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Learning and organising for radical change: A counter-history of reading groups as popular education

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Abstract

Historically, radical politics has attempted both institutional and wider social change using organisation as the main method. This article uses this premise to examine examples of reading groups in relation to social and political movements. In particular it looks at the pedagogical and organisational processes that constitute reading groups and how these processes intersect with each other. This is to understand processes of organisation and processes of learning as being in parallel and directly relating to each other. While reading groups often play a minor role in social and political movements, they nonetheless can be significant. This article argues that reading groups can under some conditions and in certain contexts, contribute to the building of solidarity and provide forms of continuity or social infrastructure, in a way that other forms of organisation, such as meetings cannot. The aim here is to examine the potential for development of political agency and solidarity through self-organised study groups. By exploring these little examined group learning practices in different contexts, it might be possible to glean the potential for mutual learning and organising to help to build and sustain social infrastructures for social transformation.

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Learning and organising for radical change: A counter-history of reading groups as popular education

In a roundtable discussion in 2000, Stanley Aronowitz talked about organising a study group with fellow workers at the steel factory where he worked before starting his academic life. He described how, while none of them had had a college education, they read novels and sometimes works of theory together. This, for him, was his first form of political activity. Indeed, Aronowitz describes how the process of reading and studying together directly led to more active union involvement: "and the next thing you knew we were opposing the leadership of our district on issues of union power. It started from a study group" (Shukaitis et al., 2003, p. 86). Aronowitz's experience draws a direct link between reading with others in a small group and processes of political organising. In this case, political action in the form of trade union involvement. Indeed, it has been argued, that historically, radical politics has attempted institutional change with organisation as the main method (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2010, p. 25). Furthermore, it could even be argued that this is also true for wider social change. How this takes place is therefore worth examining further, and in this case it will be done through an examination of reading groups.

As a form of organising, reading groups don't come as readily to mind as public assemblies and meetings. However, there is in fact a long history of reading and learning groups existing in relation to social and political movements. Perhaps due to their ubiquitousness or perceived lack of utility, though, they have been relatively invisible. Reading groups have however, been part of the co-operative movement, trade union and community-based educational initiatives and occupied factories, to name a few. Groups have met, and still do, in cafes, bookshops, social centres, libraries, info shops, public spaces, occupations and people's homes. Reading groups have been organised within and across a wide range of institutional and non-institutional settings, existing on the edges or in the margins between formal and informal social spheres. While they often play a minor role in social and political movements, they do, I would argue, contribute to the building of solidarity and provide forms of continuity or social infrastructure that can be built upon in a way that meetings cannot.

It has been argued that processes of organisation are directly related to processes of "understanding, of interpreting the world, and expressing modes of social being" (Shukaitis et al., 2007, p. 31). However, the relationship between the two processes has not been explored that extensively. This article will therefore explore this connection by looking at reading groups both as forms of peer learning and as methods for organising. Reading groups are forums in which both processes of understanding and interpreting the world, and processes of organisation, albeit on a small scale, take place. The aim here is to examine the potential for the development of political agency and solidarity through self-organised study groups and towards this end, I will look at several historical examples.

Theoretical framework

Scholarship on reading groups as social forms has been hitherto reasonably limited. There are fragments about reading groups scattered in and amongst other scholarly work on, for example, the cooperative movement within Black American communities, Spanish anarchist practices of the 1930's, feminist consciousness raising groups and groups involved in social movements connected to the New Left (Ackelsberg, 1991; Farinati & Firth, 2016; Nemhard, 2004; Teodori, 1964). In addition, the history of women's book groups in the US has been charted extensively by Elizabeth Long (2003). And there have been more recent reflections by scholar/activists Burton et al. (2015), on reading groups as activist research, which I will explore further during this paper. I will also build here on my recent PhD work on reading groups related to the historical novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance* and a recent article charting a partial history of reading groups (Firth, 2019; Firth, 2021).

