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Don't they really represent us? Being both activists and researchers at the time of the 'Spanish Revolution'

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ABSTRACT | In this article we position ourselves as socially and politically committed anthropologists, thinking about the possible ways research and activism come together in contemporary anthropology. We emphasize how critical social sciences have contributed to this debate mainly around two key ideas: the democratization of knowledge production and the politicization of that knowledge. We examine our experiences in the Spanish 15M movement and share four examples – two 'failed' and two 'successful' experiences – in which we discuss two key aspects of being activist academics. First, the difficulties and advantages of doing activism and research as a combined anthropological engagement; and, secondly, the usefulness of combining a long-term commitment to social justice as an effort to democratize mechanisms of knowledge production.

Keywords: Social activism; Spanish 15M movement; committed anthropology; collaborative research.



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Reconsidering the link between research and activism ‘here’ and ‘now’

In May 2011, the contemporary ‘Spanish Revolution’ stirred in Spanish streets and paved the way for the ‘Indignados’ (Outraged) or ‘15M’ movement (named as such due to its birth date: May 15th). For the title of this article, we use a slogan made popular during the ‘Spanish Revolution’: ‘They don’t represent us.’ The slogan was used by protesters to keep their distance from the Spanish political elite, considered indifferent to the living conditions of common people and increasingly buried in corruption scandals. We paraphrase this slogan and present it under the guise of a question in order to reflect on the supposed distinction between ‘spheres’ of research and activism and in the aim of overcoming it. Our own positionality as anthropologists who are also heavily involved as social and political activists in various social struggles particularly around the 15M movement has been the impetus for this article. Using an autoethnographic lens to unpack the complexities of collaborative ethnographic research during the ‘Spanish revolution’ 15M, we highlight the possibilities and perils of being both an anthropologist and an activist simultaneously during times of social struggles.

Tzvetan Todorov stated that scientific and political activity, despite being chronologically separated (one is usually a scientist from 9 am to 5 pm and an activist from 5 pm to 9 pm), appear united in the figure of the intellectual (1986: 6). As activist academics actively involved in both academia and social struggles, we believe that if the aforementioned dichotomy between scientist/activist is rejected, the very practice of research will be improved. Overcoming this dilemma could propel some tiny, but significant changes in intellectual University work and perhaps help the Social Sciences reposition themselves at the heart of contemporary social transformation. Although we are not saying social movements are the only location from which to address the current situation of injustice, inequality, and deprivation of individual and collective freedoms, we see the relevance of social movements as vital sites of transformation. When talking about the radical possibilities offered in/by social movements Michel Foucault wrote:

What happened in the sixties and early seventies is something to be preserved [...] These social movements have really changed our whole lives, our mentality, our attitudes, and the attitudes and mentality of other people (1997: 172-173).

This article is underpinned by the ethos of researchers understanding and appreciating the radical possibilities offered in and through contemporary social movements.

Assuming these previous considerations, in the following pages first we discuss two intrinsic dimensions to research from the perspective of activism – the democratization of knowledge production and the politicization of its contents, resorting to various theoretical contributions proceeding from Social Sciences and especially from Anthropology. We then contextualize the emergence of the 15M movement in Spain and outline its main features. Then, we put an emphasis on our lived experience in the Granada¹ 15M movement and provide four examples of empirical encounters and disagreements between activism and research, each of them traversed by the (supposed) academic/activist dichotomy and marked by a different combination of the axes ‘knowledge production democratization’ and

‘prioritization of political objectives’. We ask: Is it possible to undertake an activist research practice while reconciling these apparently opposed poles and bringing together both axes? How? Although we have no general or universalistic answers to these questions, we try to show possible ways to approach these questions ‘in practice’, based on our experience. In particular, we will argue that this objective can be more effectively achieved through the deployment of collaborative methodologies, under condition that one is part of the social movements he/she/they wish to research. In this vein – paraphrasing the title of a seminal work of Charles Hale (2008) – we formulate this article as an invitation to engage with the tensions emerging from committed fieldwork.

Between the democratization of knowledge production and the politicization of its contents: two axes that articulate militant research

The most important theoretical and methodological contributions related to the link between academia and activism in recent decades have driven in two directions.

