# Constituent Imagination

## Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization

Edited by Stevphen Shukaitis + David Graeber
with Erika Biddle

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For more information and ongoing projects:
http://www.constituentimagination.net
info@constituentimagination.net

Cover Design: Haduhi Szukis
Layout: C. Weigl

AK Press
674-A 23rd Street
Oakland, CA 94612
www.akpress.org
akpress@akpress.org
510.208.1700

AK Press U.K.
PO Box 12766
Edinburgh EH8 9YE
www.akuk.com
ak@akedin.demon.co.uk
0131.555.5165

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# Contents

# Acknowledgements

Writing acknowledgements for a volume like this is an absurd but necessary task. Absurd because, if one were to properly thank everyone who has provided inspiration and ideas, the result would be a volume composed mainly of extended thank yous; necessary because without vibrant communities of resistance there would be no point is assembling a book like this. Militant investigation is an inherently collective and social process and, for this reason, trying to credit individuals for ideas is difficult in the same way that attempting to claim ownership over them is. It is for our *companer@s* around the world, from the recuperated factories of Argentina to the Italian social centers, from joyful festivals in the streets to building new communities in and beyond the classroom, that we research, write, and teach.

Having said that we would still like to acknowledge the efforts of people without whom this project never would have seen the light of day. Special thanks to Yvonne Liu, Nate Holdren, Jim Fleming, Ben Meyers, and Jack Z. Bratich for on-going conversations and friendship. Thanks to Stefano Harney, Campbell Jones, and everyone else from the University of Leicester Centre for Philosophy and Political Economy. Much respect to Stephen Dunne and Eleni Karamali who helped co-edit the "Inscribing Organized Resistance" issue of ephemera (www.ephemeraweb.org) that grew out of this project. An extra special thanks to Sophea Lerner for being such a caring and wonderful person during the process of putting this book together. Thanks to Andréa Schmidt, the Institute for Anarchist Studies and the wonderful folks at AK Press for their support of the project. And thanks to the Snydersville Diner for a seemingly endless supply of coffee and tasty slices of pie that provided excellent encouragement during the process of editing and revising.

The front cover image is from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires in Argentina. Fittingly enough, someone has spray painted both "*Manicomo*" (madhouse) and "*4 Imagacion al Poder*" (All power to the imagination), which succinctly summarizes the ambivalent nature of forms of radicalism embedded in the university. The image facing the Introduction is one of Dave Eden's tattoos, taken during a particularly joyous weekend of reveling in Canberra, Australia (of all places).

# Practicing Militant Ethnography with the Movement for Global Resistance in Barcelona

**Jeffrey S. Juris**

Since the first Global Days of Action against capitalism—including protests against the World Trade Organization summit meetings in Seattle on November 30, 1999—anti-corporate globalization movements have staged highly spectacular, mass direct actions against multilateral institutions, while generating innovative network-based organizational forms.[1] Activists have made particularly effective use of new digital technologies to communicate and coordinate at a distance, while grassroots media projects such as Indymedia have provided forums for creating and circulating alternative news and information. Indeed, contemporary anti-corporate globalization movements are uniquely self-reflexive, as activists produce and distribute their own analyses and reflections through global communications networks. Such practices break down the divide between participant and observer, constituting a significant challenge to traditional academic approaches to the study of social movements.

In what follows, I outline militant ethnography as an alternative research method and political praxis based on my experience as an activist and researcher with the Movement for Global Resistance (MRG) in Barcelona. What is the relationship between ethnography and political action? How can we make our work relevant to those with whom we study? Militant ethnography involves a politically engaged and collaborative form of participant observation carried out from within rather than outside grassroots movements. Classic objectivist paradigms fail to grasp the concrete logic of activist practice, leading to accounts and models that are not only inadequate, but are of little use to activists themselves. As activists increasingly generate



and circulate their own analyses, the classic role of the organic intellectual is undermined.

