Movements, Activism and Academic Research: A Call to Action

# Abstract

While social movement research has blossomed over the past twenty years, much of it lacks the necessary aim, scope and/or language to be used as a tool for practical application by the movement actors themselves. Though many movement scholars support the efforts of the activists they study, a wide variety of factors have inhibited the potential of social movement research in addressing the direct concerns of the very actors they study. While many have tried and have successfully walked the fine line of managing productive academic careers and providing effective movement support, a large number have only been able to direct their efforts to direct social movement support periodically, often volunteering additional hours outside of their academic pursuits. The changes taking place to higher education institutions threatens to exacerbate these stressors but, as I shall argue here, a coordinated collaboration amongst academics within an ongoing and structured framework may be in the best position to accomplish both high quality scholarship and direct social movement support in a sustainable fashion.

# Introduction: the activist / academic gap

Social movement research has represented a subsection of many different fields, primarily arising from sociology and political science (Finley and Soifer 2001) and has often been keen to provide a supportive role in the facilitation of various movement processes (Lofland 2009, 6). It should be pointed out however that the “dominant American social movement scholarship has become detached from the concerns of actual social movements”[[1]](#footnote-1) (Bevington and Dixon 2005, 185), perhaps partially explained by the “split between scholars and practitioners” (Finley and Soifer 2001, 100) in the field of sociology and social work, respectively. This has resulted in the research “not being read by the very movements that it seeks to illuminate” (Bevington and Dixon 2005, 186; also see Dawson and Sinwell 2012 and Croteau 2005).

Part of the problem is that the social movement literature “can tend toward overly theorized and abstract outputs” (Choudry, Hanley and Shragge 2012, p. 4), using language which does not resonate with activists (Campbell 2002). Much of the theory itself is already understood, albeit in other forms, and appreciated by organizers and activists. “Organizers already know about the need for ‘frame alignment’, the value of ‘informal networks’, and the importance of ‘opportunity structures’. They would beneﬁt from studies that provide clues about how to accomplish such alignment, how to tap into such networks and how to identify such opportunities” (Flacks 2004, 147). In addition, “[s]ometimes when we talk about research and activism in the academic world we replicate distinctions around notions of consciousness and activity that are detrimental to our objectives. We can fall back on research as being an analysis….and activism as about doing things ‘out there’, which leads to a divorce between consciousness and practice” (Kinsman, 2006 as quoted in Choudry and Kuyek 2012, p. 27; also see Dawson and Sinwell 2012, p. 181). The research often focuses on knowledge that is not directly beneficial or applicable to activists or movement organizations. “[T]he need for specific knowledges to support activist agendas frequently goes unmet. The texts in which such analyses appear are often not widely available and further create division between…the academy and community-based activists” (Naples 1998a, p. 8). Of course this occurs perhaps primarily because the target audience for the social movements research is other social movements researchers or academics rather than a dialogue between academia and activism (for an exceptions, see Moyer et al. 2001, Naples 1998a), because of the institutional framework rewards internal diffusion[[2]](#footnote-2).

# Bridging and filling the gap

The criticisms of the social movement and social protest subdisciplines described above has resulted in calls being made to move towards a movement relevant theory (e.g. Bevington and Dixon 2005) or activist research which presents “scholarship that supports an activist campaign or a progressive organization and that chronicles the lessons of organizing against oppression in its many guises” (Naples 1998b, p.8). Recent projects have attempted to bridge this gap between academia and activism and work toward this “central purpose for progressive activist research” (Naples 1998b, p.8).

*Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, includes both academic, peer reviewed articles as well as shorter discussions which are meant to be directly relevant to social movement organizations and activists (also see Cox and Fominaya 2009). The journal’s board is split between academics and activists and so far eight issues have been released. This project claims both territories of academia and activism. Other projects lean more closely to activism. Long-time activists such as Marshall Ganz return to academia while maintaining links with activism, using their activism to inform their research and their research to inform activism. Ganz for instance is a central figure in the Leading Change Network which “is a community of practice: organizers, educators, and researchers developing leadership, developing the capacity of change constituencies, and improving organizing practice by continual learning” through the development of organizing curriculum, sharing recourses, and organizing workshops (see <http://leadingchangenetwork.com/mission/>).

