



Reading groups: Organisation for minor politics?

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abstract

This article introduces reading groups as organisational forms. It argues that reading groups are important forms of mutual learning and critical knowledge production that have a place in alternative organising and social and political movements. It also highlights the importance of the co-creation of knowledge and subjectivity which can potentially lead to the development of agency, solidarity and social power. In order to start to map a genealogy of reading groups, a range of examples are examined, from the early 20th century in relation to anti-authoritarian mutual pedagogy and worker cultures of self-learning and cooperation; from the 1970s in relation to feminism, the New Left and union organised worker education; and then from the recent past, in relation to contemporary work and social movements. By excavating some key historical examples, these everyday forms of resistance are made available to be accessed and utilised in the present as a form of 'minor' politics, following Deleuze. This article thereby shows the potential for mutual learning practices to help to build and sustain social infrastructures for resistance and social transformation.

Introduction

Reading groups exist across such a wide variety of contexts and are perhaps so ubiquitous as to be almost ignored. In this article I will situate reading groups on the periphery of larger organisations, as sites for the creation of knowledge and subjectivity and consequently as 'minor' tools for organising. There is little to no existing literature that specifically deals with reading

groups as organisational forms and this is therefore an exploratory article that aims to start to map out this field for further discussion and research. It draws from existing literature on critical pedagogy, workers' pedagogy, women's book clubs and organisation for resistance to capitalism, in order to contribute to a 'history from below' of reading groups as both politico-pedagogical spaces and forms of organisation.

Within *ephemera*, organising for resistance to capitalism has included 'alternative organisations', anarchist organising, strategies of resistance in the contemporary workplace, and workers' education (Commisso, 2006; Frenzel, 2014; Wellbrook, 2014). In particular, debates around knowledge production, subjectivity and organisation in this context have previously come together in *ephemera* in discussions on workers' inquiry and the im/possibility of the commons. The workers inquiry approach to knowledge production is one that seeks to understand the changing composition of labour and its potential for revolutionary social transformation (Figiel et al., 2014). The aim is the mutual transformation of both material conditions and the self (Wellbrook, 2014), one in order to change the other and vice versa. Intellectual commons are the intangible resources produced by sharing and collaboration. Commons practices are ones which, while producing and managing resources, in this case knowledge and intellectual commons, constantly reproduce the communal relations upon which the productive process is based and the resource is managed (Broumas, 2018). It can be argued that commons are continually being produced while at the same time, capital is constantly attempting to capture and put them to work. Commons are arguably also sites in which critique and resistance have the potential to develop, although whether they will 'create cracks in the capitalistic accumulation process, are stifled by it or even used in the name and interests of recent, philanthropy- and collaboration-oriented, capitalism' is not possible to determine in advance (Caffentzis, 2010: 40, Hoedemækers et al., 2012: 383).

To characterise reading groups as a minor form of organisation is to acknowledge their size and scale, their relatively peripheral position in relation to other forms of organisation and the fact that they consist of a relatively mundane, everyday activity. That they have a peripheral relation to social and political movements could also be seen as indicative of what

Deleuze termed a 'minor politics'. This is a politics that involves a 'principle of multiple entries' (Deleuze et al., 1983: 13), a politics that 'arises not in the fullness of an identity – a nation, a people, a collective subject – but, rather, in “cramped spaces”, “choked passages”, and “impossible” positions, that is, among those who feel constrained by social relations' such as poverty or debt (Thoburn, 2012). This understanding of politics is not a question of the expression of a particular subjectivity such as a 'people', because as Deleuze states, the ““people” are missing' (Deleuze, 1989: 216). However, it does entail multiplicity. The minor functions instead as a site of difference to the dominant or normative. Capitalism is often understood as an economy of sameness in which it is impossible to imagine alternatives. The concept therefore aims towards a thinking beyond existing identity formations and potentially provides a framework for a rethinking of minor and minority 'outside of sociological conventions' (Laurie and Khan, 2017: 3). A Deleuzian perspective is also a processual ontological one, which can be applied to reading groups as partial organisations which seem to readily dissolve and morph into other modes of organising. Far from being inconsequential, might reading groups instead be an important form of mutual learning that has a place in alternative organising, in social movements, and in building social power and resistance?