Here, however, the emphasis is on the dual processes of learning and organisation. Firstly, in terms of pedagogical processes, I am taking a perspective from popular education. Stemming from the ideas of radical pedagogue Paulo Freire, Crowther et al. state that popular education is "based on a clear analysis of the nature of inequality, exploitation and oppression" (1999, p. 4). Popular education is rooted in the interests, experiences, and struggles of ordinary people, and is overtly political and critical of the status quo. There is a clear commitment to progressive social and political change, with a primary focus on learning as collective rather than being purely individual. The collective is conceived as coming into being through a process of learning together, so there is already something of a connection made between learning and organisation.

Freire's ideas can give us pointers as to how we can think about reading collectively in relation to politics. Freire formulated critical literacy practices as "militant research", a perspective that highlights the co-constitution of knowledge and subjectivity. Reading together with others may not be political in and of itself, but as Aronowitz's experience shows it can lead to political action in certain circumstances. For Freire, education is indispensable to political action because of the role it plays in the development of critical consciousness and consequently of developing voice. The aim is to develop voices capable of speaking on their own terms, voices capable of listening, retelling and challenging the grounds for knowledge and power. In addition, Freire contends that context is as important as text. This includes the context in which the text was produced but also the context in which the encounter, the reading, takes place. For Freire, reading the word always implies a "reading of the world", with movement from world to word and from word to world always present and continuous (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 25). The knowledge developed will differ, depending on the particular context in which it is produced.

Another important pedagogical concept here is Harney and Moten's notion of *study*. In their joint work *The Undercommons*, they posit study as an activity that exists entirely for the sake of itself. Study, for Harney and Moten is primarily a speculative collective activity, which doesn't just

stay in the realm of survival but actively hopes and dreams for something else. An “undifferentiated labour that knows itself to be superfluous” and is in excess of any demands and expectations (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 29). They liken study to collective jazz improvisation and this may be useful in thinking about small reading or learning groups. Indeed, Elizabeth Long in her examination of women’s book clubs also describes what goes on in these informal groups as being similar to orchestral jazz ensembles.

In relation to the second aspect of the dual processes of learning and organisation, we will now turn to thinking about reading groups as organisation. There are several perspectives that I will draw from here and although there may be some debate as to the compatibility between them, I think they all offer something useful in this context. The first perspective to outline is one from organisational studies, in which organisation is defined as “actively decided order” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2010). This defines processes of organisation in relation to decision making. Furthermore, it has been suggested that decision is the fundamental aspect of organisation and what differentiates it from other social forms such as networks or institutions, which emerge more organically. Ahrne and Brunsson suggest that there are several organisational elements that, through decision, constitute organisation. These include membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring and sanctions. They make the distinction between complete and partial organisation. If all elements are present, it constitutes a complete organisation, and if fewer of these elements are present, it should be defined as partial organisation. I have already stated that a reading group is quite different to a formally organised meeting and has quite a different purpose within a social or political movement, if it has one. The main purpose of a meeting is, generally speaking, in some shape or form, to make decisions, while the purpose of a reading group is not. Indeed, if we take seriously the metaphor of the jazz ensemble, the group may well think of itself as being involved in superfluous study. However, that is not to say that decisions don’t take place in reading groups, but the reasons for them being convened are not explicitly in order to facilitate decision-making processes.

There are also direct connections that can be made between processes of organisation and the political. Not only has radical politics sought to change institutions through organisation, but processes of decision making also relate to the political on an inter-relational and micro-political level. While producing order and coordination in certain ways, decision, also actively dramatizes uncertainty and paves the way for contestation. The more that is decidable, the more that is also made potentially contentious. This level of contestability has a direct relationship to the political as contestable terrain. Higher levels of contestation mean that more can move into the uncomfortable realm of politics and be experienced as “social groundlessness” (Warren, 1996, p. 244). If issues are too contested, social relations, especially if they are already fragile, can easily fray. Means of decision-making, such as hierarchies, democratic methods, or explicit rules can therefore both open up the possibility of contestation and contain it.