He also made an attempt to establish

the Practicing Democracy Project whose goal was to “(1) develop an ongoing venue through which academics and practitioners can form relationships, compare experience, support each other’s learning, discover opportunities for collaboration; (2) create more opportunities for teaching organizing in colleges and universities; and (3) support effective organizing by community based organizations by creating internships, identifying organizers, contributing to training, etc.” (<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/hauser/publications/enews/dec05.htm>, accessed 12 December 2012).

These projects represent large scale practice which attempts to bridge the gap between any number of movements and research. Other more individuated projects also exist, and in a greater number. The projects are often a product of large organizations recognizing some knowledge gap which they then commission researchers to fill (e.g. [Andrews](http://leadingchangenetwork.com/files/2012/08/NPLAFINALREPORT.pdf) et al. 2005). Very often these organizations are large, established groups with the necessary resources to commission such projects. Other times, they are a result of coordination between a wide variety of groups and individuals (e.g. Choudry and Kuyek 2012, p. 30-32). These projects are also generally short-term projects which span some years but operate on an ad hoc basis.

Another fill for the gap between academic research and activism comes in the form of some level of participatory action research with social movement organizations and NGOs (e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo 1998, Feldman, Stall and Wright 1998). These are similar to and can be part of commissioned projects but represent a specific methodology in approaching organizational or group change with an emphasis on direct participation, observation, research, implementation and then returning to observation in an ongoing process until the research project is complete. This cyclical method has been used by some but often lacks an institutional basis and teamwork with other researchers which may be better suited to address some challenges instead of others. The need for direct participation may be very useful but may also limit some possibilities, perhaps focusing too much on being a democratic research process in the cases when, for example, such a level of activist involvement puts a strain on their organizational or human resources (see Small and Uttal 2005, 941-943). In fact, the activist organization “may expect that because the academic partner is a professional researcher, most of the responsibility for the project resides with the researcher. Depending on the guiding principles and goals of the project, this may be an acceptable arrangement” (Small and Uttal 2005, 945).

These existing projects (also see Argyris, Putman, and Smith 1985) have been helpful, productive and inspiring in providing relevant information to social movements and specific organizations. In addition to knowledge, research can also be a way in generating its own direct benefits. One example can be taken from the Filipino Women’s Organization in Quebec (PINAY) whose research projects helped to increase organizational membership, media attention, as well as increasing credibility and legitimacy in the eyes both of individuals in the community and the state (see Speirs 2012). While these efforts can be successful on a variety of fronts, challenges are still significant[[3]](#footnote-3).

The types of projects discussed above have certainly shown some ways in which researchers have engaged with activists for the purpose of providing support and assistance in domains that may be more suitable for researchers than activists to uncover, but is also very beneficial for activists to understand. Of course, I do not want to downplay the activists themselves in developing research (see Choudry and Kapoor 2010), however such research can in some cases be a drain on activist resources, and in some cases academics are better suited to collect and/or analyze research (see for example, Speirs 2012, p. 39-40). Of course research can be shared between activists and academics, in various ways and to a range of degrees as discussed an agreed to by the activist/academic collaborators.

Increases in any of these attempts to fill or bridge gaps, in ways that focus on direct attempt to produce desired outcomes for the movement or organization as opposed to a focus that is “disconnected from the task of building and supporting movements… [and/or] driven by project –centric cycles or compartmentalized logics that are disconnected from social struggles, and more reflective of tensions around funding priorities” (Choudry and Kuyek 2012, p. 34-5), can be seen as positive steps. However, a more structured, ongoing and collaborative effort has not yet been achieved[[4]](#footnote-4). This is a proposal for such an organization to be formed, and the following will be a call to action, one that I feel may be able to tackle the problems mentioned above and one that is perhaps best suited to handling the specific difficulties of such project which I will explore below.

