09 2019

Militant Research in the Post-Truth Era

Lina Dokuzović

When right-wing politicians increasingly use populist strategies and social media as a platform, seeking to discredit established researchers, scientists, and journalists in order to shake the public's belief in media content, many people end up relying on dubious information sources and no longer know how to distinguish the difference. Facebook and Twitter are viewed by many as legitimate news platforms, whereas news sources that were trusted for decades are being viewed as “fake news” when they do not support populist ideals. These same populists manage to tout “alternative facts,” which represent a major shift from popular opinion to “fact” or from *information* to *knowledge*, and access to knowledge is being used to define class divisions, exclude masses of people, filter the movement of people, and support demagoguery – all characteristics of the so-called “post-truth” era. And rather than supporting the mass democracy of the Internet that some had hoped for in the late 1990s, what these information sources/platforms do have in common is their efficacy in capturing individuals' private content and functioning as mass surveillance mechanisms. It is indeed the case now that “[i]n the digital age, information is fluid, and it is getting harder not to drown.”[1]

Around ten years ago, many of us were performing militant research on the transformations taking place in the knowledge economy, cognitive capitalism, and the interlinked university reforms as part of struggles against the commodification of knowledge and the corporatization of the university.[2] There existed a widespread energy for fighting these processes at the time. It was felt around the world. The financial crisis had taken on a global dimension, and the subsequent austerity measures began impacting people on an unprecedented scale. One of the spaces where this was felt most strongly was the university, as universities were being presented as part-and-parcel of broader reform packages: make institutions more flexible, cut "unprofitable" components to save money – no, to *save* the university – the *university* in crisis. The proposed remedies to the financial crisis were being posited as the core nodes of the crisis itself, and the steps taken to resolve these crises funneled money and resources back to resolving the financial crisis.[3] The university stood at the center of these processes, however, as the purported panacea to crisis was knowledge – the central commodity of the knowledge economy and cognitive capitalism.

Austerity measures and reforms were so similar in different parts of the world that exchanging experiences of struggle and of researching their tendencies and logic became a major strength for protest actions. These protests were then able to expand, and they snowballed into occupations and spread across cities, regions, and continents. Movements became increasingly interconnected, and this anger and exchange of knowledge bred creative solutions, alternatives, communication, sharing: resilience. Shortly thereafter, though, resources became more and more limited. Common spaces were rented out to corporate interests. Space became scarce. Increased turnover of the student body led to shorter study periods

and broken communication between different generations of students. More and more people had to take on (multiple) jobs to survive. Time became more and more precious.

Along with student turnover, the turnover of teachers and researchers also increased. This was organized through new mobility packages which hyper-emphasized mobility as the great catalyst
of the knowledge economy. They exploited the notion that *knowledge* • (more incremented) *time* • (more frequented) *space* = *more cognitive capital faster*.[4] Thus, as mobility became a key emphasis in many of the reforms, it was this node that exposed the exclusion of masses of people through new filtration mechanisms in Europe. Precisely calibrated differential inclusion became the means for managing the movement of people. It had been calibrated according to the needs of the market, prioritizing the knowledge-based economy, and creating an increasing class gap and segregation of migrants through new visa requirements and border and migration regimes that catered to the knowledge economy.[5] However, this formula for stabilizing the aftermath of the economic crisis was now itself in a state of crisis. And just like in the case of the "university crisis," the approach to dealing with the mass movement of people was to label it a "refugee/migrant crisis" itself, and let a new wave of xenophobia mask the underlying, unresolved crisis – one of an advanced capitalism, which can only temporarily be remedied at the cost of dividing and excluding parts of the population and pinching public pockets through creative new methods – and the more the public has to tighten its belts, the more convincing the arguments against the migrants/others become. And those in power making these arguments have become increasingly popular.