The first aims to democratize knowledge production (Greenwood 2000; Lassiter 2005; Holmes and Marcus 2008; Rappaport 2007 and 2008). This approach usually aims to reconfigure the relationship between social movements and researchers who are trying to unsettle the inherent authority of the canon and to propose other ways of researching which are more horizontal, symmetrical, and participatory. Affecting both choice of the topic and techniques employed (including forms of shared analysis and polyphonic writing), this proposal is characterized by strong methodological aspects. Its main goal is not one more person joining a social struggle in order to achieve a specific goal, but rather to create common pathways between researchers and studied groups, walking and working together for both research and action. This is particularly the case for the ‘doubly reflexive ethnography’ proposed by Dietz (2011) or ‘collaborative ethnography’ (Arribas 2014, Dietz and Álvarez 2014, Holmes and Marcus 2008, Lassiter 2005, Rappaport 2007 and 2008). A central concern, common to all these approaches, is to reduce the ‘epistemologically authoritative’ role of the ethnographer and to encourage ‘dialogue between knowledge(s)’ where the knowledge production process itself becomes more democratic and horizontal.

The second approach, emphasizes the production of knowledge that encourages social change (Baer 1997; Huizer 1979; Scheper-Hughes 1995). This approach tends to underline links between emancipatory and transformative proposals and social movements, aiming to support them by making them theoretically, organizationally, and politically visible. This form of knowledge production entails a commitment to achieving objectives raised by social movements by putting research practice, knowledge dissemination, and teaching at their service. This is the case for scholars like Baer, who defends a notion of ‘partisan observation’ (1997: 133-141), which pursues forms of knowledge production whose value and usefulness are determined by the people affected as first person ‘owners of the problem,’ as Greenwood calls them (2000: 32). In a similar vein, Huizer emphasizes the importance of social struggles, pointing out that ‘not seeing, ignoring, these conflicts, is generally the same as taking the side of those in power’ (1979: 396). In his proposal of ‘Action Research’ or ‘Participatory Action Research’ (PAR), the researcher turns into a ‘helper’ of marginalized or subaltern groups and the research goals are aimed to empower

them. However, throughout its historic deployment PAR has been target of a number of criticisms including: the persistence of a separation between 'expert' researchers and 'oppressed' groups, with the former acting as a self-appointed spokesperson for the latter in order to 'emancipate' them (Dadusc 2014: 52-53); a lack of cooperation between various participants; increasing institutionalization of social movements; and 'the constant temptation to resort to traditional academic outputs and elite-level ways of influencing policy when change does not happen organically from below' (The Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010: 248).

Finally, it is important to mention the feminist project in anthropology (Gregorio 2006), that recognized the possibility of 'situated knowledge' and 'embodied objectivity' (Haraway 1988: 581) as a form of political-epistemological commitment. In this vein, Scheper-Hughes stated: 'I am tempted to call anthropology's bluff, to expose its artificial moral relativism and to try to imagine what forms a politically committed and morally engaged anthropology might take' (1995: 410). Feminist anthropology has been a turning point in the deployment of committed anthropology, one of its strongest features being the fact that feminist anthropologists themselves were part of the women's political movement. Accordingly, their theoretical production was closely linked to their political mobilization, something that has characterized our experiences too. In Okely's words: 'In the 1970s, the Women's Liberation Movement argued that "the personal is political"; I contend also that in an academic context "the personal is theoretical"' (1992: 9).

