

Book Notes

LABORATORIES OF LEARNING: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, EDUCATION
AND KNOWLEDGE-MAKING IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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As students organized protests and encampments in the spring of 2024, calling for universities' boycott, divestment, and sanction of the Israeli apartheid state for its perpetuation of genocide and settler-colonial violence, the world bore witness to a transnational movement of student activists enacting grassroots education. Through teach-ins and read-ins, students learned about histories of colonization; critiqued anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and anti-Semitic narratives; and unsettled ongoing occupation. Abu El-Haj's (2024) question of "what if . . . we recognized student protesters as educators, fully engaged teachers and learners in our community?" rings particularly important as student activists face dismissal and even criminalization, tactics often used to silence and diminish the power of social movements (Alqaisiya & Perugini, 2024).

From #BlackLivesMatter to Youth Climate Strikes, the Arab Spring, Occupy movements, #RhodesMustFall, and #FeesMustFall, social movements around the world have been at the forefront of shifting discourse, disrupting the status quo, and creating change. These movements have interrogated structures of power that reproduce inequalities and pushed for a more just and sustainable world. The critiques, resistance, and alternative visions that social movements build are crucial in crafting radical (re)imaginings of the world; yet their political and theoretical contributions have often been underestimated in scholarly arenas. Rooted in the transformative power that social movements hold, *Laboratories of Learning: Social Movements, Education and Knowledge-Making in the Global South* highlights educative practices that take place in grassroots social movements. In the book, Mario Novelli and coauthors illustrate the rich intellectual and educational work social movements engage in to build transformative possibilities.

Laboratories of Learning is based on a multiyear collaborative study of grassroots social movements in the Global South. The study draws on research conducted in partnership with scholars and activists in four organizations:

NOMADESC, a Colombian human rights nongovernmental organization that has brought together Indigenous, Black, labor, and other movements through popular educational programs like the Intercultural University of the Peoples; HDK (People's Democratic Congress), an umbrella organization that has coalesced social movements across Turkey, including Kurdish, feminist, and LGBTQ+ activist groups, in their goal of building a pluri-ethnic state; the Housing Assembly, a grassroots organization that has fought for decent housing in South Africa; and the Madhes Foundation, which advocates for the marginalized Madhes community living in southern Nepal. The research addresses three major questions: How do social movements learn and make knowledge? What do social movements learn, and what types of knowledge do they make? What are the effects of this learning and knowledge making on the movements and on the societies they operate in? Novelli and colleagues explore these questions in chapters 3, 4, and 5, respectively, after providing a brief overview of theories on social movements and learning in chapter 1 and an introduction to the four social movements in chapter 2. The conclusion synthesizes the authors' reflections on educational, conceptual, and methodological issues and outlines implications for scholars and activists.

Laboratories of Learning explores various themes that can serve as starting points for scholars and activists who seek to understand grassroots pedagogical practices in social movements. To illustrate, the authors highlight how social movements build critical analyses of structural inequalities, empowering people to engage in collective resistance against structures of oppression. For example, the Housing Assembly turned housing, often considered a private concern, into a public issue of systemic inequality shaped by legacies of apartheid. Similarly, the Madhesi Foundation fostered critical awareness of the economic, political, and social marginality the Madhesi people are subject to in Nepali society.

The book also sheds light on how social movements reconstruct counter-memories and subjugated knowledge that defy state-sanctioned narratives and dominant Western epistemologies. NOMADESC's pedagogical spaces, for instance, were guided by alternative conceptions of relationality from Indigenous and Black community traditions and engaged with often-silenced historical and systemic violence that marginalized communities faced. Highlighting the trust and solidarity that can be built through pedagogical processes, the authors also show how learning in community helps strengthen intersectional movements. For instance, HDK's coalition-based activism relied on trust that activists built as they forged relationships with one another and learned about each other's struggles. In addition, the authors illuminate how alternative visions of the world are enacted through everyday activist praxis. Their insights on the ways social movements build collective inquiry, critique, and resistance are essential to tracing educative processes that foster social change.

Central to the book is its argument that social movements are "laboratories of learning" that create radical new insights on "how the world works,

the tools to change it, and the visions for alternative ways of being and living” (1). Social movements nurture new questions, perspectives, and dreams that transgress the boundaries of what is deemed (im)possible. In framing social movements as laboratories, the book draws on existing scholarly inquiry on learning and knowledge making in social movements, such as, but not limited to, those of the late Aziz Choudry, whose work sought to deepen understandings of everyday praxis in activist spaces as modalities of knowledge and learning (Choudry, 2015; Choudry & Vally, 2018). Choudry’s scholar-activist engagements included serving on the advisory board of the research project this book grew out of.

