

Creating Collectivities/Doing Transnational Politics

ESF 2004 Panel (16th Oct, Alexander Palace, London)

Organised by Feminist Review in collaboration with SCONVEGNO,
NextGeneration, BSA Race Forum, and the Torina SambaBand

[Italian version also available]

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An Introduction to the Panel Nirmal Puwar (Feminist Review, UK)

Hello and welcome for making it at 9am on a Saturday morning.

This panel includes people and groups who are already or starting to work with each other. And today is an opportunity to *think together* about creating collectivities/doing transnational politics.

The two words transnational and collective are often *doused in syrup*, they are often mentioned as good words and good ways of working.

Today, we are here to reflect on what is the substance of local and transnational collectivities. What is their mood and how are they created? Why is the transnational sought? And how do our local ways of organising and connecting mediate these global relations? Within this, we have to of course acknowledge and work with the *fragility* and *precariousness* of the collective.

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Working Together: Pulling Apart Amal Treacher (Feminist Review, UK)

In this talk I am going to point to a number of tensions or dilemmas in working on Feminist Review.

Feminist Review is an academic journal that is political – mainly a socialist feminist stance. While we try and include work by activists – we do not really succeed. The editorial collective is run by academics and while we genuinely wish to include work that is from other groups we do not manage it. We are beleaguered by the attacks on feminism, by trying to compete in a market, and also to maintain an international reputation. It is worth pointing out - that through the Feminist Review Trust we give money and therefore support to activist groups. We publish it in the Dialogue section but is this a concession and does activism remain marginal?

Another tension focuses on the universal and the particular, and this tension is widespread within feminism. In this Western social and political culture which emphasizes the individual and difference, we can theoretically have difficulty with issues of the universal. For example, when I was working on the issue of exile and asylum each contribution asserted the particular experience of refugee women. Now, I do not want to dispute that – how can I – but I longed for an article that spoke about that which binds people together. An article that risked speaking of universal experiences of loss, waiting, vulnerability, and these experiences join men and women, adults and children. This while remaining mindful of the particularity of experience and positioning.

It is difficult for me to judge quite how matters of race and ethnicity really impact on the journal or on the readership. Feminist Review has a long and troubled history on this matter. So while we publish articles on race, ethnicity, have special international issues –it does feel that these are not woven through the journal. The very tone, nature of the journal itself feels unaffected. We make efforts but it can feel like a struggle that is never ending. We make efforts to think about what articles should be included, which special issues should we publish, and who should be members of the collective. We continually come up against a problem – what should be our priority – specialism and we are low on a number of crucial ones, or matters of ethnicity? We struggle with how to include our international editors – but note the language – how do we include – and this stance mirrors dominant power relations. International issues tend to be about places that we know something about and have a connection to and so rather like the wider political culture itself we dangerously reflect the silence on say the Congo.

The issues are not just to do with who is in the collective but also the dynamics within the collective itself – who has a voice, who has to struggle to be heard? Who has power and who does not – and this is a class and age issue. And matters of power, authority and leadership do impact and despite our desire for it to be different – they remain enduring issues. How do we hang on in and remain a thriving collective when the pressures from outside, and indeed inside the self pull in altogether different directions. As Judith Butler put it recently you join and sustain a collective endeavour when frequently you do not want to be there at all. In other words we both want to be in there and at the same time anywhere else altogether. To be a member of the collective you have to give yourself up to the other, to the group. Collectives are not the space for the individual to assert their voice – and yet how do we remain in there unless we are affirmed. Alongside this there are conflicting emotions to be faced and lived with – the pleasures and confrontations, disappointments and challenges and these make a collective alive and problematic.

So for me some of the tensions centre on matters of inclusion. How international are we really? How do we manage our positions ethically and politically as academics within Western universities paying attention to the power and authority that comes with that privilege?

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Feminist Struggles in Bangladesh

Firdous Azim (Naripokkho, Bangladesh)

Women's movements in countries such as Bangladesh can be seen to operate within a cleft stick – under the shadow of a growing Islamisation, on the one hand, and under western eyes on the other.