The Spanish Revolution and 15M movement. A brief contextualization

These theoretical debates about the roles and possibilities for activist academics and their value were helpful for us, as we experienced and participated in the 15M movement, which occurred in Spain in 2011. The economic crisis of 2008 had, in comparison with other European countries, been the most detrimental to Spain. The economic growth of the previous decade had been achieved mainly through financial speculation and an extensive mortgage vending, all of which generated a real estate bubble that finally broke and caused an associated lending market implosion (Charnock and Purcell 2011, Perugorría and Tejerina 2013: 427). Thus, the recession, a rapidly growing unemployment rate, and the increasing impoverishment of large sectors of the population encouraged a rise of movements such as 'V de Vivienda' ('H for Housing', whose name pays homage to 'V for Vendetta') or 'Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca' - PAH ('People Affected by Mortgages Platform'), which preceded the 15M social uprising. These movements were in the defence of the right to housing and to support people who, having lost their jobs, could not pay their mortgages and would be subject to evictions (Antentas 2015a: 139). At a political level, ruling political parties like the socialist government of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) was replaced by the Popular Party (PP) government on November 20, 2011. Both addressed the growing debt with austerity measures, social spending cuts, and bank bailouts with public funds (Castañeda 2012: 313-314, Hughes 2011: 408-409). The collusion and interpenetration between political power and major economic interests generated an increasing distrust of politicians and the two-party political system (Hughes 2011: 408-409), which were marked by corruption scandals that were representative of 'a neoliberalized left and a neoliberal and conservative right' (Castañeda 2012: 310). It is in this context that on May 15th,

2011, some non-traditional and newly established organizations such as ‘¡Democracia Real Ya!’ (‘Real Democracy Now!’), ‘Juventud Sin Futuro’ (‘Youth Without Future’) or ‘No Les Votes’ (‘Don’t vote for them’) organized a demonstration in the main cities of Spain, characterized by slogans like: ‘We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers’ or the aforementioned ‘They don’t represent us’ (Antentas 2015b: 12).

Inspired by the Arab Spring and the Saucepan Revolution in Iceland (Flesher-Fominaya 2015: 158), protesters decided to stay and camp in the main squares like the ‘Puerta del Sol’ in Madrid and the ‘Plaza Catalunya’ in Barcelona. This ‘Spanish Revolution’ spread out throughout the Spanish state (Castañeda 2012: 310) and with it the taking of squares and the beginning of protest camps in hundreds of cities. Even after the camps were dismantled, the constituted assemblies in neighbourhoods and in smaller towns surrounding cities continued their work (Hughes 2011: 413). For example, in Granada’s case—where we were working—after the camp in the central ‘Plaza del Carmen’ (called ‘Plaza del Pueblo’, The People’s Square, by protesters) broke up, we constituted a ‘General Assembly of Towns and Neighbourhoods’ that continued to meet periodically.

It is impossible to summarise in a few lines all the characteristics and events that marked this movement’s developments. Nevertheless, in a contemporary context marked by the return of institutional politics, the emergence of political parties, and of electoral coalitions claiming 15M experience as a part of their political DNA, it is worth mentioning that there are still groups born out of this experience doing radical work. There are groups such as the ‘Stop Evictions’ (‘Stop Desahucios’) movement, which continues to fight for the right to housing. There are other movements that continue to mobilize against state and political repression generated by a growing number of fines, arbitrary arrests of social activists, and promulgation of new draconian and authoritarian legislative reforms that harshly violate basic freedoms and rights. These groups include some of the key actors in the contemporary moment. We have been participating for a long time in both types of movements in the city of Granada.

‘Failures’ and ‘successes’ in bringing together research and activism: our experience in Granada’s 15M movement

Given that both of us were heavily involved in 15M, we were constantly negotiating our presence as researchers and activists in the field. As happened to Graeber (2013), who found out how people were re-politicizing themselves through participation in the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement, first we lived the aforementioned processes, then we thought about them in the light of our knowledge as political anthropologists, and finally we presented them as theoretical and methodological reflections. According to the elaborated framework, we will discuss both ‘failed’ and ‘successful’ experiences in bringing together social research and activism, paying particular attention to the relationship established in each case between the two axes ‘prioritization of political goals’ and ‘democratization of knowledge production’.

‘Unsuccessful’ experiences: ‘top-down’ research on ‘Stop Evictions-15M’ and the migration working group case