In addition, ideas about the importance of context are not only apparent in pedagogical thinking but are also echoed by some organisational scholarship. In particular, those coming from systems cybernetics or social constructionist perspectives. These perspectives view organisations as emergent networks of communication and meaning that are continually co-created rather than existing as fixed entities or infrastructure (Miksitis, 2019; Campbell, 2000). The role of context in this respect, is that it precisely creates meaning. There is no meaning without context (Bateson, 1972). If organisation is thought of in this way, as meaning and context, there is again a conceptual link here between inter-relational reading and learning processes and processes of organisation. Reading can be part of a political project, depending on how, where and with whom the reading takes place and what is already latent within the various contexts that produce the situation.

Another organisational distinction to make is between formal and informal organisation and their corresponding social spheres. Zechner and Hanson describe the informal social sphere as the field in which individuals and groups engage in “unstable, temporary and *ad hoc* relations” (2015). They argue that the informal social sphere can provide the ground for developing further social infrastructure and organisation. In particular, they suggest that on an organisational level, collective practices in the informal social sphere might provide the basis for other forms of sustainable collective social power, through the building of lasting social relations. They couch their argument in terms of a crisis of reproduction, and the concept of reproduction may also provide a useful perspective to think about the role of reading groups as organisation. The term *reproduction* refers to the notion of reproductive labour, which in Marxist terms is differentiated from that of productive labour. Reproductive labour is the labour necessary to *reproduce* the worker, and get them ready to be productive for capital. The category generally includes domestic work around the house, childcare and self-care. Reproductive labour is often invisible and gendered. In organisational terms, it might be possible to think about the organising needed in order to maintain the organisation, or in the informal sphere, to strengthen and keep social relations in a state from which other more social organisational forms can develop, as reproduction.

When dealing with historical examples, it is important to bear in mind that history is essentially historiography or history writing, and is therefore fundamentally constructed. All historical examples should be viewed with this in mind. The focus here will be not on what particular reading groups read, but more on how knowledge was produced and disseminated, and the groups’ relationships to institutions and social movements. This is a perspectival account which is, like all histories, incomplete. I will provide examples from the German resistance to fascism and the feminist movement, as well as touching briefly on some reading groups from 2011. I will try to draw pedagogical and organisational insights from these and examine how they have attempted to create wider social and institutional change through organisation and learning. However, I also want to acknowledge that these accounts are also products of their particular social and historical circumstances and for

not be taken as absolute blueprints.

In thinking about history and what to do with it, Foucault's genealogical method provides a model for constructing counter-histories, as a way to unearth "subjugated knowledges" (2004, p. 8). Subjugated knowledge is knowledge of struggles and forms of resistance that may have been buried or disqualified, and kept in the margins by mainstream or hegemonic historical narratives. Foucault's concept of "subjugated knowledge" includes "underground" modes of knowing, that have somehow slipped through "the leaky cracks of the epistemological containers imposed by the state, the school, or disciplines of power and control" (Dolson, 2009, p. 57). While this study does not engage in the painstaking detail that many scholars suggest is necessary for a full genealogical study, I want to point to Foucault for an understanding of history making as ambiguous and uncertain (Sembou, 2011). In addition, Foucault's work also points to how historical examples can be utilised in the present. He argues that we might "make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics" through a process of retooling (Foucault, 2004, p. 8). A bricolage-like approach of taking "what is at hand" and re-using it for the present (drawn from Levi Strauss' concept of bricolage which he developed in relation to myth). Because subjugated knowledges are, unlike their official counterparts, non-hierarchical knowledges or modes of apprehending the world and acting upon it, they can be seen as being highly plastic. They lack formal centralisation, and thus are able to be connected, de-connected, and re-connected, according to the situation at hand (Dolson, 2009). I would also like to draw on this idea of plasticity not only in terms of the plasticity of historical knowledges that might be decentralised, reused and retooled, but also in acknowledging that knowledge itself, if we are to think in pedagogical terms, is highly plastic in the way it develops. In addition, plasticity might also be useful in thinking about organising processes if conceptualised as processes of meaning-making and co-construction.

Reading groups and anti-Nazi resistance

The first historical example relates to small groups associated with what became known as the Red Orchestra, or *die Rote Kapelle* in Germany during the Second World War. This was a network of small reading or learning circles (*Kreisen*), that evolved into part of the German resistance to historical fascism from the mid-1930s to the early 1940s. The name was given to it by the Gestapo and while the term orchestra evokes a tight knit organizational structure, with everyone playing to the same score, the organisation was far looser and more disparate than the name suggests. In actuality, the Red Orchestra consisted instead, of a decentralised network of small learning groups.