Women's movements have to grapple with issues such as violence, women's subordination, the special religious strictures on women, as well as social practices that keep women in a position of subservience. As women highlight incidences of dowry death or acid-throwing, or of women being stoned to death, the western representation of eastern or 'Islamic' societies as backward and barbaric seems to be vindicated. At the same time, feminists are branded as western within their own societies, and as complicit with the western stereotyping of women from 'Islamic' and 'third world' countries.

The case of Taslima Nasreen immediately comes to mind in this context. She has been celebrated in the west as a brave lone voice who has protested against Islamic strictures on women, and who has had to pay the price of exile as a result. Within Bangladesh, extreme religious groups have not surprisingly castigated Taslima Nasreen as a woman who has gone against her own religion and people. But what has been surprising is that other writers or women's groups have not championed her cause either. It seems that she has been seen to be somehow complicit with the prevalent Islam-bashing.

The feminist task is indeed very difficult – to constantly hold the critical mirror up to social inequities which keep gender discrimination in place, but not to fall into the global vilification that Muslim cultures and so called backward cultures are subject to. Feminist and nationalist interests need to be seen to coalesce, and women's struggles have to consciously formulate their critiques and their demands with these constraints in view.

Hence it is difficult to carve out spaces where demands can be articulated from within this very fraught terrain. I would like to use this presentation to look very briefly at how issues of women's work and women's sexuality are merged and play themselves out within the feminist discourse in Bangladesh.

The decade of the 1990's has been dominated by the issue of women's work – one low-paid women's work in the then newly-emerging ready-made garments sector within the country, and the low-paid and menial jobs that women were engaged in as migrant labour in the Gulf States. To this was added the emerging sex workers' campaigns, based on issues of housing and security. The issue of women's work thus came to the fore, played within the globalised economic arena.

The first obstacle to women's work in garment factories or sweat shops came not from religious groups or conservative forces, but from the most liberal forces in the west, who at one point threatened to boycott garments with the 'Made in Bangladesh' label, on charges that the industry was based on cheap and exploitative labour – 'five cents an hour' – including child labour. There was a period when there was a real possibility of this industry being moved out of Bangladesh, thus depriving the country of hard-earned foreign exchange and also putting women workers at greater economic risk. The point is that while progressive forces, including feminists, discuss issues of fair wages and working conditions, the context in which work is available or not, and what this work may mean in the lives of the women concerned is often ignored. Easy formulations of fair wages turn out not only to be glib, but may also be guided by concerns other than the welfare of the workers – to do with labour protectionism and so forth. Naila Kabeer (2001) has effectively argued the case of garments work in Bangladesh, meticulously documenting the influence this work has had on individual women's lives. The point is that issues of women's work and working conditions need to be examined from the ground, perhaps even case by case, rather than put under an ideological or theoretical mantle.

One of the concerns raised during the debate over the conditions of garments work, was that this was a deliberate ploy taken by western trade union movements to protect their own labour, which in the globalised economy was being transferred elsewhere – that what was at stake for western campaigners

was not the issue of workers' rights but of their own work. The unification of the world economy that may be part of the processes of economic globalisation, nevertheless divides the terrain and pits east against west, really making it difficult to decipher where capitalist interests lie. As feminists, we have to struggle from our own positions, and as far as women's work in Bangladesh goes, the struggle is not only for better conditions of women's work, but also to work to keep the work – to make sure that the work remains here, and that more women can enter the labour market. Bargaining positions for women can improve gradually, but our first struggle is to hold on to our new-found position in the labour market.

The issue of women's labour migration faced a challenge from another perspective altogether, guided by the impulse of patriarchal protection. As horror stories of torture, and sex 'slavery' filtered back, the government decided to ban all kinds of female labour migration, relaxing the rule slightly in the case of trained nurses. Women's labour migration merged into the issue of trafficking, and the government's ban indeed made all women's labour migration into a case of trafficking. Again, legal protection for women was not sought – it just seemed easier to withdraw women from the global labour market.

Trafficking thus became the mode through which women entered the international labour market. It was only through intense campaigning that the ban on women's work was gradually relaxed, and more government involvement in the condition of Bangladeshis living and working abroad was sought. Trafficking also brought the whole issue of sex work to the fore, and horrible stories of being sold off into brothels in Pakistan and India filled the pages of our newspapers. Anti-trafficking campaigns even by women's groups sought to raise awareness about the dire fate that could be awaiting women when they left the protection of their family and their country. Keeping the issue of women's work in the forefront of this debate was indeed difficult, and continues to be so, as the western media is also replete with horror stories of 'trafficked' women.