# An additional approach

Based on the various projects discussed above, a major constraint is a result of two problems. First, projects such as these require a broad range of knowledge dealing with human and financial resources, organizational structure, leadership, strategic aims, campaign tactics, political maneuvering, legislative background, business, networks, etc… Often, problems can be interlinked, unknown or misunderstood by the organizations themselves, making it difficult to even structure a team of researchers based on the organizations expressed needs. Another component of the constraint is the general need for a mixed method approach which commonly follows a tradition of pragmatic research (see Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998 and Green, Kreider and Mayer 2006). In order to obtain needed information or produce better substantiated findings, mixed methods is often beneficial or even necessary. Methods which are likely to be used include quantitative analyses of human and financial resources; quantitative understanding to interpret existing research on similar cases; quantitative and qualitative skill sets to produce competent focus groups, surveys, interviews, content analysis and documentary-based research, to name a few; and qualitative research practice that focuses on institutional change that may not necessarily need to be applicable beyond the case. Expertise in a variety of methods is even more likely to be needed as organizational problems may be varied and interlinked. It is very difficult and perhaps impossible for an individual researcher to embody all of these fields of expertise and so collaborative research becomes an essential component to competent research *for* social movements (RSM). Based on these two elements, collaborative work must take place. It is important to develop collaboration with a knowledge-base that is wide enough to handle each of these aspects as needed. This includes facets of methodological knowledge, in order to maintain the appropriate findings, as well as subject-specific knowledge, not only to have a good understanding of those fields but to indicate potential influences those fields have on the problems at hand which may not be initially considered. Dialogue across disciplines on the topic of social movement has recently increased with the first interdisciplinary Theory, Action and Impact of Social Protest conference (Travaglino and Nulman 2012), and the new journal Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest, which followed. However, these have yet to contribute directly to produce directly concerning the movement actors themselves.

Another constraint of existing RSM projects is their ad hoc nature. Often commissioned research is produced by an ad hoc group of scholars whose collaboration then ends. Other times, individual researchers do one-off participatory action projects, then moving on to non-social movement related projects, taking crucial knowledge from the field with them. Again this constraint is illustrated in several ways. Firstly, ad hoc projects make it difficult to compound knowledge over time, in a single body. This creates problems in finding appropriate contacts for those within a social movement seeking to resolve issues; it increases the length of time and the effort needed to redo similar projects for other organizations; relationships are required to be newly formed or reformed for each project; time and effort is exerted in the formation of new collaborations which could have been saved or spent on research[[5]](#footnote-5).

These issues can be overcome through the establishment of a structured, institutionalized, and ongoing RSM body. Such a body would need to have members who are willing to collaborate in a variety of fields, with a variety of methodological backgrounds; the structure of such a body should be explicit and transparent with a hierarchy only to a level necessary for efficiency, having specific projects be allocated to project leaders whose central competencies are related to the issues pertaining to that project. The project leader would draw up outlines of proposed research to be used in then ascertaining the expertise needed, time commitments required and project timeline. Such a structure may sound similar to the editorial board of an academic peer reviewed journal. The body should also be an organization with the appropriate legal status to be able to be funded by commissioning SMOs when appropriate, pursue grants for the body’s development and be tax deductible for donations. The body can be associated with other institutions provided that substantial decision-making freedom is granted to the body’s membership and that project selection is based on strategic assessments regarding movement/organizational outcomes rather than the body’s (or associated institutions’) own internal rewards.

Not only should such a body be doing research for specific groups, but work for entire movements, or even general movement literature should and can be explored, similar to the call posed by Bevington and Dixon (2005) in their discussion on movement-relevant theory. Research that is not meant for a specific group can still work off the questions activists themselves ask, but perhaps cannot answer as well as researchers:

…there are three key questions to explore: what issues concern movement participants? What ideas and theories are activists producing? What academic scholarship is being read and discussed by movement participants? Within these queries, social movement scholarship would, of course, focus on those concerns related directly to the dynamics of the movements themselves, such as questions about structure, effectiveness, strategy, tactics, identity, relations to the state, relations to the media, the dynamics of their opponents, etc. An exploration of these questions should help to identify the areas for social movement research that are of greatest concern to the movements themselves. (p. 198)

# An illustrative example

Coalitions have played a significant role in social movement processes. They have been established with varying degrees of success throughout a long history of social movement struggles. They represent structured networks between organizations that hold sympathies at least on some points regarding the movements’ issue(s). Coalitions can be made locally, nationally or internationally and some social movement literature does focus on coalitions (e.g. Hauptmeier and Turner 2007; Heaney and Rojas 2008; Reynolds 1999; Staggenborg 1986).