It is often thought that there was no resistance to the Nazi regime in Germany. This is partly because of the level of violence directed towards dissenters and any groups or individuals that actively organised against the regime. Indeed, within six months, the Nazis had eliminated all formal political organizational elements, leaving only more informal and leisure orientated ones. This was particularly the case within working class communities. In fact, there was

some resistance but what there was, mostly took place below the detectable surface. Resistance was fragmented and sporadic, and often adopted "the appearance of inactivity", a kind of camouflage, so that it was hidden from view for much of the population (Rothfels, 2013, p. 17). As historian Devlet Peukert argues, "opposition within the totalitarian state, in fact, found its best expression in informal activities which were hard for the Gestapo and the law to get to grips with" (1989, p. 119). Fascism politicised everyday life by force. Activities that were not thought of or meant as political, such as individual acts of deviation from societal norms, were converted into opposition to the regime.

The informal and leisure spheres took on a very particular role and meaning within the context of Nazi Germany, as these were the only kinds of organisation left that could take on opposition and resistance. More informal activities that might generally be difficult to classify as resistance per se, were punished by the Nazi regime as resistance. These were circumstances in which listening to the wrong radio station for example could lead to imprisonment. As violence and control seeped into all aspects of everyday life, it led some people to withdraw more into themselves while for others it provided a growing imperative to act. For members of the Red Orchestra a sense of playfulness and pleasure played a role in the shared moral stance of the organisation, which some members described as an Association for Persistent *Joi de Vivre* (*Bund für unentwegte Lebensfreude*) (Roloff, 2014). A joyous playful ethic to counter the Nazi drive towards death.

The groups of the Red Orchestra, started during the beginning of the regime as a few circles of friendship, discussion and learning, meeting informally, with the initial aim of preserving cultures that were being eliminated. They mostly met in people's homes. The groups included tutors and alumni of schools and educational institutions, radical high schools, the evening college and art school in Berlin and (many of which could not operate anymore) but also communist groups of self-educated workers, and bohemian groups of artists, aristocrats and early concentration camp survivors. While these small reading or learning circles developed primarily in relation to the Nazi regime, they were also building on a pre-Nazi context of small educational initiatives that were very common in Germany during the Weimar Republic. In Berlin for example, there is evidence that small workers' educational groups existed all over the city, as an intrinsic part of the workers' movement (Wenzel, 2014).

While the groups of the Red Orchestra started in order to preserve particular aspects of pre-Nazi culture, as the Nazi regime continued, they shifted their emphasis and activities to become more political. While many did initially see themselves as providing political education, they became more actively engaged in other modes of resistance such as distributing leaflets and hiding fugitives. Eventually, some members even engaged in formal espionage. The network of learning circles that made up the Red Orchestra developed over time, expanding to include more than 250 people. These circles increasingly overlapped, in "a network of interlocking relationships" (Nelson, 2009, p. xxvi). Personal contacts rippled out in different directions with circles radiating from various hubs, around individuals or couples.

The majority of members only knew one member of another group at most, and very few groups were aware of the existence of others. However, people on the edges of one circle might be in touch with another, so that the content of discussions could be carried over into other groups and the knowledge spread. Members also consciously extended and expanded their links across social boundaries, beyond their own immediate circles, in order to include people from political backgrounds that they wouldn't normally have been in touch with.

