

BOOK REVIEW

The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity, by Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish. Halifax and Winnipeg, Canada: Fernwood Publishing, 2014. \$26.95 ISBN: 9781552666937. Pages: 1-256.

Reviewed by Sophie Del Fa¹

The authors of *The Radical Imagination* make a promise: to do research on social movements differently. The book is a presentation of “The Radical Imagination Project” which was initiated in 2010 by Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish “to study, analyze, foment, broadcast and promote the radical ideas that emerge from social movements”², in Halifax, Canada. To go beyond mere academic ethnographic research, the authors organized, in collaboration with the activist groups they were studying, film sessions, public talks and workshops. They also created a website that provides a wealth of information about the activities held during the project.

The Radical Imagination Project’s main goal was to explore the “radical imagination” (hereafter RI) that moved activists. It must be understood as a driving force in the dynamics of the present political moment. The uniqueness of Haiven and Khasnabish’s definition is that they view the RI as a collective process emerging from the activities of the people involved in social movements. For them, activists perform RI; and, in return, RI drives them. It is an aspirational term that encompasses the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions as they might be. In other words, it is the ability to think how things could be different through narrating where we come from, where we are now, and where we are going. This definition is built upon a theorization of the RI by Castoriadis and Stoezler and Yuval-Davis. Following these thinkers, the RI is “a volcanic substance” that is “constantly in motion under the surface of society” (p.6). It is also “shaped by our experience as embodied subjects” (p.7). Motivated with the will to understand how the RI works, the authors start with three observations: 1) social movements are *convocations* of the RI: members share a specific view of the world in a radical sense. As social movements are very diverse, the RI is the only aspect that social movements share in common; 2) social movements are *animated* by the movement of the RI; although all members do not share the same imaginary landscapes, the social movements are driven by tensions, conflicts and dialogues that animate these various “imaginative actors”; and, 3) the researchers seek to “convoke” the RI. Rather than merely observing it, the researchers assume that their research and their writing are intimate parts of the way social movements reproduce themselves (p.8).

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² <http://radicalimagination.org/>

As they sum it up bluntly in the first pages: “[it is] a book about the RI as it is being summoned into being by people struggling to change their world, not one that offers a snapshot of movements in specific location and at a particular moment in time” (p. 22). This performative stance opens up interesting avenues to study this “embodied presence.” A strong critique towards academia motivates the authors’ manoeuvre. Indeed, they state that in our life world, which is being subordinated by capital, critical inquiry and academic freedom are highly affected. For the authors, researchers in universities undertake tasks that are mostly dedicated towards the accumulation of capital. In the context of this “entrepreneurial university” (Barnett, 2011), the methodology used to explore the RI aims to figure out:

If institutions like the university and scholars at work within the matrices of power they enclose function either to facilitate the construction of a more just, democratic, egalitarian and liberated socio-political and economic orders or to entrench, defend and deepen power, privilege and inequality (p. 40).

In that sense, the project has two objectives: exploring the RI and doing research “outside the box.” Therefore, they organize several other activities alongside the interviews they conducted: free classes, conferences, film screenings, and they created the aforementioned website. In doing so, they wished to disavow the outcomes of what the university usually does. Indeed, diversifying activities while conducting research ensures that the people being studied get something out of the process. The legacy of the project is then a different model of critical education and critical research that they call “a solidarity research.”

The book consists of four parts. Part 1 presents at lengths the authors’ methods and their posture towards academia. Part 2 addresses scholars themselves and explores what the authors call a “hiatus” that emerged when they asked their participants: “What does it mean to win?” Participants would always pause before answering this question. The authors investigate what dwells in this pause, this “hiatus.” In doing so, they present their analytical tool: the “Greimas Square” (p. 123 and 124), in reference to French narratologist A. J. Greimas’ semiotic square. They use it to say that success does not necessarily mean “not failure” and failure does not mean “not success.” The Greimas Square allows them to explore the intricacies of how activists embrace their “success.” Part 3, revisits the notion of time. For the authors, time remains the key axis of capitalist exploitation. In their last part entitled “The Methods of Movements” they ask a central question: “How can social movement researchers and social movements themselves reimagine solidarity?” (p. 210). For them, the answer lies in a prefigurative methodology that borrows from the future that we should create.

The book tries to answer a real challenge and opens promising avenues to study social movements differently. The initiative is laudable and certainly needed in a time when scholars feel increasingly stuck in their ivory tower; and, as disciplines are increasingly segmented. In some aspects, the book echoes Derrida’s (1980) question on the responsibility of the university: *we* are responsible *for* the university and only *us* through our methodology can bring research out from the institution. Haiven and Khasnabish’s book illustrates the urge to become aware of this responsibility. We, as social researchers, have to bring research outside the university, be it about social movements or in any other fields of research.

Despite its distinctiveness and usefulness, something crucial is missing in the book: the activists' voices. As progressing through the authors' argument, the reader is constantly looking forward to reading quotes from the participants. They would have given to the book a livelier aspect and made it more attuned with the authors' "solidarity methodology." Moreover, both the book and the website do not give enough "results." In the end, we do not have a clear idea of the contribution of the project for the researchers and for the activists. The outcomes remain unclear.

The Radical Imagination is an introductory book to a research project that was ongoing at the time. It is thus difficult to have a precise sense of rather or not the researchers achieved their goal of doing social research differently. At first sight, the project seems to come across some pitfalls. First, to what extent does organizing screenings, public conferences and having a website is making research "differently"? The contents of these activities are not enough developed to get a sense of what the researchers have been up to. Secondly, we do not have a sense of how the activists react to the project: do they agree right away to have the researchers on site? How to they perceive the research? What did they get from the activities? Do they consult the website and for what purposes? In short, a lot of questions remain unanswered when closing the book.

Despite these few pitfalls, this kind of book is a necessity in academia today. It gives a breath of fresh air that could lead us to a renewal of our writing and our research; and, bring us to consider again how we view our academic career.

References

Barnett, R. (2011). *Being a University*. London: Routledge.

Derrida, J. (1980). Mochlos; or, The Conflict of the Faculties. In *Centenary of the founding of Columbia University's Graduate School*. Originally published in French as *Mochlos : l'œil de l'université*. In *Du Droit à la philosophie*. Galilée: Paris. pp. 397–498.