The anti-trafficking campaign hardly took notice of a strong campaign mounted by sex workers' groups along with women's and human rights' groups for the right of sex workers to work, their right to living and working in brothels, and their demand for security and protection from the state. These campaigns used the rights framework to gain recognition for sex workers as citizens of the state and as legitimate workers. In a famous court ruling sex work was indeed declared to be legal, when plied from the precincts of brothels, and the government made responsible for the welfare and protection of these women. Interestingly this campaign had succeeded in turning attention away from the exploitative nature of sex work, whether it was a desirable arena of work or not – to the reality of the lives of women who were sex workers, to the reality of what 'rehabilitation' may mean for these women, and to the larger questions of the definition of women's work, of how the sex industry is organized and its relation to the entertainment industry, and so on. Issues of poverty rather than sexuality gained dominance, which in turn raised the question of whether this is of necessity how sex work would be debated in the 'third world' whereas in the west, sex work debates seem to centre around issues of pleasure and choice.

It is useful and important to keep these points in mind while setting up transnational feminist dialogues – how lives of women in countries such as Bangladesh are effected by transnational forces, how their position as workers are determined by transnational capital, and hence how we as transnational feminist networks can work for the advancement and betterment of women's positions.

I movimenti delle donne in paesi quali il Bangladesh operano in una situazione difficile – sotto l'ombra di una crescente islamizzazione da un conto e sotto gli occhi dell'occidente dall'altro.

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Crossing boundaries: identities in movement.

Chiara Martucci with Sveva Magaraggia & Francesca Pozzi (Sconvegno)

[Translated by Sconvegno from Italian to English]

We are from the “Sconvegno” group. It is a feminist group of six women, in our thirties. We are precarious workers, from Milan, Italy.

We intend to contribute to this workshop by sharing with you our reflections on what it could mean to create a collective, and to do politics in a trans-national context, starting from our own political experiences and observations.

During the last months some conflicts emerged within our group on the issue “open vs. closed group”, e.g. how to we respond to those who ask to become part of the group.

We are a small group: our relational dynamics represent the raw material of our political practice. We usually start from our own experiences to try to understand and change reality, to think and act politically, without dogma, categorical imperatives, nor axiomatic postulates. For each of us Sconvegno represents a political space/time created by the alchemy of our individual presences, a lab where emotions and experiences become the interpretative tools of the world, a magic that allows us be at the same time individual and collective: something more than the sum of all of us, something less than an unique and autonomous identity. So how can we interact with other realities (individuals and groups), avoiding both to bring “everything” inside the group in an indistinct way and, on the other hand, to create a self-concerning microcosm? We haven’t found an agreement on that issue.

Therefore our concern is - how to build a common ground that could consider our different opinions and approaches, without creating a monolithic and binding group identity, and being aware that only in a collective dimension could we reach the energy and ideas to identify common aims to discuss and act with.

After long discussions, we realised that we were touching crucial issues that imply very different epistemic approaches concerning the meanings to be attributed to such complex and fundamental concepts as “identity” and “belonging”. How could we decline the relationships between individual and collective so to build shared and practical ways to recognise each other, without denying ourselves as individuals?

What we understood in this process is that our investigation of sense and our experimentations in our “political and existential lab” in order to create – together – a dynamic balance between the individual and collective level, could provide some relevant suggestions to name the meaning we would like to give to the trans-national dimension.

1. Attitude to listen

Firstly, the confrontation of oneself with other subjects with different cultural backgrounds and geographical origins could make someone more predisposed to listen, to work within and with differences, so that new questions – which are fundamental tools in building a new political agenda – can emerge.

2. Pleasure in recognising each other and globalisation

From our own experiences in international meetings, we realised that to recognise the same desire of transformation, individual and/or collective, within apparently diverging subjectivities, gives us the sense of being part of a larger feminist movement. From here we gain new energies and the sense of a concrete opportunity to transform reality.

Without forgetting that – and this is our third point – the trans-national (globalized) level represents a dimension of sense that, simply, *cannot be absent*.