As Johnsen et al. have stated, rather than being purely a technical matter, organising is 'a way of working through complex ways of being human with other humans' (Johnsen et al., 2018: 419). A reading group can be categorised as a form of loosely organised informal collectivity that crosses the 'informal social sphere' and more formally organised spheres of life (Zechner and Hansen, 2015). Reading groups can also be described as being partially organised, displaying 'some elements of organisation, but not all' (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010; Frenzel, 2014: 903). Collective reading is a messier, more complex process of a commingling of a variety of subjects and objects, texts and contexts than the purely linear relationship between text and reader proposed by traditional reader-response theories (Long, 2003; Bakhtin et al., 2014). One way of conceptualising reading groups might therefore be as assemblages of readers, texts, authors and contexts, across which both meaning and subjectivity are produced. Assemblage here is understood as derived from Deleuze and Guattari, and developed by Manuel DeLanda, as

both ‘an ensemble of parts that mesh together well’ and the action of that fitting together (2016: 1). The term has been used in organisation studies to describe socio-technical ‘entanglements of human and non-human components’, ‘configurations of actors and networks’ and organisational cultures (Atkinson and Smith, 2014: 438; Collister, 2014: 772; Sampson, 2015). DeLanda (2017) argues that as social formations, assemblages are comprised of both material and expressive components, so in this case, physical bodies in space, social encounters, flows of words and non-verbal expressions as well as the content and physicality of the reading material. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari also describe a book as an assemblage, having ‘neither subject nor object’ (1988: 4). Conceptualising groups of things as assemblages emphasises the relationships of the component parts as being fluid and unstable, and the ways in which they might connect to and plug in and out of other assemblages. In order to locate collective reading practices in relation to the political, it might be this messiness and instability of particular ‘reading formations’ which needs exploring, including the social relationships, inter-subjective structures of power, the relationship to public space and therefore what counts (or not) as political (Bennett, 1995: 6).

Methodology

Foucault’s genealogical method provides a model for constructing a counter-history of reading groups. Foucault flatly rejects the construction of linear developmental historiography in which there is uniformity and regularity. Rather, his method emphasises discontinuity, irregularity and inconstancy. An excavation of the past is performed in order ‘to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics’ (Foucault, 2004: 8). This procedure focuses on ‘subjugated knowledge’, historical knowledge of struggles and forms of resistance that may have been buried or disqualified and kept in the margins (Foucault, 1980: 79–92). My operationalizing of Foucault’s method here is to begin an incomplete history of reading groups. By excavating some historical examples, a partial genealogy might be constructed. The choice of examples has originated from my PhD study which focused on groups connected with the German historical novel *The aesthetics of resistance* (Weiss, 1975-1981, 2005), but which has since been expanded. The examples detailed fall roughly

into three historical periods: the early part of the 20th century, the 1970s and the early 21st century. The early 20th century examples are from the cooperative movement and specifically anti-authoritarian movements, the resistance to historical fascism in Germany and the Spanish Anarchist movement just before the Spanish Civil War. The groups from the 1970s are in the context of feminism, the New Left, counter-culture and union organised worker education. The examples from the recent past spring from the context of the 2011 student movement, Occupy and Transition movements and debates around the university as a critical institution. Primary archival research was conducted in relation to reading and study groups related to *The aesthetics of resistance* and the resistance to fascism in Germany. I interviewed members of London-based reading groups and have undertaken participant-observation in a number of different groups since 2014. These modes of historical and empirical research inevitably provide different evidential bases which will have an impact on the kinds of analyses which can be undertaken. While archival research tends to emphasise the discursive aspect of reading groups through the written traces that are left behind, empirical and experiential research can include more embodied and relational aspects. As this is an exploratory article, the assertions made will be speculative. Nevertheless, as an initial study it can be used to identify areas for further research. It might also be possible to begin to elucidate some of the different ways that mutual learning practices may help to build and sustain social infrastructures for resistance and change, and what might be useful for organisational thinking.

Reading and learning groups in the early 20th century

In the late 19th and early 20th Century, mass worker movements developed an expansive cultural and community based infrastructure which included libraries, social centres, Sunday schools and other educational and cultural associations (Wellbrook, 2004: 363). Education was also a key founding principle in the cooperative movement, most notably started by the Rochdale Pioneers, although there were other early precursors to co-op models elsewhere. Very early on, their cooperatively run shop in Rochdale ‘began to exercise educational functions’ as a meeting place for discussion groups (Holyoake, 2009: 89). 19th Century historian and co-operator George Holyoake

described how religion and politics – ‘the terrors of Mechanics Institutes’ – were discussed alongside business confidence and skills.

There is also evidence that study groups were (and still to some extent are) instrumental in the formation of African-American owned cooperatives. Study circles formed one part of a whole series of educational initiatives within the African American cooperative movement but were in particular seen both as pre-training and the organisational form from which co-ops developed. Nembhard states that ‘as early as 1918 black activist groups in urban areas were forming study circles to discuss economic problems and learn about cooperative economics’ (2014: 88). W. E. B. Dubois organised the Negro Cooperative Guild which first met in 1918 in the United States. Advocating the Rochdale model, Dubois encouraged individuals and groups to study consumer cooperation. Study groups were formed following this meeting although according to Nembhard there is no documentation of exactly how many. This long, mostly hidden history of African-American co-op ownership (often characterised as being one of failure), has continued into the 2000’s with study circles still being used today as an early step in the process of establishing cooperative businesses through building trust between members and enacting a ‘study-learn-implement’ model.