According to Ahrne & Brunsson (2010), a network consists of a web of relations between people that is based on personal and informal relations and kept together through reciprocity, trust and social capital. Who belongs is not formally decided upon but is latent and develops gradually. This differs to an organisation, which is based on decision and includes elements such as rules and membership. Using these definitions, the reading and learning groups of the Red Orchestra seem to fall between network and organisation, sharing something of each. Membership would have been decided on an informal basis but also carefully, given the political context. The decision and who to admit would have been based on existing networks of friends and acquaintances and those that they were reaching out to. There would have been decisions made, at first on a basic level, such as where and when to meet, who to invite and what they would read, learn or do. The decision to develop and shift their emphasis to more active modes of resistance would have been taken in some way but was probably not formalised. Ahrne and Brunsson's description of the relations between people in a network also corresponds with the groups. Personal relations were certainly kept together through reciprocity, trust and social capital. Members of the groups have testified to this and these seem to be exactly what was developed and strengthened in these groups over time that enabled more risky resistance activities to be taken on. The groups of the Red Orchestra shared a sense of cohesion with other "underground organisations". A cohesion which that "arises from a strong internal interdependency between its participants" created by a strong external threat (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2010, p. 8). In this case that of the Nazi State.

What is interesting, is that the horizontal, decentralised nature of the network could not be understood by official histories. The relationship between the learning groups within the larger network that made up the Red Orchestra was a horizontal one. This has been described as a relationship of *Querverbindung*, or crosswise connection (Nelson, 2009). However, for historiography on both sides of the cold war ideological divide, the political vocabulary to describe the network of groups just did not exist. The Red Orchestra could only be comprehended as a centrally controlled organisation with a vertical structure. The generally understood model of resistance movements, is that, while, like in the Red Orchestra, participants do not know many others in the larger organisation, there is a hierarchy in the way that orders are given and received. For the Red Orchestra, while this was the method of spreading knowledge and information and leadership did exist, it was not centrally controlled. The horizontal relations of *Querverbindung* were simply unable to be acknowledged or understood.

Feminist reading groups

The second example is in relation to feminist consciousness-raising groups (C-R groups) of the 1970's and 80's. C-R groups were groups of women which gathered together to talk about their personal experiences of sexism and patriarchy, and are perhaps more well-known examples of small group learning. The production of knowledge from their collective analysis of empirical first-hand experience, fed directly into the campaigns, demands and actions of the wider women's movement. What is less widely known is that many consciousness-raising groups developed out of or began as reading groups (Farinati & Firth, 2016; Spender, 2001). They read books such as Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* which prompted them to talk about topics such as the disconnection between the image of woman, as wife, mother, lover, for example, which women had to inhabit, and the labour it entailed to construct that image. These books facilitated discussions of the members' own conditions, and at some point, most groups switched to solely producing knowledge through the telling of their personal experiences. Through this "telling it like it is", (a process that had also to some extent been used in the civil rights movement), there was a widespread realisation that issues that had been deemed personal and individual were actually systemic and social. The trust, social relations, and in particular the collective analysis of empirical first-hand experience developed in these smaller groups, (which were at one stage on almost every street corner), fed directly into the wider women's movement. Second wave feminism specifically emphasised the importance of multiple voices, narratives, and perspectives, and recognised the value of the knowledge produced in these small groups.

The collective learning taking place in these groups was based on this process of collectivising individual experiences and analysing it in relation to the context of late twentieth century patriarchy. Consciousness-raising groups also enabled women to change their relationship to language, which many felt was a language which was not of their making, being patriarchal in origins, but one that nonetheless they were obliged to use. C-R groups were therefore a way of decolonising everyday life, experience and language, with women being able to begin to "deconstruct their muted condition" (Spender, 2001, p. 93). Again, it is possible to see the processes of collective learning, and meaning making, with, in this case, processes of deconstruction and reconstruction taking place in parallel with organisational processes.

In addition, it is also worth noting the relationship of feminism to other organisations and institutions. In addition to their opposition to the domination of the existing system, feminists constructed alternative spaces and created "counter institutions," such as women's centres, women only bars, bookshops, newspapers and magazines, as a kind of 'counter milieu' (Katsiaficas, 2007, p. 75). Women's illegal occupations of vacant homes to create women's centres, for example, provided prototypes for later movements. These were places where old organisational forms were questioned and non-hierarchical and de-centralised organising structures were created. This provides a good example of how institutional change was attempted through

organisation.