Coalitions can hardly call on research assistance during its formation. It is more likely that coalitions will at first successfully form and then be able to commission some research. But the success or failure of the formation of such a coalition could be in crucial need of such assistance. An organized, structured, ongoing, collaborative body has the capacity to approach projects deemed important and recommend research to be taken on behalf of potential upstarts. Suppose now that such a coalition is forming, and an assertive project leader receives affirmation from central decision-makers of this coalition for research to be made to understand effective strategies to successful coalition formation.

The project leader, after talking with these central decision-makers about their needs, creates a project timeline and suggests members whose expertise may fit within the framework of the project. She calls for researchers with strong QCA, statistics, documentary, and questionnaire backgrounds. She also calls on those knowledgeable in the fields of organizational leadership, game theory, SM structures, someone whose area of expertise covers the coalition in question. The project leader gets positive feedback from enough researchers to continue. In this case some of the fields meshed together. One researcher was knowledgeable in both organizational leadership and structures. Another, whose area of interest was coalitions was an expert in historical documentary. The team formed and, following the timeline and project plan developed by the project leader, set out to do various components of what would come together in the final report.

Several members of the team went in search of coalition cases which could be included in the analysis. Enough cases were gathered for quantitative methods to be applicable but fewer cases, which were directly relevant because some were perhaps too old, too large or small in scope, or too far afield, were examined in greater detail. At the same time, a literature review was generated by several other members of the project. This literature review was then discussed with the whole team. The literature review and project plan was then shown to those outside the project.

The team was then informed by a member of the body that research on the existing networks between coalition partners and motivational forces for the partners would be important to be included. Additional members of the team are brought in if possible and additional variables are added. Researchers and project interns collected data on all cases to the extent needed. Quantitative information was gathered for all the cases, QCA data was gathered for a smaller number that was more pertinent. Case studies of previous attempts at like coalitions were analyzed in depth. This information was written up in separate chapters and then the team worked to triangulate the data. The leadership expert found her own literature to be relevant (Shaffer 2000, 116-7) and contributed a chapter to the report. Network analysis was done using the questionnaire expert who also was used to align the attempted coalition to the data at hand. Unfortunately, a motivation expert was not available for this project. The report was collated and any methodological issues or information gaps were addressed along with the results.

The results, which highlighted two important variables for successful coalition formation, were shown to the coalition partners. The project leader went on to ask if further research was requested on the two important variables or others, and how existing or new data could be applied to their case in helping to achieve a successful coalition. The report was then reexamined by the body for academic purposes. Theoretical frameworks were integrated and papers were structured around the findings. These papers were then submitted for publication in relevant journals.

While this presents a very simplistic look at the work and organization that goes into such a research project, it also highlights the benefits of doing such a research project in a structured, ongoing and collaborative body. The project was unlikely to be commissioned without being approached as it addressed the formation of a successful coalition, rather than increasing some aspect of an already successful organization which is able to commission such a project. Various elements were needed in order to effectively fulfill the requirements of such a project, and it would be difficult without such a body to have continuous exchange and coordination between project members. New approaches needed to be explored once they were distributed amongst other specialists in the body, who then became involved in the project to the extent that they could. Once the project was over, some questions were answered while others just started to be asked. These questions could be addressed yet again by the body because of their ongoing presence.