Any wins that local protests had achieved typically only affected the local citizens and left the most vulnerable parts of the student body – particularly the migrants – to deal with the worst of the consequences: deregulated tuition at far higher rates than locals, a reliance on loans as opposed to scholarships (the latter of which they had limited or no access to) and consequent indebtedness, increased surveillance and visa regulations, among others. Having catered to the most privileged parts of the population, the gains thereby fooled many people into believing that they had achieved universal wins from their struggles. It also successfully fooled people into believing that the reforms had, therefore, been fully implemented and that the time for negotiation was over, and that they had seen the worst of what the reforms had to offer. And this consequently masked the much broader processes taking place across the European knowledge-based economy that were reliant on mobility and the development of new modes of radically filtering the movement of people through knowledge-based criteria. The *extensive* terrain of knowledge-based transformations still remained after the *intensive* transformations had been implemented.[6] In other words, while institutions had been internally restructured by university reforms, the European space was still undergoing a massive restructuring imposed by these very same reforms in order to protect the borders of its knowledge economy.

Many activists experienced burnout. Some had been arrested, some others had been under surveillance. Fear became prevalent – fear of defaulting on debts/loans, of surviving in a post-crisis economy/world, of finding employment in academia, and that fear was felt the most strongly by the most vulnerable parts of the population. The knowledge economy grew, and students and educators suffered, too, because precarity was often the result of the

widespread promise of cultural capital and social mobility. The "crisis in education" was shifted to those paying tuition fees and those receiving increasingly precarious teaching positions, and both began questioning whether the university was still a relevant space for emancipatory thinking and for a mass struggle. Meanwhile, hedge fund managers profited from student debt, and a whole new market opened up for profiting from the knowledge economy – now including the bankers that caused the financial crisis that steered the austerity measures, reforms, and transformations to begin with.[7] All these consequences led to the emergence of a *gap* that continued to grow: a simultaneous gap in access to higher education and a gap in migration/mobility regulated by knowledge-based criteria.

Ironically, in an attempt to harness knowledge-production in all spaces at all times, tuition fees and the corporatization of the university have been creating a situation that is more and more similar to the one in the United States: access to higher education is becoming a luxury of the higher classes. And the consequence that has been evident for several decades in the United States is that this reputation has created a growing knowledge-/class-based resentment, which has become manifested in the current state of *anti-intellectualism* we see in many parts of the world. As Keti Chukrov states, "When knowledge becomes the main capital and means of production, it is inequality in knowledge that rather causes insult and the mood of non-recognition amongst the unprivileged layers of society."[8] Knowledge-based divisions stand at the core of class divisions today.

Anti-intellectualism has been utilized rather effectively by far-right populists and nationalists as not only an argument for discrediting intellectuals, and science in general in many cases, but also as the basis for being able to argue and invalidate complex issues with

random fabrications and nonsense in order to maintain dominance. Anti-intellectualism supports demagoguery at its finest: people are told what they want to hear in order to uphold the cult of strong leadership. All the while, people are briefly convinced that these knowledge-/class-related divisions are no longer relevant and do not apply to them – that they will not get the short end of the stick within a machinery that creates huge class divisions based on knowledge if only they unconditionally support those who appeal to some sense of familiarity.[9]

Translocal militant research

During the university occupations, various interconnected nodes of struggle existed, which made it possible to do multifaceted militant research across borders. Many groups discussed the eventuality of abandoning universities as spaces for political organization and struggle. Some other groups had unique successes in hijacking knowledge/resources from universities to disseminate to their communities.[10] And a tremendous amount of knowledge was produced through those translocal struggles, with an immense level of exchange existing between them. While there is certainly significant activism taking place today, particularly in the migrant and feminist movements, not to mention the struggles for access to education that never waned in many parts of the Global South – many of the important strengths, strategies, and modes of disseminating and archiving experiential knowledge have suffered in recent years.

People in grassroots organizations and collectives in the left often used mailing lists and other short-lived platforms (e.g. n-1) for communicating and organizing. However, new meetings, events, and work groups would often create a proliferation of new mailing

lists or platforms. This flood of content made it difficult to consume information, and these platforms inevitably began to collapse. The emergence of Facebook served as a new, centralized space for consolidated communication and networking, but this was met with a fear of surveillance and caused many people to abandon those efforts, struggling to recruit others for redeveloping alternatives. Furthermore, many important online archives of struggle began to disappear. This coupled with the flood of post-truth dynamics on social media led many to feel a sense of political impotence in a landscape that was increasingly veering to the right.