Militant ethnography seeks to overcome the divide between research and practice. Rather than generating sweeping strategic and/or political directives, collaboratively produced ethnographic knowledge aims to facilitate ongoing activist (self-)reflection regarding movement goals, tactics, strategies, and organizational forms. At the same time, there is often a marked contradiction between the moment of research and the moments of writing, publishing, and distribution (Routledge 1996). The horizontal networking logics associated with anti-corporate globalization movements contradict the institutional logic of academia itself (cf. Juris 2004). Militant ethnographers thus have to constantly negotiate such dilemmas, while moving back and forth among different sites of writing, teaching, and research.

## Grasping the Logic of Activist Practice

In his discussion of Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, Loïc Wacquant identifies the "intellectual bias," or how our position as an outside observer "entices us to construe the world as a spectacle, as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically" (1992: 39). This tendency to position oneself at a distance and treat social life as an object to decode, rather than entering into the flow and rhythm of ongoing social interaction, hinders our ability to understand social practice. As Bourdieu himself suggests:

> The anthropologist's particular relation to the object of his study contains the makings of a theoretical distortion inasmuch as his situation as an observer, excluded from the real play of social activities by the fact that he has no place...inclines him to a hermeneutic representation of practices (1977: 1).

Militant ethnography addresses these objectivist shortcomings. In order to grasp the concrete logic generating specific practices, researchers have to become active practitioners. With respect to social movements, this means helping to organize actions and workshops, facilitating meetings, weighing in during strategic and tactical debates, staking out political positions, and putting ones' body on the line during mass direct actions. Simply taking on the role of "circumstantial activist," as George Marcus (1995) puts it, is not sufficient. One has to build long-term relationships of mutual commitment and trust, become entangled with complex relations of power, and live the emotions associated with direct action organizing and activist networking. Such politically engaged ethnographic practice not only allows researchers to remain active political subjects, it also generates better interpretations

and analyses. In her study of everyday violence in a poor shantytown in northeastern Brazil, Nancy Scheper-Hughes describes how she was coaxed into political organizing by her Bahian informants:

> The more my companhieras gently but firmly pulled me away from the "private" world of the wretched huts of the shantytown, where I felt most comfortable, and toward the "public" world of the Municipio of Bom Jesus da Mata, into the marketplace, the mayor's office and the judge's chambers, the police station and the public morgue, the mills and the rural union meetings, the more my understandings of the community were enriched and theoretical horizons were expanded (1995: 411).

Scheper-Hughes refers to such ethically grounded and politically committed research as militant anthropology, which captures the active and engaged style of ethnographic practice outlined here. She subsequently calls for a barefoot anthropology which involves a kind of witnessing, differing from active struggle *together* with the women of Bom Jesus she describes in the passage above. I thus refer to ethnographic research that is both politically engaged and collaborative in nature as militant ethnography.

This broader emphasis on ethnography transcends the exclusive realm of anthropology. Militant ethnography is relevant for a variety of disciplines and in many ways corresponds to methods practiced by activists themselves. Militant ethnography generates practical, embodied understanding. Indeed, mass direct actions generate extremely intense emotions involving alternating sensations of tension, anxiety, fear, terror, collective solidarity, expectation, celebration, and joy. In this sense, the militant ethnographer also uses her body as a concrete research tool (cf. Parr 2001).

## Two Tales from the Field

My research explores the cultural practice and politics of transnational networking among anti-corporate globalization activists in Barcelona. I am particularly interested in how transnational networks like Peoples Global Action (PGA) or the World Social Forum (WSF) are constructed and how activists perform these networks through embodied praxis during mass actions. Specifically, I conducted participant observation with the international working group of the Movement for Global Resistance in Barcelona, a broad network involving militant squatters, Zapatista supporters, anti-debt campaigners, and radical ecologists.[2] I participated in mobilizations in Barcelona, Genoa, Brussels, Madrid, and Seville, and I had previously taken part in mass actions in Seattle, Los Angeles, and Prague.[3] Moreover, given that MRG was a co-convener of PGA in Europe and many activists were involved in the social forum process, I helped organize PGA and WSF-related events in Barcelona, Leiden, and Porto Alegre. By practicing militant ethnography, I aim to enhance our understanding of how social movement networks operate, thus helping activists build more effective and sustainable networks. The next section provides two concrete ethnographic examples.