The opportunity to recognise each other at a trans-national level is meaningful not only because it represents the place where it is possible to be re-energised in order to continue to work locally, but also because it makes globalisation not only a matter that concerns multinational enterprises but one that also moves across individual subjectivities in concrete ways.

3. Dynamic balance

In this dynamic balance between individual and collective dimensions – the local and the global, the micro and the macro – it is important not to crystallise neither the leadership, nor the themes. Being alert to this tendency means that we could think in a contingent and contextualised way, so that we are enabled to belong to and to act in a mobile and flexible way.

4. The possible elements of continuity?

One of the main purposes of this phase of the Mo-Mo is to identify political practices that are appropriate to the transformations which we are going through.

Therefore we would like to conclude our speech by proposing an example of best practice, a form of trans-national struggle that succeeded in Italy and in Spain: the MayDay parade. An idea that we would like to propose here, and that we would like to discuss together is to reappropriate the International Women's Day, the 8th March.

We could re-signify this date, by giving its original meaning back, making it become a moment in which individual subjectivities could recognise each other and become visible in this shared self-recognising. We like the idea of an event that finds in the discussion common and transversal priorities, which can be developed in different ways in each context; starting from the need to identify elements of impact which are easily replicable, so to build a commune event at a transnational level, without being binding. This could be an event that gives us a sense of being part of a movement, of common actions at the margins, without being identitarian.

MARCH ATTACKS!

Le sconvenienti

Attraversare i confini: identità in movimento.

Chiara Martucci with Sveva Magaraggia & Francesca Pozzi (Sconvegno)

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The (im)possibility of Anti-Racist Praxis Sanjay Sharma (BSA Race Forum)

I'm going to risk being rather parochial and talk about the British academy and the limits of doing anti-racist collective work today.

bell hooks once complained that the theoretical deconstruction of identity emerged at the same moment that racialized minorities were claiming a voice and subjecthood. To speak of, or represent the racialized subject became problematic because of the challenge of difference. The deconstructed 'black subject' no longer had an authentic place to speak from. In the academy, this led to the praxis of anti-racism and identity politics to literally "fall apart".

Of course, this hasn't stopped work on racial otherness or marginality in the academy. It's actually hard to keep up with postcolonial theory, which often ends up pursuing the infinite regression of identities. Putting it rather simply, there's a trajectory in which "first world" intellectuals end up focusing on the *most* subjugated subject, invariably the landless, "third world" woman. To represent or give voice to such subjects is a necessary political act, but a fraught one. It reveals the plight of millions in an age of rampant global capitalism, but also, the *privileges* of intellectuals who are in the position to represent them.

And it the question of representation I wish to turn to. Problematizing political representation has led to acknowledging the limits of forms of identity politics. There's always some aspect of subjectivity left out in the roll calls of identities. There will always be some group identity which is ignored or just escapes representation. There can be no essential black or racialized subject, but instead, one that is embodied, gendered, classed, *etc.* And it's this 'etc' as Judith Butler points out, which reveals a limit - subjectivity can never be complete or fully known, represented

If you spend too much time hanging out on the fringes of the ESF, it's hard not to come across the concept of the 'multitude'. In the last Paris ESF, more than a 1000 people turned up to see Negri in a seminar like this one. In fact, as many of you will know, Hardt & Negri's new book after *Empire*, is called *Multitude*.

The intense debate over this term captures the challenge of a post-representational forms of politics. My intention is not to defend the idea of the multitude, but just to point out that it does seem to grasp the range of anti/alter-globalization groups and their complex modes of organisation and protest. Aren't we in a situation in which theory is attempting to catch up with what's happening on the ground?

One way of thinking about the multitude is that it does not seek to represent groups, or be a representation of them. Rather, it acknowledges the rise of new constituencies which are immanent, emerging from *local* contexts, yet acting in *global* arenas. And these new consistencies aren't necessarily contained by existing forms of identification. They are collectivities which emerge, intervene and disrupt forces of domination in a globalizing world.