Pedagogy, debate, study and research coexisted within the educational activities of most labour organisations in the early 20th century, but these weren’t necessarily centrally organised. In Berlin for example, there is evidence that small workers’ educational groups existed all over the city during the Weimar Republic as an intrinsic part of the workers’ movement (Wenzel, 2014). Two examples I will concentrate on here are the German *Rote Kapelle* or Red Orchestra’s learning circles and the educational initiatives of the *Mujeres Libres*, or the Free Women, in Spain. Both examples consisted of decentralised networks of small learning groups rather than being directly connected to any centrally organised mass movement. While some were, not all the groups of the Red Orchestra were connected to the workers’ movement or to the Communist Party. The network was far more disparate and to a large extent, this contributed to its surviving for as long as it did. Indeed, the historiography of the Red Orchestra has, up until recently, depended on the notion of a centrally controlled organisation directed by the Communist Party, it being perceived as almost impossible to be conceptualised otherwise.

The *Mujeres Libres*, on the other hand were directly connected to the anarchist worker organisations in Spain, and were specifically decentralised in nature.

What was known as the Red Orchestra, or *die Rote Kapelle* was a network of small reading or learning circles (*Kreisen*) that evolved into part of the German resistance to historical fascism from the mid-1930s to early 1940s. While the term *orchestra* evokes a tight knit organisational structure, with everyone playing to the same score, the organisation was far looser and more disparate. It started as a few circles of friendship, discussion and learning, but expanded to include more than 250 people. This included tutors and alumni of schools and educational institutions, including radical schools, the main evening college in Berlin and the art school but also communist groups of self-educated workers, and bohemian groups of artists, aristocrats and early concentration camp survivors. These groups mostly met in the domestic spaces of people's homes. One member compared the structure to the circles a stone hitting a pond makes. Over time, the circles increasingly overlapped, forming what Anne Nelson (2009), describes as a 'new geometry'. She uses the German term, *Querverbindung*, to describe the structure as 'a network of interlocking relationships' (xxvi). *Quere* meaning *across* or *crosswise* and *Verbindung*, meaning *connection*, the term literally emphasising the horizontal connections between members. Personal contacts rippled out in different directions with circles radiating out from various hubs, around individuals or couples.

And while most started off as discussion groups, their emphasis became more political and they progressed to other modes of resistance. As the Nazi regime infiltrated more aspects of society, shattering all formal political organisational elements that might have provided any resistance, activities that were not formally thought of as political, such as leisure and informal ones, were converted into opposition to the regime (Peukert and Deveson, 1989: 102). As well as holding discussions on political and artistic issues, they collected information, distributed leaflets and fly-posters, documented Nazi crimes and hid and helped persecuted people. Some members also became involved in formal espionage. They, very consciously, expanded the network across social boundaries. One key member, Arvid Harnack, was very clear that the key to any resistance work lay in expanding their *Bekanntenkreise*, their circles of acquaintances, and he extended his links to include both Social

Democrat and Communist circles and beyond. However, they not only shared the political desire to end the Nazi regime but also an ethical stance of joyful resistance. This can be summed up as the '*Bund(es) für unentwegte Lebensfreude*', loosely translated as the Association for Persistent *Joi de Vivre* (Roloff, 2003).

In the Spanish context of the 1930s, self-organised education was an essential component of anarcho-syndicalist and anarchist traditions. Bakunin emphasised the importance of developing an independent socialist base of knowledge for the workers' movement (Bakunin, 1869; Wellbrook, 2014). In addition, the insistence within the communalist-anarchist tradition that means must be consistent with ends was also reflected in its pedagogical ideas. If the ends are the achievement of a non-hierarchical egalitarian society then it must be achieved through a movement that is also non-hierarchical (Bakunin, 1990; Bookchin, 1998). Pedagogy was therefore seen as part of the 'preparation' needed to ensure that any kind of revolution would not just lead to the reinstatement of authority in new forms (Ackelsberg, 1991: 55–6).