### *Next Stop: Genoa!*

At the end of a July 1 march against police brutality in Barcelona, a Milanese activist from the Tute Bianche took the microphone and announced the coming siege of the G8 summit. After describing the Genoa Social Forum and the pact that had been made with the city, he enthusiastically called on all Catalan and Spanish activists to make the trip, exclaiming in the spirit of the singer Manu Chao, "Next Stop: Genoa!" Ten days later, my friends and I were discussing our police evasion strategy on a regional train we had hopped through southern France. As we pulled into Genoa, the Italian police were out patrolling in force. Although we had done nothing wrong, our hearts began to pound. The paranoid feeling of being under constant surveillance would remain with us during our entire time in Italy. We spent our first few days sleeping in a squatted social center in the hills on the outskirts of town, where we met up with many PGA-inspired activists. Ricardo, a well-known solidarity activist and squatter was frustrated about how difficult it had been to coordinate with the Genoa Social Forum (GSF), the main body planning the protests in Genoa. He was extremely eager to fill us in and elicit more support for building a radical international contingent.

Ricardo was particularly troubled by the fact that the GSF had refused to create channels of communication with militant anarchists due to the Forum's strict "non-violence" stance. The dominant political forces within the GSF—Tute Bianche, NGOs, ATTAC, radical labor unions, and *Refundazione Comunista*—were characterized by autonomous Marxist, socialist, and social-democratic perspectives, and the use of strictly non-violent tactics. On the other hand, the guiding political ethos among decentralized grassroots networks like PGA or MRG is broadly anarchist, in the sense of horizontal networking and coordination among diverse autonomous groups. This networking logic also holds for the question of violence versus non-violence, where a diversity of tactical positions generally prevails. For radicals like Ricardo, even those who refuse to engage in violent tactics, it is important to establish dialogue with all groups regardless of the tactics they choose. The GSF's strict non-violent stance and unwillingness to communicate with groups outside their direct action guidelines was perceived by many grassroots anticapitalists as a major obstacle.

Over the next week, I became deeply embroiled in the complex discussions, debates, and negotiations that ultimately led to the creation of the

Pink & Silver bloc for the main action days, building on our experiences in Prague. Not only did we have to generate consensus regarding the wisdom of joining the militant squatters, whether self-defense constituted an acceptable response to police provocation and the specific protest route to follow, we also had to negotiate with the GSF and other international networks in order to carve out sufficient space within a crowded action terrain involving aggressive Tute Bianche, militant black bloc, festive pink bloc, and traditional Ghandian non-violent tactics.

There is insufficient time here for a full ethnographic account of the space of terror that subsequently emerged in Genoa (cf. Juris 2005a). Rather, I want to simply point out that it was only by becoming deeply involved in the direct action planning process, which at times meant positioning myself at the center of extremely intense and sometimes personal debates, that I could fully appreciate the complexity and logic of direct action planning and the accompanying fear, passion, and exhilaration. It was only through engaged participation that I began to realize how diverse activist networks physically express their contrasting political visions and identities through alternative forms of direct action. Tactical debates were thus about much more than logistical coordination: they embodied the broader cultural politics that are a crucial aspect of activist networking and movement building. Learning how to better negotiate such tactical differences can help activists build sustainable networks more generally.

At the same time, the overwhelming campaign of low-level terror unleashed by the Italian state also points to some of the potential limitations of the "diversity of tactics" logic. If, rather than dividing and conquering, the state pursues an indiscriminate strategy of physical repression, it becomes impossible to safely divide up the urban terrain. In particular contexts it makes sense to actively dissuade other activists from using militant tactics. However, blanket condemnations of protest "violence," including widely circulated statements by Susan George after Gothenburg and Genoa are not likely to produce the desired effect, as they violate the basic networking logic at the heart of contemporary anti-corporate globalization movements.[4] It is only through dialogue, and immanent critique based on solidarity and respect that such contentious issues can be resolved. At its best, militant ethnography can thus provide a mechanism for shedding light on contemporary networking logics and politics while also making effective interventions into ongoing activist debates.

### *Subverting the WSF International Council*

Beyond mass direct actions, militant ethnography can also help activists negotiate more sustained forms of movement building, including the social forum process. First conceived as a singular event providing a space for



reflection and debate regarding alternatives to neoliberal globalization,[5] the WSF has since morphed into a sustained process involving forums at local, regional, and global levels.[6] After three years in Porto Alegre, the WSF was held in Mumbai in 2004 before moving back to Porto Alegre the following year. Most recently, the 2006 WSF was "polycentric," held at three remote sites in Latin America, Asia, and North Africa.