The book also speaks to literature on critical pedagogy and social movements. While these two lines of literature have been largely disconnected, recent scholarly efforts to examine the relationship between education and social change highlighted the generative possibilities of thinking at the crossroads of critical pedagogy, which focuses on educational practices that build critical consciousness and praxis, and social movement literature, which is primarily concerned with how social movements are mobilized and framed. The fusing of these two strands of scholarship draws on the strength of critical pedagogy literature in examining individual agency and everyday praxis and the strength of social movement scholarship in exploring political opportunities and structures (Tarlau, 2014). Speaking at this intersection, Novelli and colleagues suggest that learning in social movements occurs across a wide range of activities and seeks to ask, “What does an alternative pedagogy of producing rebellious subjectivities look like?” (216).

Laboratories of Learning also compels readers to rethink where education and learning take place. Education is often narrowly equated to schooling; however, as existing scholarship on learning in social movements has emphasized, educational processes exist beyond school walls in community-based settings. Theorizations of learning in social action have outlined categorizations of learning as formal education (in educational institutions), incidental learning (through social action and protest), informal education (from other people), and nonformal education (structured systemic teaching in various social settings) (Foley, 1999). Furthering this line of scholarship, the authors seek to move beyond these categories by illuminating how social movements craft wide-ranging spaces of learning that are holistic, temporal, and relational. This insight broadens existing understandings of education to account for learning across different spatial and temporal junctures.

Situating themselves in critiques of colonialist legacies of comparative education, the authors engage in “criss-crossing comparison” that centers relationality and seeks to enable dialogic spaces of critical reflection and learning (Sobe, 2018). Drawing on individual case study reports written in collaboration with activists from each movement, this book engages in a critical comparative analysis that weaves together insights that have emerged across the four cases. For some readers, the frequent shifts among the four highlighted social move-

ments in chapters 3–5 may create a slightly disjointed reading experience. Nevertheless, this format embeds comparative understandings throughout the book, serving its goal of providing criss-crossing synthesis. It also provides future movements across different spaces and causes with a framework through which they can understand and strengthen their pedagogical work. Given the focus on cross-case insights, the book engages less with nuances that may exist across the four movements. This may raise lingering questions about how concepts it highlights, such as interculturality and diversity, may hold different meanings across contexts. The research project website offers case studies of each movement for those wishing to gain rich, in-depth portrayals of the movements (see <https://knowledge4struggle.org/>).

One major strength of the research project lies in its collaborative inquiry process. Committed to research conducted with social movements themselves, the project included collaborative data collection and writing processes as well as intermovement meetings that brought together researchers and activists. Unlike traditional scholarship that is often critiqued for its extractive and reductive portrayals of social movements, this collaborative inquiry fostered a participatory, collective approach to knowledge making that honors the interests and needs of social movements. Given the collaborative nature of this work, readers might wonder: Which of the findings might have emerged through South-South dialogue or North-South dialogue that took place between social movements or between social movements and scholars? How did the collaborative research process shape the cross-case insights presented in this book? How can researchers and activists interested in similar research endeavors build on the authors' methodological reflections? By charting out a research approach that intertwines theory and practice, the book importantly fosters scholar-activist engagements that break away from traditional scholarship. In doing so, it offers theorizing and interrogating from the margins as a way of creating intellectual and participatory spaces of resistance.

Insights from *Laboratories of Learning* offer new directions forward for future scholarship on learning in social movements. One path lies in further developing conceptualizations of epistemic resistance forged in social movements as they unearth silenced narratives, speak back against systems of power, and contest historical and contemporary manifestations of epistemic violence. Potentially in conversation with decolonial theories' critique of coloniality in knowledge production, future scholarship could extend the authors' explorations of social movements as spaces of epistemic struggles that uplift erased histories and reshape public memories. In doing so, scholars can heed Novelli and colleagues' note on how knowledge from social movement spaces that emerge from ancestral traditions and silenced historiographies can fuse with decolonial and neo-Marxist analysis to develop new, hybrid ways of knowing. Another possibility lies in attending to spatialities, temporalities, and subjectivities that shape educative processes in social movements. Grounded in the authors' understanding of learning as a relational process that involves vari-

ous subjects in different time frames, this potential line of inquiry could help build intricate understandings of how resistance is cultivated across time, space, and people.

As Novelli and colleagues note, in her work on marginality as a site of resistance, bell hooks (1991) argued that

marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation . . . It is also the site of radical possibility . . . for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives . . . It offers . . . the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (149–150)

Tracing the disruptive possibilities that lie in the margins, *Laboratories of Learning* offers an important window into social movements as sites of grassroots education for resistance. It pushes for a deeper appreciation of the alternative knowledge, learning, and pedagogies from social movements that enable us to continue interrogating, reimagining, and changing the world.

WOOHEE KIM

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