# Common challenges to RSM

All forms of activist research have their different benefits and flaws but many of the challenges are the same. Organizations and movements must be attracted to the project, either prior to its commencement – which would likely lead to stronger collaboration, trust and goal-orientation – or after its completion; trust must be developed and maintained; the researchers involved must be sufficiently skilled to address the problems at hand and those that spring from further investigation; resources must be efficiently used to maximize the best possible research practice, the analysis of the data, and the preparation and dissemination of the project outcome. I will attempt to provide an explanation as to how the body suggested above could be effective in meeting these challenges (also see Small and Uttal 2005 for more information on challenges to activist research).

First, any given project requires a variety of research skills to be employed. While a single movement or organization may be interested in a specific issue (e.g. food safety, minimum wage, animal rights) the important information may require a diversity of methodological approaches (e.g. historical, quantitative, participatory action research methods[[6]](#footnote-6)) and a multiplicity of disciplinary outlooks (e.g. organizational studies, social psychology, law). Movements generally have their own background knowledge which would take time to investigate if previously unknown to the researcher. Certain methodologies are more useful than others in answer certain questions or based on the availability of data or the possibility of collecting new data. Different disciplines have developed different outlooks which may need to be consulted depending on the questions at hand and the intersectionality of various issues that are produced from problematizing the question further. Previous ‘action-oriented research’ has already pointed out that “the research process itself probably will not be as stable as what academic researchers are accustomed to” and that “[s]ometimes modifying research questions is not enough; significantly changing parts of the research design may become necessary” (Small and Uttal 2005, 940-941). This means that it becomes more practical and resourceful to have a relatively large collaborative project where in the case of research design changes which lie outside the scope of expertise for the original research team can be addressed relatively quickly by another member of the wider project. It is also useful to have the project be ongoing as it makes the transition between the ‘stable’ academic research and the ‘action-oriented’ research more effective, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Not only is a question of expertise important, but so is the question of resources. Different projects require different levels of resources and some projects may be significantly curtailed when resources are lacking. Taking a hypothetical researcher who embodies all of the necessary expertise needed can still only apply that expertise for a limited amount of time. Further collaboration may increase the accumulated time given to the project. Ongoing collaboration assures time spent on the project working through collaborative strategies, team development, etc… are kept to a minimum once collaboration has been experienced during initial projects. Time as a resource is also managed between two competing interests: academic professional maintenance and activist support. Collaborative efforts reduce time spent writing academic reports and doing analysis if this work can be divided up amongst collaborators while still providing the necessary academic *and activist* outcomes.

This leads to another problem, namely that of research dissemination. Collaboration can also divide up the dissemination roles so that less time is spent for any given individual on that role in the long run. However, the key problem here is how ‘disseminatable’ the research is. Standards for organizational, movement activist, and government body readability/credibility must be articulated and maintained. A consistent and organized research group should have the best possible means for assuring these standards, which are modified for the needs of a particular project, through ongoing training and perhaps dedicated positions for its maintenance. Rewriting a report to fit particular standards may in some cases be done by a member outside of the specific project, further saving project resources.

The development and maintenance of trust poses a significant challenge to these projects as trust has shown to be a critical component in activist research (see Naples 1998b, 11-12).

Our research processes come out of, and are embedded in, relations of trust with other activists and organizations that develop through constant effort to work together in formal and informal networks and collaborations. Such relationships are sometimes years in the making. . . .They allow us to identify research that is most relevant to the struggles we are engaged in, and to communicate that research in ways that are meaningful and useful for the building of movements. And they are invaluable in the production, vetting/’getting the research right,’ application, strategic considerations and dissemination of the research. (Choudry and Kuyek 2012, 24)

However, developing trust can be problematic as activists can often be skeptical of university research, fearing that the process consists of activists getting exploited for the benefit of academic careerism more than of authentic support the generation of knowledge useful for the movement. Trust may indeed be the most difficult characteristic to foster for a body such as the one described, particularly in areas where organizational trust is low. However, ongoing, collaborative research does not need to be seen solely as an institution but also as a collective of individuals in common pursuit, each with various levels of contact with social movements and organizations. The ongoing nature of the body provides for a track record of support for organizations while the organizations provides a single point of contact (and ‘brand’) which can developed into a trustworthy body over time.