The *Mujeres Libres* or Free Women was an anarchist women's organisation aligned with the CNT-FAI, the Spanish confederated anarchist trade union and affiliated affinity groups. The *Mujeres Libres* was started in 1936 and organized schools, women-only social groups and a women-only newspaper. The importance of a network of economic, political and cultural organisations and activities which provided a context in which to test the movement's developing theoretical perspectives was very important. Many of the women involved in the movement were interviewed in the 1970s when there was a resurgence of interest through second wave feminism. They were very clear about the shift in mind-set that took place through their involvement in activism and the learning associated with it. They described themselves as 'having come to a full sense of who they were only in and through the activities of the groups they joined'. The libertarian community thus 'became essential to the new developing sense of self' (Ackelsberg, 1991: 36).

Anarchist-supported educationalist initiatives took a variety of forms. *Ateneos*, for example, were local neighbourhood educational and cultural centres, so prevalent during the early years of the republic (just before the Spanish Civil War), that almost every working class neighbourhood had one.

These offered educational opportunities for those that had never been to school, including both adults and children. One participant, Valero Chiné describes what they offered as a ‘totally different kind of education’ which revolved around discussing what people had read. He says:

Each person would talk about what he had read (which often varied a great deal, since sometimes we didn’t understand what we were reading!), and then we would all talk about it, and think about what each had said. (Ackelsberg, 1991: 84)

Through attending these *ateneos*, people experienced a shift or change in consciousness, a ‘*cambio de mentalidad*’ (a change of mentality), which was fundamental in their becoming more involved and more militant within the movement. The intimate relations that they provided, contributed to a deep formation of the self in relation to the wider movement. Enriqueta Rovera, an activist from *Mujeres Libres* said of the experience: ‘that’s where we were formed most deeply’. They also played a part in the creation of a community of people who believed ‘that they could effect a change in the world’ (Ackelsberg, 1991: 86).

Reading groups in the 1970s and 80s

Educational circles also played an important role in the workers movement, the New Left and the student movement of the 1960s and 70s both in the US and in Europe. These were an integral part of how theory was developed and reading groups were connected to this wider movement (Rector, 2008; Polletta, 2002; Teodori, 1975). Union-based worker educational initiatives were key sites for many of these groups. However, the search for alternative modes of organising and increased democracy of the ’68 generation can also be tracked alongside a readiness to self-study, and a change in mind-set that Sergio Bologna links to the growing crisis of and resistance to Fordist labour practices (Bologna, 2018: 80). In addition, I would like to highlight the role of feminism here with regards to the recognition of small groups and the knowledge produced in them. Without this feminist perspective it is unclear as to whether reading groups per se would be recognised as being valuable at all.

Second wave feminism specifically included an increased emphasis on the importance of multiple voices, narratives and perspectives in small group practices, primarily in the form of consciousness-raising groups. Feminism recognised the value of knowledge produced in these small groups which then fed into the wider women's movement. During the 1970s, many consciousness-raising groups developed out of or began as reading groups (Farinati and Firth, 2017; Spender, 2001). Groups of women read Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, De Beauvoir's *The second sex* or Greer's *The female eunuch*. These books facilitated discussions of their own conditions and at some point, most groups switched to producing knowledge through the telling of their personal experiences. This production of knowledge from the collective analysis of empirical first-hand experience, fed into the larger women's movement and their campaigns, demands and actions. C-R groups were a way of decolonising everyday life, experience and language. Women started to 'deconstruct their muted condition', and their position of having 'been obliged to use a language which is not of their making' (Spender, 2001: 93).

The trajectory that the Milan Women's Bookstore took, however, although coming from similar concerns, was oriented in a different direction. In their case, the group went through various phases of organisation, and *ended* as a reading group. Their collective practice shifted from C-R or *Autoconscienza* (directly translated as self-consciousness, an adapted and specific, more separatist practice to US C-R), to other more open forms of practice which included collective reading (Libreria delle Donne, 1990). The practice of *Autoconscienza* was felt to be too restrictive and insufficient a tool to deal with feminism's relationship to the world. It seemed too static and separatist, straining 'under the pressure of its own contradictions' between the internal experiences of the group and its 'utter otherness and alienation from all other social relations outside the movement'. The Bookstore Collective, set up as part of a move among feminists to construct alternative counter institutions and spaces of autonomous self-organisation, therefore embarked on a collective reading practice (meeting in the basement of the bookstore), using texts of fiction by female authors, in the search for a language that represented them better. They used 'the texts as they would have their own words', taking them apart and putting them back together in different ways along with non-words: places, facts, feelings (Libreria delle Donne, 1990: 7-8,

10). For them, the speaking of disparity and inequality within the group became important, and the reading group as a form seemed better able to deal with differences than *autoconscienza*.