The International Council (IC) was created shortly after the initial Forum in January 2001 to oversee the global expansion of the process. However, the relationship among the Brazilian Organizing Committee (OC), other local committees, and the IC has been somewhat contentious. In addition to the distribution of power and authority among these decision-making bodies, there has also been an ongoing debate about the nature of the process itself. Although the WSF Charter of Principles specifically defines the Forum as an open meeting space, others view it, at least potentially, as a political organization (cf. Patomäki and Teivainen 2004, Sen 2004, Whitaker 2004).[7] Such conflicts are rendered particularly visible during periodic IC gatherings, including the April 2002 meeting in Barcelona, where I was an active participant as a member of MRG's international working group (cf. Juris 2005b).

Shortly before the Barcelona meeting we learned that MRG had been invited to become a permanent member of the IC—most likely due to our reputation as an exemplar of an emerging mode of activism involving confrontational direct action and network-based forms. This unleashed a heated debate within MRG and among grassroots networks in Barcelona. How could a diffuse network with no formal membership, many of whose participants are deeply opposed to the Forum, participate in such a highly institutional representative structure? After a long discussion during an open assembly of social movements in Barcelona, MRG decided to offer its official delegate status to the larger assembly, including its right to speak during the IC meeting. Although MRG would ultimately refuse the Council's invitation to become a permanent member, radicals would at least have an opportunity to make their voices heard within the very heart of the Forum process.

This is where my own role in the meeting became more complicated. I was enthusiastic about attending the IC meeting not only as a delegate from MRG, but also as an ethnographer specifically studying transnational networking practices. The Barcelona IC meeting was a perfect opportunity to examine these processes first-hand. Although I initially wanted to simply observe, allowing others to intervene, I was quickly drawn into a more active role. The assembly of social movements had agreed to issue a statement during the meeting criticizing the IC for its vertical structure and lack of internal democracy. Since I spoke English and Spanish fluently, I was given the task of helping to draft and then present the declaration. So much for my role as neutral observer! By inserting myself into the flow and rhythm of

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such a contentious debate, I learned a great deal more about the social forum process than I otherwise would have.

The meeting agenda included the relationship between the WSF and the broader anti-corporate globalization movement, future challenges, regional social forums, methodology and architecture, and internal IC process. Throughout the three-day gathering, delegates debated critical issues such as whether the IC should continue to play a logistical and coordinating role or provide more active strategic and/or political direction. The autonomy of the local forums also generated significant disagreement, pitting those who wanted more central control against others who viewed the WSF as a kind of trademark, though freely available to anyone inspired by the Forum model and its ideals. It was only when I read the MRG declaration that I truly began to understand the diversity of positions represented within the IC, and what it actually felt like to be at the center of such hotly contested debates.

As soon as the session opened about internal procedures, delegates immediately brought up the issue of democracy and openness within the Council. Sensing that the right moment had finally arrived, I raised my hand, and after several long interventions, read the MRG declaration, which included the following text:

> We would like to thank the Council for the membership invitation, although we are not sure how it happened. MRG is part of a new political culture involving network-based organizational forms, direct democracy, open participation, and direct action. A top-down process, involving a closed, non-transparent, non-democratic, and highly institutional central committee will never attract collectives and networks searching for a new way of doing politics. This should be a space of participation, not representation.

Although we had expected to receive an extremely hostile response several delegates supported our contention. One member of the Brazilian OC tersely responded, "We have to clarify who wants to be a member, and who does not!" However, others were more receptive; as an important figure within the European forum process stressed, "We really have to figure out a way to include this new political culture despite their unique organizational form." Although he missed the point that our "new political culture" is specifically expressed—at least in part—through our innovative organizational forms and practices, he was generally supportive.[8] Perhaps not so incidentally the inaugural edition of the European Social Forum, ultimately held in Florence the following November, would be organized through an open assembly of social movements rather than a member-based organizational committee. Although our critique certainly ruffled a few feathers, we had more allies than originally anticipated.