While the academy can go on theorising the multitude, a more pressing activity is needed for itself. How do we create *collective intellectuals and collective practice* in the academy? (as Bourdieu argued for), especially to resist the rise of a neo-liberal educational agenda? And as E. Said desired, the need to create new constituencies within and beyond the university. There's no single strategy, and as we already know, collectivities themselves aren't utopian radical spaces. Nevertheless, rather than constructing activism as something happening outside of the university, can't we apply the praxis of the multitude to the academy itself?

Such a move forces us to question how academic collectivities work, and sometimes *fail*. As a way of thinking about this, I wish to briefly reflect on my own involvement when co-editing a book called *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*, (Zed) published in the mid-90s.

The book emerged from a diverse group of people who had a common interest on writing about the rise of new 'British-Asian' forms of popular culture, but wanted to resist presenting authentic native accounts of Asian otherness. It included musicians, DJs as well as researchers working in universities. When the book was reviewed in different media, from the academic to the popular press, it seemed to satisfy only a few. Some thought it was blindly celebrating postmodern theory. In stark opposition, some critics accused it of being too political and too Marxist! And other academics valorized the writers as 'coming from the street', as if some of us weren't part of the institutional authorities of the academy (or should I say *complicit* with them?)

Now you could conclude that the edited collection was just eclectic which made it difficult to categorise. But in hindsight, more was going on. The collectivity that formed around it, did not seek to represent the diasporic Asian subject. Alternatively, we attempted to intervene in multicultural spaces both inside/outside the academy. Intervene against an orientalizing regime of power which had been producing racialized knowledges about Asianess. The fragile collectivity around the book was part of activating a new constituency, which invoked the trans-national in refiguring the multicultural. I wouldn't claim that the group around *Dis-Orienting Rhythms* was a convivial bunch, or the book's political effects were 'successful'. And you could conclude that the book spawned an emerging "cultural industry" around Asian popular culture, especially in terms of how it was consumed in transnational academic contexts, particularly in North America.

Although, I do believe that in a fleeting collective moment, it was able to generate creative anti-racist work, which didn't dwell on theoretical problems abstracted from the (im)material conditions of everyday life.

However today, the challenge is pursuing collective intellectual work in a climate in which institutional incorporation is all too easy. Similarly, the pedagogies on offer to students are equipping them with skills for being flexible workers in the new knowledge economies. What's on offer in the academy is individual social mobility, rather than collective forms of struggle. And what's become legitimated now, is to write about and represent the other – the figure on the margins - instead of intervening in the conditions which produces these forms of marginality

The academy needs to learn from the multitude, rather than only writing about it.

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Creative Resistance: strategies and transnational subjectivities for alternative politics¹

Beppe De Sario and the Torinosambaband²

Se non posso sambare non è la mia rivoluzione!
“if i can’t samba it’s not my revolution!”³

The Torinosambaband belongs to an international, largely European, network of activist samba bands which play samba as activism.

What do we do? Who are we?

Since 2000 we have been active on the scene of protests against neo-liberal powers and global war. Our political action has developed its own specific forms. We usually gather during large international movements, protests against the summits of transnational power and, we also organize meetings of our network for internal purposes.

In our international meetings our aims are training in our specific activism and practices, learning to experience a new activism with a transnational dimension, getting together and living together, and actually doing direct action together. Most of the time is spent together in the spaces offered by the host band (location). All the bands from the different localities are provided with food and accommodation as well as proper spaces for discussion and playing music. So we not only do activism together during these international gatherings but, we also *rest* and *play* together in common spaces that we generate. Thus the experience in an event like the ESF or other international meetings is a very particular political experience, it mixes political action, life experience and cultural performance. Our travels across Europe are indeed at the same time *training and learning travels*. They involve facing up to the differences between international bands, coping with different local contexts and doing direct actions which involve various styles of confrontation with the police and other power structures.

The Importance of the Transnational

The importance of transnational activism – in our view and experience – is apparent at different levels. Creative action allows us to *cross borders* (national, cultural and those of political traditions). Creative action enables instant, emotional affinity that can often by-pass differences in social and political background via the styles and cultural practices. The creative practices are the substance of our political action: they are *political-experience* languages which, performatively, connect individual life, attitude and skills of everyone involved which allow the activists to express themselves while representing political and social issues. Creative exchange and reciprocal recognition as similar and different activists in a common network, and the permanent production of nuances in the ways of doing activism, support self-confidence and trust.