During this period, I would also like to highlight reading groups organised around *The aesthetics of resistance* (Weiss, 1975-1981), an epic anti-authoritarian historical novel by Peter Weiss, a German writer associated with the New Left. This was something of a cult book which initiated reading groups all over Germany, Austria, Sweden and other European countries. Within these groups, there appears to have been a particular emphasis on self-conscious reflection regarding the process of learning that members went through. There was also a relationship to political activism especially in East Germany around the time of the fall of the Berlin wall. *The aesthetics of resistance* reading groups existed both inside and outside formal university education with many union organised and many more self-organised groups. There were also autonomous working groups ('*Autonomen Arbeitsgruppen*') and some on the edges of the University (*Aus-Universitat*) (Rector, 2008: 21). Many were organised outside the formal university and some of those were in relation to industrial trade unions and other workers' organisations such as the *Marxistische Arbeiterschule*, or Marxist Worker School. Even if they were inside the university walls, they were most often organised by students on their own terms. Some members who were involved in non-university and trade union-based working groups wrote about their experiences. One cross sector group which included a hairdresser, a masseur and an economist produced a number of texts which were published (May, 1981). There is also evidence to suggest that there were many more informal groups but these are very difficult to track or reconstruct as they leave little or no record. In this respect, the production of knowledge took place outside of or within the margins of the university institution. Through them, *The aesthetics of resistance* became part of a long tradition of workers' education in terms of its content (it reflects on leftist histories), as a pedagogical object, taken almost literally as *Bildungsroman*, and as an organising principle.

The small reading or working groups (*Lesegruppe*, *Arbeitskreise*) mimicked or incorporated the model that appears in the novel. Reading about the protagonists discussing and debating the contradictory, opposing and fragmentary positions within the Left, working through leftist histories and

grasping to gain knowledge on their own terms, encouraged similar discussion and debate. The practical value of such groups was precisely in the collective reading and discussion that developed into a critical self-examination and positioning within the groups themselves (Rector, 2008). The representation of workers' autodidactic learning also encouraged them to do the same. The groups could therefore become a focus for dealing with some of the theoretical arguments and interior controversies of the Left as well as more classical Marxist and German studies of the workers' movement. For example, they 'demonstrated the necessity of a dispute with Stalinism' taking place at that time. They also discussed the question of politically resistant art and literature. The groups generated a form of collective political and aesthetic self-knowledge as a form of 'militant dialogue' (Magenau, 2007: 15).

Reading groups in the East played an important role in the breakdown of the GDR, part of the larger movement that contributed to the fall of the wall in 1989. Inside the GDR, in the middle of the 80s, where the 'political atmosphere became so stifling', *The aesthetics of resistance* became a medium through which politics and history which could otherwise not be talked about, could be discussed. Groups used the book to discuss both the artistic doctrine of socialist realism and 'the distortion of real socialism'. One member, Sigrid Lange spoke about how it helped her and others to start to think through political alternatives to the society they were living in under the GDR and prompted her to realise that it was impossible to keep out of the political situation any longer. This for her was the development of 'political self-understanding' (Nährlich-Slatewa, 1997: 3-4, 1). She and several of her fellow reading group members were directly involved in the SED roundtable discussions during the last days of the GDR. These were discussions in which members of the East German government came together with representatives of emerging new citizens' movements in 1989 to discuss possible reform.

Reading or learning groups in the early 21st century

Around the period of 2011-2014, with the Occupy and the student movements, there was a resurgence of interest in radical and popular pedagogy as an important aspect of transformative praxes (Earl, 2018). There was also a marked shift towards 'building autonomous communities rooted in

new forms of direct democracy', characterised as people making and doing things together as modes of resistance (Shukaitis and Graeber, 2007: 12; Holloway, 2010). Coming after the financial crash and the beginning of Austerity, they have also been dubbed the 'post-Seattle new social movements' (Castells, 2015; Earl, 2018). These put the stress on pre-figurative politics and the 'politics of the first person', that is, those enacting transformations on the level of subjectivity and micro-politics (Bailey et al., 2018; Earl, 2018; Katsiaficas, 2007).

The reading groups in this period are not associated with union-based educational initiatives which in general have largely disappeared, in parallel with both the decline of mass worker based unions and movements, and an increase in accessible mainstream education. However, most if not all the examples have had some relationship, directly or indirectly, to the university as an institution and a resource. This to some extent reflects 'changes in critical research as academics have attempted to systematise a new form of connection between paid researchers and communities of struggle' (Wellbrook, 2014: 359).