As 'activists not affected' (by eviction) within the group 'Stop Evictions-15M' ('Stop Desahucios 15-M': <https://afectadosporlahipotecagranada.com>), we would like to start off by sharing research conducted by a team from the Faculty of Psychology at Granada University, the Andalusian School of Public Health, and the group 'Stop Evictions' itself. This group was born within the 15M and somewhat linked to the state-level 'People Affected by Mortgages Platform' (although not directly part of it). The goal of the research was identifying psychological impact of evictions on concerned people. The study methodology consisted of 205 interviews, based on a questionnaire with typical public health studies scales, whose results were subsequently compared with a sample of 6507 people belonging to the Andalusian adult population (Granada Stop Desahucios 2014a). The study accuracy is based, according to Stop Evictions' discourse, on the participation of *catedráticos* from Granada University in its development (Granada Stop Desahucios, 2014b), that is, full-time professors occupying a higher hierarchical level in the academic status. The study makes abundant use of terms like 'mental disorder' or 'mental health' to classify some of the worst consequences of evictions (Cano 2014, Granada Stop Desahucios 2014a and 2014b, Huertas 2014, Ramírez 2014). In the same vein, it is emphasized 'how depression, alcoholism and suicide rates are growing unstopably within people affected by evictions' (Granada Stop Desahucios 2014b, authors' translation). Obviously, this is done with the respectable aims of making the dramatic consequences of evictions public and of reinforcing the legitimacy of the groups' struggle for an effective right to housing. Nevertheless, it seems to us that this framing leads to the production of somewhat 'victimizing' and 'disempowering' narratives. Although it is a kind of 'tactical victimization,' it is still victimization nevertheless. This way of presenting the research is based on the groups' need of having its struggles legitimised by public opinion. We call this a 'logic of validation.' Although this logic aims to produce counter-hegemonic narratives by questioning existing policies on housing, it does so by appealing to knowledge understood and established by that very same hegemonic order. It uses research instrumentally, to generate insights into the experiences of people being evicted, but in the process supports power relations existing within academy and it ends up naturalizing them and reinforcing a scientific patterns of knowledge production. Thus, although this research is characterized by a strong commitment to social transformation, it unfortunately has a limited concern for the democratization of knowledge production. Here, the 'division of tasks' between activism and research is deepened, where neither the first nor the second are reciprocally transformed. Furthermore, a 'logic of externality' is replicated, in which there can be mutual support between the two spheres of research and activism, without challenging or blurring the borders of either. In the process, they both remain unchanged. We are not claiming that is necessarily bad, but as committed activist anthropologists, we expect better.

Another 'unsuccessful example' comes from the Granada 15M working group on migration. Its promoters were mostly Spanish and European activists who were trying to get migrants involved in the movements.² This does not mean that there were no migrants within the working group, but rather, that inclusiveness was a concern for many people within the movement. The first public meeting of this group took place in May of 2012. It was attended by about 40 people with diverse profiles and opinions regarding tasks and aims of the

group. There were students and activists from Social Sciences on one side, and people mainly from NGOs with an educational and social interventionist background, on the other. One of our first discussions was outlining the main goals of the group: although the group did not carry out a specific research on the following issues, some members (one of us amongst them) wanted to produce theory about the migrants' role within the current capitalist re-organization. In doing so, they wanted to denounce specific cases of migrants' rights violations to inform on institutional racism episodes happening in the city. Other members of the group were more interested in focusing on values such as diversity, plurality and respect, mostly understood in moral terms. They wanted to use knowledge in a more applied direction, among other things, by accompanying migrants and carrying out educational activities.

The group lasted until approximately the beginning of 2013. We attempted to bring in more people with migrant backgrounds in order to ensure more direct participation in the group's activities. We tried to investigate illegal police raids and denounce cases of institutional racism in the city. Although the group was horizontal in both its principles and objectives, what we missed was a clearer 'politicization of knowledge'. Even though everyone had knowledge and experience about migration, not all were heading toward a transformative political objective, which would have required questioning certain moral, paternalistic and Eurocentric attitudes addressed towards migrants' victimization. In the end, the group was not able to generate appropriate tools for more radical thinking, nor did it achieve the participation of the migrant community itself.

The collaborative shift: Stop Repression's research on 'blacklists' and our collaborative ethnography with 'Stop Evictions-15M'

'Stop Repression' (<https://stoprepressiongranada.wordpress.com>) was also born during 15M. It is a plural and horizontal collective, autonomous from political parties and trade unions. Its assembly takes decisions by consensus and pursues a double political aim: to denounce repressive actions undertaken by institutions in the city and to produce substantive changes in the exercise of the right to protest and freedom of expression. Stop Repression was born from a felt necessity: that of helping activists who were increasingly harassed by arbitrary fines imposed by public authorities (one of us was fined six times in approximately a year!). These fines are based on visual identifications of protesters by police and made without requesting the protestors to show their identity card. Blacklists play a central role in administrative repression, since they are systematically used by police to visually identify activists participating in demonstrations and fine them; they are a way to criminalize, marginalize and control social movements.³ Although visual identifications are as legal as 'in situ' requests for identity cards, what we denounced was that such identifications were not based on clearly legal procedures. In fact, the documents that the police officers used to certify their visual identification of activists' participation were usually signed by the very same police officers (identified by their badge number): since they could not personally know all the fined protesters, they had probably used the aforementioned blacklists.