While developing trust is important, it represents a part of a bigger challenge, which is essentially gaining access to organizations and movements. It is widely known that some quarters of social movements and their organizations are hesitant, skeptical or outright antagonistic to academic-based support. While it is important to note that any constructive research initiatives should be approved of by the representative organization(s) for whom the research is meant to be constructive, it is also important to consider that offering such a service may enable groups who are otherwise hesitant or perhaps unaware that such a service is an option, to be assisted. This becomes difficult to do without such a body. While trust makes it easier for organizations and movements to begin a relationship with researchers, some movements or organizations may not know that developing such a relationship is a) useful for obtaining answers to questions they have, b) capable of producing other outcomes more directly through the research process itself, or c) is even available to them. While researchers who work within movements or previous success of such research can help inform these groups, an ongoing and organized body should be better capable of advertising previous successes, information activist organizations of direct benefits and developing an arm of the body that would actively pursue relationships where it may be more difficult for individual researchers who are nested outside of activist circles.

The need of gaining access to movements, organizations and individuals goes beyond a specific research project on a specific case. Often, experiences and suggestions for other organizations and individuals not directly related to the study involved are important in developing an accurate assessment. In a similar way, an ongoing and collaborative body would be able to gather a pool of contacts and maintain communication with them in order to help others with the problem at hand. Such contacts may be more difficult for movements to reach, they may be unaware of these specific contacts, or doing this form of outreach for strategic support may further strain these organizations which may already be tight on resources. In this way, an ongoing collaborative board also allows for more dynamic and longitudinal research (Small and Uttal 2005) to be conducted more efficiently, benefiting both the academic and activist parties.

Though in some ways addressed above, a key challenge to doing activist research is in producing work which is beneficial to activism while maintaining some type of academic/research career. This issue has been addressed by Cancian (1993), who finds that being a researcher whose work is primarily for the social movements (called a scholar-ACTIVIST) “is most feasible after tenure is obtained” and even then “is likely to be uncomfortable since it will probably bring negative sanctions from administrators and colleagues who expect conformity to the disciplinary conventions. It is also by no means certain that such a shift in orientation will necessarily result in work that is of real assistance to movement efforts” (Croteau 2005, 35), leading to either abandoning activist pursuits or their academic careers. Another path is to have a ‘two-career strategy’ by producing two versions of work: one for academia, and one for activists. However, this places a heavy burden on researchers and, “[s]ince the activist version of such publications is not particularly rewarded— and may be seen by some as mere popularizing— the implicit professional pressure is to focus on prestigious journals and leave the translation to others (Croteau 2005, 35). Those who continue down both tracks can be seen as SCHOLAR-ACTIVISTS while those who focus on professional life fall back to a SCHOLAR-activist position, where the focus of work is for professional advancement and while it may be work *on* movements, it is not work *for* movements (Croteau 2005, 35), or as Ashwin Desai put it, “only a few notches better than spying” (2006, 5).

Maintaining such a dual role is very demanding. “One childless woman observed that if she had children, she would not have the time to be an activist as well as a successful professor” (Cancian 1993, 103, as quoted in Croteau 2005, 35; also see Dawson and Sinwell 2012). Again, without a collaborative effort, sustained activist scholarship may prove particularly difficult. Collaborative work, while presenting its own demands, can lighten certain forms of academic labor. The larger the body, the more the opportunity for work, particularly of this kind, to be divided. The institutionalization of such a body would also provide the opportunity for developing skills in producing these ‘translations’ and allow those not directly involved in a particular research project to still be useful by helping in this process. Such a body could fulfill both academic and activist aims if properly coordinated and with members sharing a common pursuit. Another benefit of such a body would be that not all members would have to be SCHOLAR-ACTIVISTS. A wide array of individual scholars and activists along the spectrum can participate and be included to different extents within the research, organization or dissemination process.