From November 23–25, 2018, a group of people with a history of militant research practice met in Barcelona to discuss strategies of translocal militant research in the present-day. This allowed and forced us to reflect on the broader political landscape and the limitations and potentialities with which we are faced. It also forced us to reflect on the activities and actions in which we had been involved in the past 5–10 years, along with their successes and failures. One of the organizing principles of the meeting was to transversally connect different nodes of a broader struggle. Therefore, it included people from feminist collectives, environmentalist groups, collectives working on logistics, migrant struggles, university/knowledge-based struggles, rights to the city/commons, and radical care practices. There was thus also a strong emphasis on translocality for strengthening and developing new perspectives of struggle.

In a short period of time, we exchanged information about the movements we came from, including our work perspectives and strategies, we conducted numerous concentrated workshops, interviewed each other from various angles, mapped our processes, discussed our specific translocalities, and began writing about the experience. We discussed the concrete forms of militant research

used by different groups and their strengths and weaknesses in the current political moment. These processes led to some nostalgia and storytelling and forced us to reflect on and map the changes that took place around us in the last 5–10 years that brought us to this current moment. Approaching this from a translocal perspective allowed these personal stories to act as puzzle pieces for clarifying a broader dimension of political transformations in different parts of the world.

Many of us had experienced a sense of guilt, anxiety or detachment. The struggles themselves had changed, people were stuck in precarious positions, some people had begun families, others suffered from burnout or other health-related problems. And while everyone was still active in some capacity, this sense of impotence and lack that became so widespread had penetrated our subjectivities as well. Our increased isolation – a consequence of the processes that led to it – made our exchange of lived knowledge more precarious. And this in turn made us more vulnerable. We thus discussed the roles of affect, anxiety, and grief in our work, as well as the notion of vulnerability and what we can learn from it. Our vulnerabilities have in many ways certainly resulted from a capitalism in crisis and the transformations that it induced. However, we also understood this crisis as a structural vulnerability in and of itself. This allowed us to reframe certain questions and to ask *can one vulnerability be used to destabilize another?* In other words, departing from the notion that we could use these experiences as forms of counter-power, we spoke of how we could use an exchange of our experiential and embodied knowledges of vulnerability as a strength – not as a lack[11] – for articulating and imagining new modes of action today. We thus imagined connecting our previous practices that we spoke of to the current situation, learning from our successes – and perhaps more

importantly – from our failures in order to imagine our practices anew.

In addition to questioning the role of vulnerability in relation to our strengths and weaknesses, we also outlined other goals/needs we saw in moving forward. These included the need for new spaces for archiving our knowledge, experiences, successes, and failures, i.e. elaborating conflicts in a visible way that can help to develop future steps. We questioned which technologies we can use for documenting/sharing knowledge in a secure way, how we can increase access to our knowledge commons, how we can observe our enemies, which strategies of extra-market sharing or production we can learn from and put into practice, how we can prevent the isolation that has been increasing among people in recent years, and how we can prevent exclusion in this context. All of this led to the proposals for a translocal network school that could connect knowledges of struggles in different geographic locations beyond the online network.[12]

Let me end with a thought experiment based on the concept of the Future Archive, developed by Manuela Zechner (co-organizer/ participant of the meeting), and on some of the workshops from the meeting in Barcelona.[13] The Future Archive is a perspective and series of fictional interviews for reinterpreting the present from an imagined, desirable future. I began writing this by reflecting back on 2008 and the snowball effect produced by the austerity and fear of the financial crisis, as we began doing in the Barcelona meeting. If we look at the present from 2008, it's perhaps not so surprising. In 2008, extreme austerity measures were becoming commonplace. Many new forms of web surveillance had become widespread after the 9/11 attacks. There was a broad sense of fear, anxiety, and paranoia. The US had an unfair election that outraged many people worldwide. And a new conservatism was dividing

societies around the world. There are certainly differentiations, but that situation somehow doesn't seem so different from what we are experiencing today. And not only did we survive that, but new mass movements, which were fighting against similar forms of oppression, rapidly expanded translocally and became more networked than ever before, leaving behind a wealth of knowledge on strategies and perspectives of struggle.