In order to accomplish our political goal, we had to co-research on administrative repression (Oliver and Urda, 2015) as one of the government's strategies to criminalize and discourage social protest. At the same time, we had

to instruct ourselves on concepts such as ‘Criminal Law of the Enemy’ (Zaffaroni, 2013), bills and legislation, especially focusing on the new law of public security and the criminal code reform both of which were approved in 2015.⁴ We systematized the information produced and finally we passed to action. We appealed against 73 fines, winning 59 administrative trials (81%) and losing 14 (19%). The cost of court fees was covered by self-financing activities. In most of the cases, police officers could not prove they previously knew the accused activists nor that they had caused any public disorder during the demonstrations. Later on, we stopped just defending ourselves and took to the offensive. We processed twenty-one complaints based on the same number of favourable verdicts, requiring an investigation into the existence of blacklists and demanded police accountability. Three complaints were admitted. As the judicial inquiry started, four police officers were charged as accused parties while two had to declare as witnesses. The police had to explain exactly how they visually identified two different people with no criminal record. The case ran very slowly, and in the end it was dismissed. The battle was lost but still we think it was worth the struggle.

The other ‘successful’ experience refers, once again, to Granada ‘Stop Evictions-15M’ group, but this time it is research undertaken by ourselves together with other committed academics, within a larger research project officially funded by academic institutions. It is still ongoing.⁵ At the end of 2015, making the most of our previous activist experience and our contacts in the movement, we were allowed to start a collaborative ethnography with Stop Evictions. This project had two main aims: First, to produce useful knowledge for housing movements, relevant for their own practices. Second, to produce knowledge as collectively and horizontally as possible, attempting to question the dichotomy between research ‘subjects’ and ‘objects.’ During this time, not only did we attend the movement assemblies and participate in its collective actions (such as weekly rallies in front of bank branches), but we also activated various research strategies. In particular, we conducted fifteen ‘interviews/conversations’ in one assembly and three ‘debate groups’ (each one made up of four sessions) in the other. The issues debated had to do with the pros and cons of the organizational forms and action strategies of the group, and with the political subjectivation process of the activists as well. Even though the methodologies deployed may appear traditional, the difference is that their main aim has not been the production of discourses to be unilaterally analysed by us as academics, but rather the production of materials on which the group itself could use to reflect upon during a second stage.

Thus, the questions formulated for our research protocol were not aimed to address pre-established subjects – the ‘research group’ key issues – but rather were meant to facilitate the emergence of subjects that were relevant for the activists themselves that would be the basis for a subsequent process of collective co-analysis. During our conversations, a wide set of ‘questions’ were raised for debate. The aim was that the materials coming out from the research process would help to improve the organizational/political effectiveness of the group and could also provide a ‘counter-history’ of the movement itself, based on the words of its protagonists. Therefore, our idea was diametrically opposed to the extractivist approach which characterized the psychology-based research discussed above. In fact, our aim was to combine the democratization of

knowledge production (entailed by the potential of collaborative ethnography) and the production of useful knowledge(s) for the activists.

Both within ‘Stop Repression’ and ‘Stop Evictions-15M’, our role is that of being activists, such as any other member of the group. We think these cases show quite clearly that the kind of militant research we are interested in combines horizontal processes of knowledge production with a commitment to transformative political objectives. Although they are good examples, we don’t want to mythologize them. In the first case, all together we accomplished information and documentation tasks, we elaborated on theoretical contents and disseminated them; we analysed data and undertook protest actions. However, horizontality must be constantly cared and sought for, among other things, because we are a very diverse group, characterized by different stories, knowledge and ideological positions. Furthermore, it is not easy to undertake any research practice within this specific context, given that ‘one of the aims of state repression is that of having social movements taking care of themselves rather than addressing political issues’ (Holm 2009: 10, authors’ translation). This aspect certainly affects the way we work and it permanently conditions it, often determining our agenda from the outside. In the second case, also ‘Stop Evictions-15M’ is affected by an ‘emergency logic’ that has it constantly focusing on the achievement of immediate practical objectives rather than creating spaces for reflection and mutual listening in the long term.