The range of skills and attitudes put into action by samba activism is not ordered by a fixed hierarchy – i.e. favouring written words or authority based on age or militant career. Instead there is a privileging of various *families of resources*: words, music, dance, empathy and relational capability, invention of concepts, ideas, tactics or languages, and so forth. The creative practices can generate change and transformation.

¹ For coverage of the activism of the sambabands at the ESF 2004 see <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/10/299752.html>

² Presented at ESF 2004 (London), a panel co-ordinated by Feminist Review on ‘Creating Collectivities/Doing Transnational Politics’.

³ – a *détournement* from Emma Goldman: “if I can’t dance it’s not my revolution”.

They are *tactics* which are subversive and playful at the same time. These tactics turn the activist role upside down. Importantly, they corrode the connections between representations and expectations of both activists and the bastions of power involved in contentious politics, in order not to strengthen the challenged power itself by using a pure antagonistic agency. Conversely, the creative practices reduce the authority of logocentric politics, authoritarian leadership and destructive conflict.

The sharing of creative practices' has enabled European activism. The immediacy with which cooperation among the bands gets bigger and stronger gives us confidence to come back to our local places with more assurance. The trans-european level of activism and activist relations provide us with tools, of - style, political practices, international relations and recognition by the European activist scene – which we can use in order to challenge our own local political contexts.

The Transnational Challenges

Transnational relations are also problematic ones - the immediacy can turn itself into superficiality if it does not open up communication. In order to be open to concrete horizontal exchanges during meetings and international counter-summits, so that we strengthen the relations and generate more effective actions, we need to communicate our differences – of social, cultural or of political backgrounds - among the bands and, put them into game.

The main obstacles are practical - which means political. In order to have closer affinity and familiarization between samba activists for example, we have to deal with the problem of different languages. This impacts on how we speak in everyday-life conversations and in the coordination of the political action. Many of us operate in a sort of broken international English, which is spoken in very different ways. But this is not satisfactory. There are also political and conceptual challenges which have to be openly acknowledged and discussed. These involve a recognition of the articulation of differences of, style, gender, generation and political and cultural backgrounds - not least differences in food cultures!

Bringing the transnational to the local and the local to the transnational: this a frequent slogan which can be heard in the demonstrations of the global movements and it lies also in the meaning of most of political actions that take place on a global scale. For us, this means to act between the local and the global by creative action and everyday-life political practices. Opening our local space and our forms of life to other specificities, building a network founded on practical and cultural commons but also on different sites, this is the challenge for our creative travelling activism, whenever it crosses the borders.

While creative practices do immediately open up friendly and rich transnational relations, based on reciprocal trust and horizontal participative political practices, nevertheless, there isn't an uncontested guarantee of either (1) a deepening of the relations among transnational groups nor, (2) of a positive delivery of the new things apprehended at the transnational scale to the local one. The transnational space provides a new activist imaginary which is able to break with the local/national traditions. At the same time though the local spaces must take on changes, so that life and alternative politics merge together into a different perspective from which to approach transnational activism and its families of differences (precarious work and casualisation, migrations, war/peace, local and urban environment, and so on).

Changing the life in order to change politics, and vice versa: this was a motto of some of the Italian political traditions of the '60s and '70s. Today few of these traditions are represented even though they have not been forgotten. These traditions involve the "'77 movement" and radical feminism. Perhaps though this is a promise that we could recognise as a legacy for us and our political perspective – not a direct legacy, rather a indirect one apprehended in contentious politics and creative practices.

The problem of how transnational activism can merge different traditions and cultural and historical differences at the global level is a key concern. The creative practices become very important, in our

view, in order to answer a decisive question posed by and to global activism as a whole: the *cultural translation* of the issues and – more generally and deeper – the experiences, the practices and imaginaries as a premise of a truly transnational activism, that involves an activism open to new families of differences. So, we have to develop the transnationality of politics along with the transnationality (or becoming transnational) of the subjectivities.

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Bridging the Gap between academia and Political Action Joanna Hoare (NextGeneration, London)

NextGeneration is a pan-European network of feminists, most of whom are academics or students of gender theory. As a collective, we are concerned with bridging the perceived divide between feminism in academia, and feminist political engagement.