Many radicals in Barcelona and elsewhere had assumed the IC and broader forum social process is dominated exclusively by reformists and Marxists. Although I suspected the reality was more nuanced, it was only after my active participation in the Barcelona IC meeting that I fully appreciated the complex internal dynamics *within* the Council. This understanding not only helped me conceive transnational networking as shaped by an intense cultural politics (cf. Juris 2005c), it also influenced my participation in subsequent debates about whether grassroots radicals should take part in the forum process more generally. My experience suggested that rather than boycott the forums, it perhaps made more sense to actively work together with those elements who shared our more libertarian goals and visions.

## Specifying Militant Ethnography

Militant ethnography thus not only generates compelling analyses, it can also help inform concrete strategies and decision-making. If ethnographic methods driven by political commitment and guided by a theory of practice break down the distinction between researcher and activist during the moment of fieldwork, the same cannot be said for the moments of writing and distribution, where one has to confront vastly different systems of standards, awards, selection, and stylistic criteria. As Paul Routledge (1996) has suggested:

> When it comes to researching resistance, there has traditionally been what de Certeau (1984: 24–25) refers to as a gap between the time of solidarity and the time of writing. The former is marked by docility and gratitude toward one's hosts, while the latter reveals the institutional affiliations, and the intellectual, professional, and financial profit for which this hospitality is objectively the means (1996: 402).

A brief anecdote from my own experience illustrates some of the issues involved. In January 2004, my former MRG-based colleagues organized a conference in Barcelona to explore the theory and practice of activist research. The idea was to create an open space for reflection and debate among activists, those conducting research from within, and for social movements and others involved with self-managed political projects. During one session, a British activist mounted a harsh attack on academics studying movements from the outside. He was somewhat appeased when we explained we were using engaged methods, but he remained skeptical about how the research would be used, pointing out that, "You go back to the university and use collectively produced knowledge to earn your degrees and gain academic prestige. What's in it for the rest of us?"

For the militant ethnographer, the issue is not so much the kind of knowledge produced, which is always practically engaged and collaborative, but rather, how is it presented, for which audience, and where is it distributed? These questions go to the very heart of the alternative network-based cultural logics and political forms that more radical anti-corporate globalization activists are generating and putting into practice. Addressing them doesn't just respond to the issue of ethical responsibility toward one's informants, colleagues and friends, it also sheds light on the nature of contemporary movements themselves.

Part of the issue has to do with how we understand the nature of the intellectual. Barker and Cox (2002) have recently explored differences between academic and movement theorizing, criticizing traditional theories *about* rather than *for* movements. They explain the differences in terms of the distinction between "academic" and "movement" intellectuals corresponding to Gramsci's "traditional" and "organic" varieties: the former operate according to the interests of dominant classes, while the latter emerge from within and work on behalf of subaltern groups. However, not only does this distinction break down in practice, beyond that, it seems to me the relationship between activists and intellectuals within contemporary social movements is far more complex. When nearly everyone engages in theorizing, self-publishing, and instant distribution through global communication networks, the traditional function of the organic intellectual—providing strategic analysis and political direction—is undermined. In this sense, militant ethnography does not offer programmatic directives about what activists should or should not do. Rather, by providing critically engaged and theoretically informed analyses generated through collective practice, militant ethnography can provide tools for ongoing activist (self-)reflection and decision-making.

Several anthropologists have recently proposed strategies for making ethnography useful for activists that can be incorporated into a broader praxis for militant ethnography. Working with US-based, anti-corporate globalization activists, David Graeber has similarly noted the embattled position of the traditional vanguard intellectual, positing ethnography as an alternative, which would involve "teasing out the tacit logic or principles underlying certain forms of radical practice, and then, not only offering the analysis back to those communities, but using them to formulate new visions" (2004: 335). In this register, ethnography becomes a tool for collective reflection about activist practice and emerging utopian imaginaries.

Julia Paley (2001) enacts another kind of critically engaged ethnography working with urban community groups in Chile to analyze power relations and political processes that shape and constrain their strategic options at particular historical junctures. In this mode, ethnography becomes a tool for collective analysis about the outside world. In his study of gender, race, religion, and grassroots Afro-Brazilian movements, John Burdick (1998) suggests that ethnography can help movements represent themselves in order to understand the social and cultural heterogeneity within them. Militant ethnography can thus help activists carry out their own ethnographic research.