Our most important learning has been not to overvalue our academic knowledge. Paradoxically, our excessive concern not to ‘silence’ activists had entailed our renunciation to intervene in internal debates. However, along the way we realized that the activists were experts of their own worlds, they were not dependent at all on our academic knowledge. We learned from them as they were constantly generating a set of useful knowledge(s) regarding mortgage procedures, legal appeals, administrative deadlines, how to deal with bank officers. All issues on which we ‘as academics’ had almost nothing to say. Furthermore, on occasion we had to insist and remind our comrades that we were not only activists but also researchers. Thus, our recognition as academics was not a given. In conclusion, both experiences have their limits. However, they surely point to an attempt to value the ‘process’ over the ‘product’, and to carry out non-extractivist, collaborative and committed ethnographies, aimed at addressing the relationship between academia and social struggle in ways different from most hegemonic approaches.

Concluding remarks

Throughout this article we have emphasized the existence of two tensions: the (virtual) opposition between ‘academia’ and ‘activism’ and the relationship between the prioritization of political goals and the democratization of knowledge production. Let us draw some conclusions, which will inevitably be incomplete. First, the relation between academia and social movements entails two symmetrical risks. On the one hand, social movements may not recognize the academy and reject it as a whole, or they may ‘use’ it as a mere validation instrument for their own struggles. Without a critical engagement with the research establishment, social movement actors may not see its internal contradictions and may not support processes leading to its transformation. After all, the University may belong to a social reality that movements intend to

transform. Secondly, supposedly committed academics may 'use' social movements, for example, by 'grabbing movements' knowledge' (Dadusc 2014: 49) with an aim to validate their own theories, to achieve or enhance their academic prestige, or to elaborate policy proposals to governmental actors (Dadusc 2014: 48). Such work has the effect of fostering professionalization and institutionalization and creating 'experts on movements' figures in the process (The Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010: 266). In this process, academics often neither give in to a long-term commitment to these movements, nor do they enhance the possibility of 'learn[ing] from these perspectives how to know differently' (Dadusc 2014: 49).

Within the twofold dis-acknowledgement dynamics, there is a risk that might make us lose sight of the internal diversity of both of the academic world and of social movements. This could lead to essentialist, romantic and exotic narratives of the nature of the two—in the case of the former mainly negative, and in the case of the latter mainly positive ones. For example, by converting horizontality of movements into a myth, regardless of unequal power relations that also exist within social movements, academics may misunderstand the way movements might lose critical capacity as they change or they might not be able to make sense of internal sectarianisms within movements, and so on (Calle 2012: 230-232).⁶ Similarly the academy, despite often disempowering, normalizing, distorting, colonizing or silencing critical knowledge produced by social movements (Calle 2012, Santucho 2012), does not stop being a 'structure of legitimation,' a site to access resources, and 'a place where it is possible to work on ways of knowledge', so that 'social movements can permeate and reach agreements with specific persons and under particular conditions' (Calle 2012: 226, authors' translation). Ultimately, the supposed dichotomy between Academia and Activism (both in capital letters), so often assumed on both sides, is simply false.