Many of the radical pedagogical initiatives that proliferated around 2010/11 in the context of the student protests have now disappeared but a few continued for a number of years. One of these was The New Cross Commoners, a group based in South London. Some of the participants had links to the local university either as academic staff or students, but the group was sufficiently separate from the institution that the distinctions did not exist in the same way. This was not a case of the group bringing in academic expertise, but more of academics, students and local residents working together outside of any formal research or university framework. An important part of their project was an emphasis on non-academic and collectively-facilitated learning that would be accessible to a wide demographic from the local area. They used the reading group format to explore ideas around the commons and related collective practices. The group viewed their collective learning projects, including the reading groups, as autonomous prefigurative practices: as attempts to try out decentralised egalitarian social relations, to cooperate and co-produce knowledge together. As Caffentzis and Federici have argued, in order for commons-based resistance to capital to be effective, there needs to be 'a commitment to the creation of a collective or multiple collective

subjects' by the community involved (2014: 13). The group's reading practice shifted several times between different modes of meeting and reading, sometimes involving practical exercises stemming from the texts and sometimes purely reading. Members felt that there was an important balance between the informality of the group and 'the formal openness of those processes of looking at texts' (Firth, 2019: 100). For one member, it was important that it didn't become too much like a group of friends. There was a level of commitment involved in coming to the group sessions, but one in which the social relations developed were more those of solidarity rather than friendship alone. They felt that the collective reading practice was a form of solidarity practice precisely because of this kind of commitment.

The group generally met in a social centre which they were associated with and helped to maintain. Increasingly, tensions emerged between the needs of the space and the groups and activities that inhabited it. The amount of time and energy it took to look after and reproduce the space was one of the issues which contributed to these tensions. One member delineated between the two kinds of reproductive practices:

The sharing that happens to the cleaning and sharing of the actual space is one thing, but it doesn't particularly include the sharing of ideas or that kind of exchange. In that sense, I would say that it's actually really important that, things like that...happening there, but it was always put in second place. (Firth, 2019: 101)

For them, the reading group was primarily a place for self-reflection: 'a space for dreaming and imagining' beyond cleaning the floor, washing the dishes and cooking dinner that the reproduction of the physical space required. The tensions between the physical space and the demands on people's time, necessary for its maintenance and reproduction, were substantial and put a lot of strain on the people meeting there. On the other hand, the maintenance required to keep a reading group going is of quite a low level, not always even necessarily expecting people to have read the material beforehand.

There is also evidence that reading groups have played an active role in the relationship between academic research and contemporary social movements. Burton et al. provide examples in which the authors as researchers have been deeply involved with activist practices and social

movements and that it has been through reading groups that some transformation has taken place, in this case, within the Occupy and Transition movements. Through these practices they address the nature of research and the relationship with the university as an institution. One Welsh reading group, connected to the Aberystwyth Transition Initiative, meeting in 2011, consisted of a group of academics and students wanting to change the university from within. They consciously evolved a less hierarchical and more creative and empowering structure based on critical pedagogy and consensus decision-making. They also saw themselves as exploiting the university's resources in order to do this. From the examples they gave, it seems that the temporariness of the reading groups, coupled with some required level of commitment, provided an informal structure which could morph and change into other forms. Many of the groups became something different and some of them evolved into more active research or activism and then back into a more reflective mode of collective reading. They suggest that these cycles of reading and doing especially when in a position of being both inside and outside the university can provide 'profoundly transformative' experience for the participants, potentially breaking down barriers between academics, students and activists (Burton et al., 2015). They argue that there is much potential for radical reading groups to subvert institutions, especially universities, in order to create alternatives and resist recuperation. Reading groups do not seem prone to institutionalisation by the neoliberal university, precisely because they fall under the radar.

These groups allowed for spaces in which academic students and staff as activists could meet and focus on the nature of research itself and the relationship with the institution of the university. They consciously evolved a less hierarchical and more creative and empowering structure based on critical pedagogy and consensus decision-making. This kind of everyday form of resistance aims to create a relation of 'undercommons', squatting the university, being 'in but not of' it. This is arguably 'the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university' (Harney et al., 2013: 26). In addition, these examples illustrate potential possibilities for a kind of 'learning feedback loop'; part of a broad action research cycle that might allow different forms of learning, across institutions, social movements and community

groups and spaces to influence and support each other so that they might build on ways for creating lasting transformational change (Earl, 2018).

Reading groups might therefore provide examples of tactical practices as part of a strategy to build creative resistance within, through and outside of academia, connecting ‘different forms of learning within social movements, community groups and higher education’ (Earl, 2018: 2). The ‘split between activists and people in the academy’, might potentially be bridged, by study groups and reading groups (Burton et al., 2015). By providing a longer temporality than activism generally does, they might enable a slower more careful engagement in visionary thinking: ‘We just have to actually give ourselves the time to do this sort of work and in an ongoing way in study groups and reading groups’ (Shukaitis et al., 2003: 91). Self-reflection on the part of researchers/members is one part of this process.