Today, we have become so inundated with fear that the left has been adopting strategies of fear-mongering, previously predominantly the domain of the right, to stimulate people into action. However, let us try to use these historical moments – rather than fear – for approaching our experiences and vulnerabilities as strengths rather than lack and as anchor-points for reimagining a desirable future: a reality where we use our translocal knowledges from feminist and queer collectives, migrant struggles, knowledge-based struggles, struggles for commons, struggles against displacement, and radical care practices; a reality where committees of poor and disenfranchised lead the decision and policy-making and where knowledges of struggle become more important than “alternative facts”; a reality in which our sense of self does not become destabilized but rather anchored through an exchange of our experiences of embodied struggle. In a time when a constantly turbulent news cycle makes it more and more difficult to focus and to understand what is taking place around us, let us instead comprise a map of the nodes of past successes and failures, of our embodied and experiential knowledges, for revisiting and developing strategies of struggle in the present-day.

---

[1] Govinda, Kishor, (2019), “Book Review: Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest": http://sanhati.com/articles/19056/

[2] Militant research is meant to break down the divisions between the subject/researcher and the object/researched and comes from a tradition that has spanned from the co-research/*conricerca* of the Italian *operaista* movement, which questioned the conditions of labor in the 1960s/70s, to feminist groups analyzing living and working conditions – and their overlaps in the home – in consciousness raising groups in the 1970s, to more recent groups that have analyzed the role of precarity in new modes of exploitation in working and living relations. For a series of articles on the subject, see: https://transversal.at/transversal/0406

[3] See e.g. Adamson, Morgan. (2009). “The Financialization of Student Life: Five Propositions on Student Debt.” *Polygraph*, *21*, 97–110.

[4] See chapters 2 and 3 of Dokuzović, Lina, (2016), *Struggles for Living Learning*, transversal texts.

[5] See Dokuzović, Lina, (2018), “From Guest Workers to Guest Consumers: A Disposable Labor Force in the Age of Cognitive Capitalism”: https://transversal.at/transversal/0718/dokuzovic/en; and Mezzadra, Sando, & Neilson, Brett, (2013), *Border as Method: Or the Multiplication of Labor,* Durham, London: Duke University Press.

[6] I refer to the restructuring that reforms in higher education imposed within institutions as *intensive*, and those taking place on a supranational level as *extensive* (referring to temporal and spatial transformations respectively, they are terms which I borrow from

Mezzadra and Neilson [2013 p. 68]). For a more detailed analysis, see chapters 2 and 3 of Dokuzović, L. *Struggles for Living Learning*.

[7] Dokuzović, L. (2016), esp. chapters 2 and 3.

[8] Chukrov, Keti, (2018), "On the Envy of the Servant and the Benevolence of the Master": https://transversal.at/transversal/0718/chukhrov/en

[9] Discriminatory statements by politicians excused with "he's saying what we've all been thinking, but were too afraid to say before," have become all too prevalent in recent years.

[10] For instance, the Rural Network and the Abahlali baseMjondolo, a shack dwellers' movement in Durban, South Africa, elected a group of its members to attend the KwaZulu-Natal University through the combined financial donations of its community, in order to bring back and disseminate the knowledge they obtained in the university to use in their everyday lives and struggles. See: http://abahlali.org/node/5843/

[11] This notion of using capacity rather than lack lies at the center of the concept of *living learning* – or "the radical politicization of everyday life and common knowledges as social spaces of knowledge production" (Dokuzović 2016, p. 193).

[12] The blog-in-progress can be found at https://translocalcoresearch.wordpress.com/programme-2/ and a series of interviews within the group can be found here: https://archive.org/details/@translocalmilitantresearch

[13] https://thefuturearchiveblog.wordpress.com/