Interestingly, there is one example of a feminist group that had a different trajectory to the majority of others. The Milan Women's Bookstore, an example of a feminist counter-institution, was organised by a group that went through various phases of organisation, and *ended* as a reading group. Their collective practice shifted from a specifically Italian form of C-R or *Autoconscienza*, (directly translated as self-consciousness), to other forms of practice which included collective reading (Libreria delle Donne, 1990). The book shop was run by a collective and set up as part of the move to construct spaces of autonomous self-organisation. Meeting in the basement of the bookshop, they used fiction by female authors to help them to find a language that better represented them. This was part of the general feminist drive to deconstruct and reconstruct language for themselves. The group took the texts apart and put them back together in an experimental way with other non-words, places, facts, and feelings, for example, as a way to claim the words for themselves. They tried to use "the texts as they would have their own words" (p. 10). These experiments resulted in a new relationship to language and meaning. For the Bookstore Collective, they felt that this was a more generative and open practice than the very specific, separatist, Italian form of *Autoconscienza* they had started with.

For the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, the reading material took centre stage of their collective reading practice, facilitating a new relationship to language and through it agency and emancipation for the women involved. Rancière describes a similar process in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, in which the reading material takes the pedagogical place of teacher as the thing in common, around which the students, (and in this case, the tutor), meet on equal terms (Rancière, 1991). The tutor in Rancière's study, Pierre Jacotot, had witnessed the French revolutionary assemblies and saw learning and communication, as practices of doing that created a community of speaking equals. Jacotot's method, involved the students reading together, but also repeating, imitating, translating, taking apart and putting the text back together as pedagogical processes. Jacotot sees this as an emancipatory pedagogy in which equal minds cooperate together to achieve intellectual emancipation. For Rancière, the importance is the reduction in intellectual disparity that is produced in the process and for that reason emancipatory. For the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, the taking apart and putting back together of language was also an important emancipatory practice. Indeed, for feminists the collective analysis of sexist language was synonymous with the analysis of patriarchy and sexism. In both cases, the groups' focus on language was therefore a step towards societal change. Language encoded the meanings of society and therefore, as meanings changed, society potentially changed. Social organisation and linguistic meaning were interlinked. As Spender argued, "to concentrate on either word meanings or social organisation – to the exclusion of the other – is to invite failure" (Spender, 2001, p. 31).

The second wave feminist movement, including the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, placed a great emphasis on inter-relationality, on the social relations and solidarity

created through the processes of sharing personal experiences, and the deconstruction and reconstruction of language. New meanings were co-created through the processes of organising which rested on the development of reciprocity, trust and social capital. These new meanings were then used to challenge the social institution of patriarchy. At the same time, other feminist organisations and "counter-institutions" directly created alternatives. Membership in feminist C-R groups was informally organised, although it had, of course, definite gender boundaries, in that they were women only spaces. Procedures and protocols of speaking and listening were developed and decided upon, although reasonably informally (Farinati & Firth, 2016). And while the informality of the groups allowed for their fluidity in terms of easily shifting between different modes of learning, it also has to be acknowledged that hidden hierarchies did emerge in relation to a certain lack of structure (Freeman, 1970).

Reading groups and the university in the early 21st Century

The previous two examples were both organised in opposition to dominant power structures. The first in relation to the Nazi state, and the second in relation to patriarchy. I now want to move closer to the present, and look at reading groups in relation to the social movements stemming from 2011 in the UK, and their relationship to the educational institution of the university. What is important here, is the role that organisation took in these movements, as a significant tool, to not only counter the established rhetoric about there being no alternative to capitalism, but also on the level of collective practice, in order to directly counter the atomisation and individualism that had been a central feature of neoliberalism.