Reading groups as organisational forms

As I have set out, reading groups as partial and informal organisational forms, may exist under the auspices of formal social organisations such as unions, social centres, libraries and universities, or meet in people’s homes. Whatever the umbrella under which they gather, members are most likely to engage in temporary, unstable, and ad hoc relations. Power within the informal social sphere is arguably based on these ad hoc relations, lying in encounters and relations which can create affective contagion and the forming of networks (Hansen and Zechner, 2015). These, Hansen and Zechner suggest, can provide the basis for more formal modes of organisation to emerge. They argue that collective practices in the informal social sphere can offer opportunities for building lasting relations and infrastructures for struggle and change, or other forms of sustainable collective social power at an organisational level. From the examples given here, there is certainly evidence that in some circumstances reading groups can lead to other forms of organisation and vice versa, and that they can quite easily change their mode of operating. The learning groups of the Red Orchestra became more of a network over time, developing strong relationships between the members who became more active in the anti-Nazi resistance movement. The reading groups of the African-American cooperative movement were started with the explicit aim

of forming cooperative organisations. Feminist reading groups shifted to or from consciousness raising and reading groups connected with contemporary social movements moved between reading and more action-based phases. To what extent reading groups can actually contribute to longer lasting organisation is harder to determine.

There is also evidence that the social relations between members were very important. Many of the groups contributed to the development of solidarity between members, and prompted some individuals to becoming more politically active or committed to the movement they were a part of. In several examples, personal transformation and changes in mind-set were reported. These developments in agency, subjecthood and in building relations with others went hand-in-hand with the development of learning and understanding for the members. In the contemporary landscape, it can be argued that the dual creation of alternative forms of knowledge and subjectivity is especially important within the context of post-Fordist conditions. This is a context in which 'the life of the mind' has come to be fully included as productive for capital (Negri, 2007). While it was left outside of Fordist factory production, 'the primary productive resource of contemporary capitalism lies in the linguistic-relational abilities of humankind' (Virno and Lotringer, 2004: 46). If we acknowledge that contemporary struggles are 'over the forces and relations which produce subjectivity as much as wealth and value,' then the places where there is the possibility of creating such subjectivities otherwise can also be viewed as potential sites for the thwarting of appropriation (Read, 2010: 121; Scott, 1989). Practices of social reproduction, in terms of the production and reproduction of knowledge, therefore have implications for the production of the self as well as for processes of organisation. As Marta Malo de Molina argues, 'all new knowledge production affects and modifies the bodies and subjectivities of those who participate in the process' (de Molina, 2004).

In addressing reading groups as potential sites for politics and resistance, it is, however, worth acknowledging that informally organised groups, and the social relations that develop within them, may not always be liberatory. Hidden hierarchies, power relations and cliques can all emerge (Freeman, 1970). A group can be made intimidating for new members. Collective reading practices can reproduce power relations or stage an image of a reading

community but fail to provide much more than this (Hall, 2003; Ganahl, 2001). Groups may also just produce the comfortable reassurance of belonging to a group that shares certain beliefs, a certain demographic, or friendship. It is important therefore not to fetishize particular organisational forms, as has happened with peer-to-peer relations (Hui and Halpin, 2013). What I have aimed to do here is to highlight potential possibilities of an organisational form that has not been paid much attention.

Conclusions

Given the lack of literature on reading groups as organisational forms, it has been productive to have started to map out some of the ways in which they might contribute to understandings of organisation, pedagogy and politics in a minor sense. Deleuze's concept of the minor, as a site of difference to the dominant, works here as a reminder that alternatives are possible to imagine, not only in the face of continuous homogenous capitalist production but also in relation to political polarisation and rigid ideologies. It therefore offers a perspective on everyday practices of collective resistance that are 'counter to all forms of fascism, whether already present or impending', particularly in relation to the development of knowledge and understanding (Foucault, 1984: xv). This potentially points to a role for study groups to play in developing active, wide-ranging and non-hierarchical democratic cultures within organisations or as contemporary anti-authoritarian practices. This has particular resonance in light of contemporary invocations of 'the people', the undermining of democracy, and the rise of nationalisms and the Alt. Right.

Whether as part of African American co-operative education, the resistance to historical fascism, feminist or union based educational initiatives or the Occupy movement, collective reading practices offer examples of sites where the possibility of alternatives might be imaginatively generated which do not align with the norm. Taking place as they have in the peripheries, borders and in-between spaces of other organisations and social movements, my hope is that this 'subjugated knowledge' can both constitute historical knowledge and be made use of in the present.