# Conclusion

Much of the present literature on social movements rarely reaches the movements themselves. Sometimes this is due to the academic language. Other times because the valuable information for movement practitioners must be excavated nuggets at a time from the large tomes of research. A large reason for this is the divergent reward structures within the academic profession and in social and political movements. Until these structures converge, which perhaps is not entirely desirable to begin with, those seeking to be academics and to support movements with their research are in a difficult position. As I have argued here, a collaborative, ongoing research body may be the most effective form of producing research *for* social movements.

I acknowledge that there are critiques against the scholar-activist model that is proposed (e.g. Dawson and Sinwell 2012; Cox and Fominaya 2009), and acknowledge that it affirms a binary that I agree should not exist. However, the model recognizes the current state of the academy in many countries and while it is important to counter regressive moves that place ‘knowledge’ in conservative brackets, the opposition itself represents activism within academia. While this is a noble and necessary fight, not all fights can be fought at once. If it is possible to do SCHOLAR-ACTIVISM in a sustained way within the conservative and constricted framework of the present academy using the type of research body described above, perhaps other fights are worth fighting first, particularly by social movement scholars. However, in some ways movement relevant research and academically approved research is always, or should always be mutually exclusive affair. On activist scholarship in the field of anthropology, Charles R. Hale writes, “Dual loyalties to an organized group in struggle and to rigorous academic analysis often are not fully compatible with one another. They stand in tension, and at times, the tension turns to outright contradiction” (2006, p. 105). While Hale is considering here the meaninglessness of the political utility of research in an academic context, another reason for exclusivity between these two realms is because the information that is provided directly to the movement, its organizations, and its actors often *should not* be in the ‘public’ (or academic) domain (see Desai 2006, p. 4). Information released in such a way could prove detrimental to the movement or the efficacy of its future strategy and tactics, while at the same time the data and analysis can be used in other ways to further academic needs. This is why a ‘translation’ of research is not always appropriate and further work must be done in order to maintain both scholarly and activist elements. This becomes an even greater problem, requiring greater resources, which can most efficiently be achieved through a collaborative, ongoing body. This is not to say, however, that we should not take the knowledge generated and developed by social movement actors seriously (see e.g. Smith 1990). This is an easy challenge. The difficult challenge is to force academic, and perhaps political, institutions to accept this knowledge as legitimate. Certainly, it seems, the movement actors themselves already value their own knowledge-generating capacities, often more so than that of academia, and often for good reason.

I hope this paper will serve as a call to action to aspiring and established movement scholars in attempting to construct the type of organization suggested here and make it less difficult to tread the narrow path of activism–scholarship. While further exploration should be made of the best way to address various challenges, these may accompany the creation of such institutions. If we are truly successful in this endeavor, we may see the sprouting of various bodies, perhaps the development of some areas of specialization and collaboration between institutions leading to even more effective and efficient research *for* social movement.

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1. This can easily be said of the scholarship in the UK as well, and I suspect in academic institutions around the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Also see Barker and Cox (2001) for a discussion on the difference between movement scholars and activist theorists. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some of these problems are addressed below. For more challenges around collaborative research with community-based research partners, see (Cottrell and Parpart 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Although see the IBON Foundation for an organized centre for socioeconomic research and the Leading Change Network. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Similar problems arise when the body can collaborate with other existing bodies whose work is pertinent. Such bodies can help provide trainings to SMOs (e.g. http://www.interactioninstitute.org/; http://buildingmovement.org/projects; http://movementbuilding.movementstrategy.org/whatwedo&p=2; http://www.crenyc.org/our\_services; http://www.smartmeme.org; http://www.compasspoint.org/coaching; http://trainersalliance.org/) and individuals within movements (e.g. http://leadingchangenetwork.com/mission/; http://buildingmovement.org/projects; http://www.trainingforchange.org/; http://trainersalliance.org/) . However, without such bodies, new links would have to be made with every project, again leading to increases in the length of time and effort spent on non-research work. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For uses of historical methods in social movements see e.g. Green 2000. For the usefulness of quantitative methods in developing credibility, see Speirs 2012, 43-45. “[I]n Canadian political culture, statistical data is part of the process of making something relevant, important, and ‘true’” (ibid., 45). For participatory action research on social movements see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1998; Feldman, Stall and Wright 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)