The social movements of 2011, in this case Occupy and the student movement in the UK (but there are other similar examples elsewhere), brought together popular pedagogy with prefigurative politics, that is, grassroots political practices that aim to practice future ways of doing, through practices of direct and deliberative democracy. These, in line with other "post-Seattle" social movements also emphasised "politics of the first person", that is, those enacting transformations on the level of micro-politics and subjectivity (Bailey et al., 2018; Earl, 2018; Katsiaficas, 2007). Indeed, for many activists involved in the Occupy movement, the actual physical occupation of space and the organisation that this entailed, was primarily a learning experience. Learning, through the putting into practice of principles of mutual aid and self-organisation, was "a defining aspect of the camps" (Earl, 2018, p. 16). Both these movements were in response directly or indirectly to the financial crisis of 2008. The Occupy movement directly challenged the hegemonic narratives about wealth production that led up to the crisis and the vast disparities that the crisis made all too visible. While the student movement developed as a reaction to the UK government's decision to increase university tuition fees, itself a direct policy stemming from the financial crisis. The institution of the university itself also became a key site for struggle and change. The increase in student tuition fees can be seen as part of a wider drive to make universities more business oriented, to which many were (and still are),

very resistant. Radical pedagogical initiatives and popular education projects, such as free schools, proliferated as part of these movements and the surrounding milieu. At the same time, "changes in critical research" were taking place in UK universities, as academics attempted to find new forms of connection between themselves as paid researchers and "communities of struggle," resulting a rise in scholar-activism (Wellbrook, 2014, p. 359).

Reading groups were one of a number of different pedagogical initiatives that proliferated amongst students, academics and activists, which in some cases directly attempted to link these groups of people together, and connect group learning to political activism. Indeed, popular education, rooted in Frierean ideas, precisely aims to "forge a direct link between education and social action," and is committed to progressive social and political change through group learning (Crowther et al., 2013, p. 4). An article published by several researchers involved in the Occupy and Transition movements, argued that reading groups in particular, could provide examples of tactics as part of a strategy to build creative resistance within academic practices. The authors describe examples that they were all directly involved with. One Welsh group they describe, for example, was connected to the Aberystwyth Transition Initiative. Convened in 2011, the group consisted of a group of academics and students wanting to change the university from within. They consciously evolved a less hierarchical and more creative and empowering structure based on critical pedagogy and consensus decision-making. They saw themselves as exploiting the university's resources in order to do this. This group, along with the others that Burton et al. describe, such as the Occupy study group, a group based at the Occupy site in London, shifted between modes of active research or activism and more reflective collective reading. They suggest that these cycles of reading and doing, provide "profoundly transformative" experiences for the participants, and go some way in subverting the university and potentially breaking down barriers between academics, students and activists (Burton et al., 2015). For academics, Harney and Moten suggest, what is important in order to create radical potential, is to take a stance of being both inside and outside the university, being "in but not of" it (Harney et al., 2013, p. 26).

Consequently, Burton et al. argue that reading groups do not seem prone to institutionalisation by the neoliberal university, because they fall under the radar. Reading groups can potentially, (although not necessarily), dissolve boundaries between different sites of learning and between staff, students and activists, while making use of the university's resources. What they also offer are different modes of temporality from other forms of activism or pedagogy. By providing a longer temporality than activism generally does, they might enable a slower more careful engagement in thinking and imagining and a mode of doing that is not dictated by the academic imperative to produce.

Another researcher also involved in the Occupy study group, Cassie Earl (2018), has suggested that a kind of broad action research type cycle or learning feedback loop could be created between different pedagogical sites in order to connect and share forms of learning so that they might influence

and create wider social change. This might allow different forms of learning, across institutions, social movements and community groups to influence and support each other, so that they might build means for creating lasting transformation. In her study of radical pedagogical spaces, Earl focussed on Occupy, Lincoln University and Lincoln Social Science Centre (a small alternative higher education institution run as a cooperative that was initiated by staff from Lincoln University), as three educational sites across and through which knowledge could potentially circulate. These were all larger and more formalised pedagogical entities than reading groups, with complex trajectories and relationships. However, the idea of some kind of learning feedback loop between them in which knowledge might traverse the boundaries and influence, support or change each other, and in so doing, contribute to tactics for creating wider social change, is an interesting one. This suggests that borders of learning spaces can be thought of as porous and shifting. Earl makes the distinction, and I think this is perhaps useful here, between schooling and education. Schooling, being the training and taming of people into the neoliberal industrial reserve army (following Marx), and education, as a process of critically becoming and creating possibilities for imagining and creating alternatives. This perspective also makes a connection between processes of learning and organisation in terms of changes in subjectivity, agency and the potential for the creation of alternative modes of being and doing.