Through charting this partial genealogy, it is possible to see, for example, the changing relationship of knowledge production to organisation: such as with the role of education in the mass worker and traditional union movements, or consciousness raising within the second wave feminist movement. It is clear that small-group learning practices can play a valuable role in social movements as a form of informal organisation. Through their loose coordination and temporary nature, they can provide spaces for developing social bonds and knowledge and understanding of different kinds. Their very informality allows for processes of social reproduction that are quite different to those produced by more formal meetings or from the labour needed to maintain and socially reproduce a space.

It is however, important to reiterate the significance of context for these quite different examples of reading groups and to emphasise the particular local and historical conditions in which they have been situated. As small *ad hoc* and informal interpersonal networks, these examples show different ways in which reading groups have interacted and intersected with larger organisations and institutions. Some of the groups in the 1930s, under the heading of the Red Orchestra for example, were self-organised, while for others, schools and colleges initiated the contacts between people. It seems useful here to highlight again the decentralised nature of the anti-fascist resistance that developed from these mainly leisure-based friendship groups; something which was not conceivable by either liberal Western or Soviet historiography. For these groups, the domestic spaces in which they met, hidden away from the fascist encroachment into people's everyday lives, became spaces of resistance. The anarchist and cooperative movements also provided different kinds of frameworks for some groups, particularly in the case, for example, of the African American cooperatives addressing the needs and desires for self-help after slavery. The groups from the 1970s were set up through a mixture of organisations, which (at least the ones which left traces) were mostly organised under the auspices of larger existing organisations, such as trade unions and universities. It was on the whole, therefore, in these institutional spaces, that they most visibly met. That is not to say that more informally self-organised groups, meeting in domestic or neighbourhood spaces did not exist, but these have not left many archival traces, apart from feminist groups of which there is some documentation. The groups in the

recent past have mostly drawn on existing social networks, some of which were created during the protests of 2011. They were self-organised, and not held under the auspices of any larger organisation, although some public spaces were used. Many of these groups explored the breaking down of barriers between activism and research and the role of the university as resource. They have met in a mixture of private, public and 'common': libraries, social centres, and domestic homes with the resources these provide.

While highlighting these differences, it might be possible to propose that reading groups' potential for organisation, for building social power and resistance, may be based on several properties: their relationships to other forms of resistance and social and political movements; their fluidity and ability to morph into other social forms; their relationships to spaces, institutions and organisations; their ability to create both knowledge and changes in subjectivity; and their ability to build solidarity and contribute to a vibrant supportive community. They are definitely not 'seamless totalities in which personal identity is created', or expressed, but rather small interpersonal networks which cannot be solely reduced to the persons that compose them, the texts around which they congregate or the contexts within which they operate (DeLanda, 2017: 252). The relationships of the component parts are not stable and fixed. They can be displaced and replaced both within the groups themselves and with other organisations they are related to. Perceiving of these partial organisations as assemblages therefore appears a plausible concept, especially with a focus on process: many of these groups were fluid enough as a social form to either incorporate activities other than just reading and discussion, or to shift into a different organisational mode entirely.

In addition to the reading groups' quite different relations to spaces, organisations and institutions, these loose formations also offered some sustained opportunities for creating solidarities, albeit often on a small scale. Many members documented personally-transformative effects, from the developing of trust and horizontal bonds between participants to an increase in feelings of agency, and the desire to be more involved in their surrounding communities and social and political movements. In some cases, reading groups and collective study provided a starting place for the raising of

consciousness for members, be it in relation to feminism or as workers and political agents. This has at times, but not always, been a self-reflexive process or one of conscious 'research'. It is also true, however, that often what has started as a leisure activity has turned into something else or had effects that could not have been foreseen. Some reading groups have acted as precursors to more formal organisation such as the formation of cooperatives, or gone through various phases of change. There also seems to have quite been a fluid relationship between their constituent parts, in terms of their texts, contexts and participants.

There is therefore fertile ground for further research. It might be useful to continue to examine the relationship between different kinds of grassroots learning and on-the-ground democratic practices, and to consider how agency might emerge from some organisational processes. It is difficult to ascertain precisely the link between knowledge creation and agency creation, so this also offers possibilities for future research. To what extent might study groups actually play a role in developing active, wide-ranging and non-hierarchical democratic cultures within organisations? Or indeed, as a contemporary anti-authoritarian practice? How do reading groups compare with other forms of political education? Might they be useful for more overtly political organisations or alternative conferences such as *The World Transformed*? Or for newly-emerging independent trade unions? Where else might reading groups be present? Where else might they be useful, productive, purposefully unproductive, or create spatial or temporal breathing spaces for activists to reflect? By unearthing these examples, what seems to emerge is that there is potential, however minor, to provide spaces in which agency, solidarity and new forms of knowledge and organisation might be developed. I believe that identifying these spaces is crucial if we are to fully grasp our present circumstances and determine the possibilities for creating social change.

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