If anything, we should speak about a 'hegemonic academy' and a 'hegemonic political activism', or even better, 'committed academic practices' and 'flexible and open practices of political activism' (Leyva 2010: 17, authors' translation), both 'in lower case letters and plural' (Leyva 2010: 14, authors' translation). Thus, the goal should be not to dissolve borders between academia and social movements, but rather to create opportunities for mutual recognition between people committed to social change proceeding from the research world and activist groups interested in sharing a path towards a mutual transformation. Being activists and researchers at the same time, we would like to think about transforming both knowledge production and activist practices so that we do not have to choose between a membership to one or the other, where we do not feel obliged to clarify in each case whether we are speaking 'as anthropologists' or 'as militants.' As Santucho puts it: 'We are not researchers with a political standpoint as well, but rather our role as researchers is influenced and reorganized by this political wish' (2012: 119, authors' translation). Of course, not every researcher has to be a social activist and vice versa, but maybe we have something interesting to say for those people who, like us, are already both things and have decided to investigate issues closely related to their everyday political practices. For us, searching for a better adjective to define the type of 'observation' to be undertaken in the field does not remain a terminological debate, it is animated by a deeper transformative intention to lay the foundation and give meaning to new forms of

both. From this point of view, to be ‘epistemic partners’ (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 84) is necessary but not sufficient: there must also be a political partnership.

Second, in accounting for the tensions between the ‘horizontalizing’ and ‘democratizing’ axes, that is, between a focus on research practices or on social transformation dynamics, there is no reason why these axes should enter into conflict. Nevertheless, as we have shown empirically, they do sometimes. Imagined visually, we see research strategies discussed in this essay as characterized by different levels of ‘knowledge production democratization’. We see them as part of a continuous line in which the minimum degree of collaboration requires ‘returning the results’ and the maximum degree is where the research belongs to those who carry out the collaborative and horizontal practices throughout all stages of the research process. Similarly, at least in abstract terms, the researcher’s level of involvement with ‘studied’ groups and social changes achievement may vary from a more committed attitude to a less committed one. The two unsuccessful examples were marked by a positive value on one scale, but practically lacked the other component. Instead, the two ‘successful’ examples were marked by a positive combination on both scales; although at different levels, they combined a participatory knowledge production process with a political aim and a will to generate useful knowledge. Following these examples, we posit that any of the infinite combinations marked by a ‘positive’ value in both directions is a good start.

Finally, we emphasize the usefulness of combining collaborative research methodologies with the participation in social movements as activists. Maybe it is the combination of both conditions that really gave strength and consistence to our research practice, providing insights that would have been otherwise difficult to find out. This does not mean that we discredit those research practices that, even while being committed to social change, end up validating themselves by reproducing dominant patterns of knowledge (production). On the contrary, from our specific places of enunciation and our conditions as both militants and researchers we state that this is not the kind of committed research we wish to practice. Similarly, we think that a merely ‘experimental’ collaboration is not enough, unless it is oriented to questioning the hegemonic power relations. We are fully aware of the limits, difficulties, contradictions as well as disciplinary and institutional constraints existing in the neoliberal university. That is why we do not formulate this proposal as a prescription, but rather as an ideal scenario we still yet hope to reach.

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Notes

1. Granada is a medium-sized city; it hosts a major university and is located in the eastern part of Andalusia, the most southern region of Spain.
2. Alexandrakis shows how people affected by a problem do not always feel motivated by social movements and their overall resistance strategies (such as the struggle against austerity). However, if they 'enter into intimate, critical relation, a shared topography of political sense may emerge along with new critical agency', paving the way to 'actions that evoke the coming political, within the crisis ordinary' (2016: 43).
3. We speak about these as administrative repression as these fines are based on administrative rather than criminal law. That means, for example, that by any means a person unable to pay a fine will be sent to prison. Nevertheless, according to Spanish administrative law, this also entails much less guarantees a long litigation process. Although the accused may appeal to different courts, it will be much more difficult for him/her to fully exercise the right to defence.
4. Commonly called a 'gag law' ('Ley Mordaza'), the new law on public security and reform of the criminal code has been heavily criticized by United Nations experts due to violating basic rights and freedoms, taking Spain back to an obscure past allegedly left behind (New York Times 2015).
5. The other researchers being Aurora Álvarez Veinguer, Antonia Olmos Alcaraz, Rocío García Soto, and many other comrades from the Stop Evictions movement. As for the project, its title is: 'Emergent Processes and Agencies of the Commons: Collaborative Social Research Praxis and New Forms of Political Subjectivation' (reference: CSO2014-56960-P, 2014 call of the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Innovation).
6. Accordingly, we recognize the utility of 'critically engaged activist research', a notion used by Speed (2006: 71) to define the ability to carry out a critical analysis of power relations and to debate them within the social movements one is part of.

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