Although very different from the learning groups of the Red Orchestra, in both content and political and social contexts, there are some echoes here, in terms of the potential effects of learning and organising processes in the creation of agency and solidarity. In the contemporary context, these pedagogical forms of organising can also be seen as a form of resistance, but in relation to neoliberalism. This resistance is evident not only in terms of critiquing the university as an institution, but as also in the production of social forums that are in themselves a challenge. One of the main imperatives of neoliberalism is the reduction of all relations to the marketplace and the reduction of all social situations to the condition of individualisation. The market is predominantly a space of private consumption. The production of other forms of public space, such as social forums, occupations, public assemblies and similar spaces, can therefore "be understood as the most basic and necessary form of resistance to this process" (Gilbert, 2014, p. 177). This is particularly the case with spaces in which collective decisions take place.

Conclusion

So in conclusion then, I would like to offer these histories of reading groups not as models per se, but following Foucault, as highly plastic knowledge that can be connected, de-connected and re-connected according to the situation at hand. It might therefore be possible to use or repurpose these histories to construct new cultural forms through a kind of bricolage, improvising and appropriating where needed. I would argue that these examples show the potential that small informal group learning can have within, in the margins of, or between different sites of learning. Groups can overlap and share learning, as part of a larger movement,

network, action-research cycle or learning feedback loop. As informal, fluid and porous sites of learning, some reading groups seem able to easily switch between action, reflection and production or change mode entirely. Reading groups fall into the category of non-institutional self-organised forms of learning, although they can have quite different and varied relationships with institutions, including as a method of organising, in order to bring about institutional change. By exploring these little examined group learning practices further, it might be possible to glean potentialities for mutual learning practices to help build and sustain social infrastructures for social transformation, such as the kinds of “learning feedback loop”, which Earl has suggested.

While reading groups do not have to be highly organised entities, decision making does take place on a basic level. Conscious decisions include, deciding when, where, and how often to meet, when to meet next, what to read, how much to read and at what pace. Reading groups are in this sense partially organised, falling somewhere between organisations and networks in the terms which Ahrne & Brunsson set out. They are not emergent, in that there has been a decision to convene them and other basic decisions have taken place. However, they are still characterised by informal social relations, norms and expectations of members that generally emerge from the group working together. They also retain some of the characteristics of networks such as flexibility and spontaneity. This seems to mean that they give themselves to be overlapping, porous and shifting spaces and of learning that can morph between active and reflexive modes, being flexible enough to change according to the conditions and context. These characteristics, alongside their capacity to develop social relations in an informal and low key way (that is not a meeting where everything can become contentious), can provide a reproductive role in organisations and networks. However, even those things which are decided are done quite informally. Reading groups are temporary, fluid and flexible but held together through the tasks that the groups set themselves and the social relations of the members. The temporariness and informality of these groups, coupled with some level of commitment, offers something that is very different to a meeting. Reading groups’ *raison d’être* is not to decide something, and that is perhaps a strength. Harney and Moten’s metaphor of jazz improvisation in relation to study is useful here in differentiating groups that are more exploratory and don’t necessarily have to have a conclusion in mind. These spaces can provide the ground for individuals and collectives to find voice in a situation where the risk of polarisation and contention is low. A certain level of safety is developed that helps to develop critical thinking and a tolerance for uncertainty. These kinds of social forum can play a somewhat reproductive role, developing trust, solidarity and social capital on an informal level that feeds into or maintains a wider social movement. Informal social infrastructure might then be built on further and provide the means to attempt institutional or wider change through organisation.

There are, as we have seen, many different ways that the dual processes of organisation and learning might work together within learning and reading groups to increase

collective agency. However, none can be guaranteed and it is important not to fetishise the reading group as any kind of exemplary social form. What kinds of effects they have will be determined by a whole range of factors, not least the very specific contexts in which they operate. Indeed, as we have seen, both processes of learning and organisation, are dependent on meaning making and therefore also dependent on context. There is radical potential in a range of social forums and organisational practices. What is important is to understand those differences and what might be possible to build with them, between them and within them.

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