For Burdick, this means supporting movements in their efforts to reach out to a broader public. But it might also suggest working with activists to help them analyze different movement sectors, understand how they operate, their goals and visions, and how they can most effectively work together. In my own case I spent hours talking to MRG-based colleagues about diverse movement sectors in Barcelona and elsewhere, and how they might best coordinate. We held similar conversations about regional and global networking processes. In this sense, transnational activist networking always already involves a form of militant ethnography, while militant ethnography among contemporary local/global movements necessarily requires the practice of transnational networking.

In sum, militant ethnography involves at least three interrelated modes: 1) collective reflection and visioning about movement practices, logics, and emerging cultural and political models; 2) collective analysis of broader social processes and power relations that affect strategic and tactical decision-making; and 3) collective ethnographic reflection about diverse movement networks, how they interact, and how they might better relate to broader constituencies. Each of these levels involves engaged, practice-based, and politically committed research that is carried out in horizontal collaboration with social movements. Resulting accounts involve particular interpretations of events, produced with the practical and theoretical tools at the ethnographer's disposal and offered back to activists, scholars, and others for further reflection and debate.

The question remains as to the most appropriate context for practicing militant ethnography and how to distribute the results. One obvious place is the academy, which despite increasing corporate influence and institutional constraints, continues to offer a critical space for collective discussion, learning, and debate. As Scheper-Hughes (1995) suggests, those of us within the academy can use academic writing and publishing as a form of resistance, working within the system to generate alternative, politically engaged accounts. As Routledge suggests, there are no "pure" or "authentic" sites, as academia and activism both "constitute fluid fields of social action that are interwoven with other activity spaces." Routledge thus posits an alternative third space "where neither site, role, nor representation holds sway, where one continually subverts the other" (1996: 400). The more utopian alternative is suggested by the rise of multiple networks of autonomous research collectives and free university projects, including the activist research conference cited above, or the radical theory forums recently held during regional and world social forums. By exploring emerging cultural

logics, networking activities, and utopian political imaginaries within contemporary anti-corporate globalization movements, militant ethnography can thus contribute to both academic and activist spheres.

## Notes

1. The Seattle Protest was actually the third Global Day of Action inspired by the Peoples Global Action (PGA) network. The first took place on May 16, 1998, in conjunction with the G8 Summit in Birmingham and just two days before the WTO Ministerial in Geneva. The second was held on June 18, 1999, against major financial and business centers around the world during the G8 Summit in Cologne. Actions were carried out in more than 40 countries, including a 10,000 person strong "Carnival Against Capitalism" organized by Reclaim the Streets in London.
2. I refer to "anti-corporate globalization movements" in the plural to emphasize that activists do not oppose globalization per se but rather those forms of economic globalization that benefit transnational corporations, while recognizing the diversity of movement actors. Alternatively, many activists speak of the global justice or alternative globalization movements. However, these formulations are rarely used in Barcelona, the site of my own research. (Juris 2005).
3. MRG was founded during the mobilization against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund meetings in Prague in September 2000. The network ultimately dissolved itself in January 2003 in response to declining participation and as a broader political statement against the reproduction of rigid structures.
4. Barcelona-based research carried out from June 2001 to September 2002 was supported by a Dissertation Field Research Grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc., and a Dissertation Field Research Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council with Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funding.
5. For example, see comments by Susan George regarding protest violence in Gothenburg ("I was at Gothenburg") and Genoa ("G8: Are You Happy?"). Archived at http://attac.org and http://www.corpwatch.org respectively.
6. Oded Grajew and Francisco Whitaker, two Brazilian civil society leaders initially proposed the World Social Forum idea to Bernard Cassen, President of ATTAC-France and Director of the *Le Monde Diplomatique*, in February 2000. The WSF would specifically coincide with the annual World Economic Forum (WEF) Summit in Davos.
7. The Charter defines the Forum as "an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences, and interlinking for effective action." The WSF Charter of Principles can be viewed at http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br.
8. As I have argued elsewhere (cf. Juris 2005a/b), broader cultural ideals and political imaginaries are increasingly inscribed directly into emerging organizational architectures.