NG London started with four of us who had recently completed courses in Gender Studies at the LSE; the group has remained small, with never more than five (and usually only three) members. Our particular areas of concern have been feminist academic engagement with questions regarding the politics of language and location. In other words, who we speak for, and who we speak to. With regards to the 'real world' issues we wanted to focus on, these were migration, sexuality and sex work.

The ESF: to engage or not to engage?

One of the first decisions NextGeneration London made as a collective was that we would participate in some way in the ESF. One of our members had attended the ESF in Paris last year, and had come away with very mixed (mainly negative) impressions. However, we decided that it would provide a good focus to plan our activities and establish the group. Cost and political concerns regarding who the official forum speaks for and to led us to decide that we could not participate there, so we decided then that we would instead try to plan an action for the unofficial forum (Autonomous Spaces).

Planning for the ESF

We wanted our participation in the ESF to itself be a reflexive process, ie that it would not be a question of us planning and then performing an 'action', or running a workshop 'addressing issues of migration, sex work, sexuality etc', and having people come along to watch and then ask questions. Rather, we wanted to engage with others (groups and individuals) directly working with, or within, or affected by these issues. We wanted the whole planning process to be as inclusive, and as participatory as possible. So we decided to hold a series of 'public' meetings, and went about trying to establish links with groups working 'in the field', e.g. Southall Black Sisters, Latin American Women's Aid, the International Union of Sex Workers, and emailed and phoned these groups to invite them to these meetings, with the idea of working together to plan an action.

So what happened...

We had two types of response to our emails: no response at all, and 'we think that's a great idea, and if you do run a workshop/seminar/whatever at the ESF we will definitely support it, but we can't spare the time or energy to come to meetings and participate in planning it'. This of course was exactly what we had wanted to avoid!

We did get more people coming to the 'public' meetings we held, but for the most part they were also students and academics, and this participation varied considerably. And we found that at these meetings, we spent so much time trying to make sure that the process was a reflexive one, and so much time worrying about misrepresenting and appropriating others' positions, that we never actually managed to bring ourselves to committing to doing anything. So NextGeneration's only participation in the ESF is this (appropriately reflexive) seminar.

Reflections

So why did we find it so difficult to bring others in, and to build a collective beyond the original few members?

In our attempts to engage with 'frontline groups', I think we were extremely naïve in a) ignoring the realities of the non-profit sector (or at least of those organisations operating at the under-resourced, over-worked end of it) and the fact that many organisations simply do not have the time or the resources to commit to attending meetings and planning events; and b) in assuming that participation in the ESF would be of much relevance, and a high priority to such groups.

With regards to 'recruiting' other members, our concern with the whole process being reflexive, non-hierarchical and consultative meant that we were adamant that we could not come up with a 'plan of action' on our own (by 'on our own' I mean the few core members). But because we had no definite plan or idea of what we wanted to do, there was no proposal to which people could commit, and it was very easy for potential new members to disengage from the process.

The approach we took to planning our participation in the Forum created many difficulties for us, and is probably the main reason why we are not participating beyond this seminar. But of course there were other, practical factors that made it difficult for us to plan a workshop, linked of course to our status as very new, unestablished group with no money, very few contacts, and not enough time to devote to the practical side of running a group.

However, I wanted to finish with one other thought. This process was not just about planning for participation in the ESF, but also about establishing the collective and its identity. In this respect, the approach that we adopted has had another significant impact. We were so busy trying to engage with other groups, with other individuals who had more 'authentic' experiences of the issues with which we were concerned, that we denied ourselves our right to speak about *our* location regarding these issues: our experiences of migration, for instance, and our experiences of working on these issues within 'frontline agencies'. On reflection this standpoint is very problematic in itself, with all the assumptions that come with it about the essential authenticity of The Other's voice, and of our location in relation to the people with whom we were trying to engage. But it has also meant that, a year on, we still have not really established who we are, and what we are trying to do - we were so worried about *not* speaking for others, that we forgot to speak for ourselves.

I think that this is more cause for regret than our failure to put together a workshop at the parallel ESF; but at the same time, the realisation of this is really where the future of the collective lies. From this realisation, we can begin to build activism upon our academic knowledge of gender theory, but also upon our own location and our own experiences. And this way, we can start to find our own voice.

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