements. But how does one explore the workings of something that entails so many meanings and different shapes?

What is ultimately a process that has no end point, is perpetually in motion, constantly in a phase of becoming – just like the social movement itself?

On more apparent note, radical imagination may stand for the capacity to imagine the world and collective life in radically different forms from the social, economic and political reality in which people find themselves. However, radical



imagination is not merely about dreaming of other worlds. To the contrary, it is a collective process of concrete groups and initiatives within the movement, as they actively work and tangibly transform their struggles against the dominant order (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014).

I approach my field as “active reality” (Cox 2011:33), that is I understand the student social movement as “an actively produced social formation, with historical and social links between its component parts”, created by “the ways participants experience themselves” and “the techniques through which they produce, maintain and transform themselves”.

While such direction requires to muddle in everyday nitty-gritty of the movement’s frustrations and efforts, protests and mobilizations have also proven to be a rich visual source of activists’ imagination. Marches become bold spectacles of the radical imagination as banners and posters are transformed into canvas of unapologetically clear ideas of a world as it should and may be otherwise. Moreover, marches also mirror yet another important aspect of the radical imagination, namely the boundless conjunctions of the past, present and possible futures.

Activists of a new generation, no longer paralyzed by the fear of past horrors, build their radical ideas and activities on the painful legacy of the dictatorship and accounts that narrate how the world has become the way they experience it today. Simultaneously they reimagine the distorted present with tangible work for the future generations.

Eduardo Galeano, beloved author of [“The Right to Dream”](#), famously pioneered the importance of dreaming and imagining better worlds, and his words appear frequently painted on posters during the marches. His statements such as “Allow me, readers, the madness of inventing the future. The world that is upside down dreams that it lands on its feet” or as the one on the picture “Education will not be the privilege of those who can pay for it. Police repression will not be the curse of those who cannot buy it” [1], are chosen by activists precisely for the very



tangibility of their struggles.

These words gain their significance from their ability to radically (re)imagine the world of today as the driving force of social movements' activities, which in turn become significant for their capacity for collective, shared – and never-ending – work for other possible worlds.



Photo by Mina Baginova

This post is a part of Allegra's Summer 2015 Fieldnotes series. See earlier installments [here](#).

Footnotes

[1] El derecho de Soñar – Eduardo Galeano. Consulted [here](#).

Works Cited

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