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# :: COMMUNITIES OF/IN RESISTANCE ::

the globalization movement including People's Global Action, the Direct Action Network, and the Planetary Alternatives Network.

**Gavin Grindon** is a PhD student at the University of Manchester, England, where he is studying the theoretical development of the concept of carnival as a form of radical activism. His publications include "Carnival Against Capital: A Comparison of Bakhtin, Vaneigem and Bey" in *Anarchist Studies*.

**Harry Halpin** is a post-graduate student at the University of Edinburgh, studying Informatics and the intersection between the Web, philosophy, and linguistics. He is also the co-founder of Scotland Indymedia and erstwhile resident of the Bilston Glen Anti-Road Bypass site. In former lives he has organized summits and protests around globalization, driven computers from Maine to Chiapas, and maintained various free software packages.

**Nate Holdren** is a teaching assistant and PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. Nate has contributed numerous translations and other material to various electronic projects.

**Brian Holmes** is a cultural theorist, art critic, and a founder of Université Tangente. His publications include *Hieroglyphs of the Future: Art and Politics in a Networked Era* (Arkzin Communications, 2004) and *Unleashing the Collective Phantom* (forthcoming 2007, Autonomedia).

**Ben Holtzman** is an independent researcher and activist. He works as an editor in New York.

**Craig Hughes** is an activist and researcher who lives in Washington, DC. He holds a Masters degree in History and is a member of the Team Colors collective.

**Sandra Jeppesen** has a PhD in English from York University, Toronto. Her dissertation focused on Guerrilla Texts and anarchist cultural production. Her first published novel, *Kiss Painting* (Gutter Press, 2003), explores social relationships within the anarchist milieu. She has been a member of several anarchist collectives, including Who's Emma Records and Books, Uprising bookstore and infoshop, Resist (Toronto), the random anarchist group, the Toronto Anarchist Bookfair collective, and the Anarchist Free University.

**Jeffrey S. Juris** is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Social & Behavioral Sciences at Arizona State University. His research and teaching interests include globalization, social movements, transnational activism, new digital technologies, Spain, and Catalonia. Juris is dedicated to integrating research and practice by engaging in militant ethnography. He has also participated in several activist research networks, including the Open Space Collective, which emerged from the World Social Forum process. He is also developing a comparative ethnographic project exploring the use of new digital technologies and emerging forms of collaborative practice among media activists in the United States, Europe, and Latin America.



**Anita Lacey** is an activist and researcher living and working in Windsor, Canada. Her research fields and interests include global anticapitalist and justice movements, the idea and ideal of community and community spaces, particularly in regards to protest, and gendered development practices. She is passionate about activisms for social justice, and connections between people locally and globally who are in or seek communities that recognize and celebrate diversity and struggle to attain social justice in the current manifestation of globalization. This passion drives her research, writing, and teaching.

**Ashar Latif** was primarily molded by his childhood spent in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the raging wilds of New Jersey. Currently residing in the frozen north, he still dreams of warmer climes.

**Angela Mitropoulos** lives in Melbourne, Australia. She has been involved in noborder campaigns and xborder. She has also written a number of essays on migration, labor, and the state for *Mute*, *Culture Machine*, and other publications.

**Antonio Negri** is an independent researcher, communist militant, and former professor at the University of Padua. Emerging from the heretical Marxist tendencies of the autonomous worker's movements of the 1960s, his work has been important in understanding the changing dynamics of capitalism and the possibilities of social resistance. He has written many books, including: *Marx Beyond Marx* (1979), *The Savage Anomaly* (1981), *Communists Like Us* (with Felix Guattari, 1985), and *Empire* and *Multitude* (with Michael Hardt, 2000/2004).

**Michal Osterweil** is a PhD student in Anthropology at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. She has been involved in various activist research networks and projects, including Global Uprisings and Explorations in Open Space (a research project on Social Forums).

**Kirsty Robertson** recently finished her PhD, *Tear-Gas Epiphanies: New Economies of Protest, Vision, and Culture*, at Queen's University in Canada.