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Notes Towards Prefigurative Epistemologies*

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In a rundown community centre in La Independencia neighbourhood of La Vega shanty town, Caracas, in August 2006, members of Comités de Tierra Urbana (Urban Land Committees, CTUs) came together to develop an analysis of their experiences of participating in the CTU and the successes and barriers they had encountered in their strategy to ‘democratize the city’1. The meeting lasted for two consecutive weekends during which the 20 or so participants began by discussing their history of involvement in the CTUs. These histories were written up and displayed around the room. Facilitators then began discussions orientated towards identifying the major themes that united participants’ experiences in order to develop a strategic orientation and understanding of the CTU project in La Vega. This would also form the basis of a document to be taken by elected participants to a regional level meeting to be held a number of months afterward. The key themes that came out of that meeting were the relationship of the CTUs of La Vega with the Oficina Técnica Nacional para la Regularización de la Tenencia de Tierra Urbana (National Technical Office for the Legalization of Urban Land Ownership, OTN) – the state institution to which the CTUs are attached, especially around the question of the granting of funds to the Campamento Pionero project of La Vega, the tensions that arise in light of the different demands and logics of CTU members working in the community and those working in the state, the problems in moving from the gaining of individual land title towards democratic control over land and services, and the problems of maintaining community participation in CTU projects. Discussions around these issues and the causes for the problems as well as potential solutions were debated. Thus by the end of the meeting a number of key themes as well as a variety of potential solutions to these problems had been identified. This same process was happening amongst CTU communities all over Venezuela, first at the local level, then at the regional before finally moving on to the national level (not without many hiccups and therefore unevenly across the national space). These multiple processes of a systematization
of experience would form the basis of the movement’s theorization of its identity, objectives and strategy for the medium term.\textsuperscript{2}

This experience and the multiplicity of such experiences that it is part of constitutes the attempt by the CTUs to develop collective knowledge-forming processes through which to forge the movement’s strategy, identity and analysis. It is explicit in its aims of breaking with the patterns of traditional Venezuelan politics, as well as those of the orthodox left, wherein political strategy, identity and analysis were developed by movement intellectuals. Their epistemological practice is linked to a political practice which problematizes a politics led by vanguards or organized in a hierarchical manner in which individuals delegate their intellectual and political powers to a political leadership. For the CTUs, this political practice reinforces a politics which disempowers ordinary people. They instead seek to develop their utopias as part of the process of creating alternative logics of being and doing. The CTUs project is relational and open, always moving, adapting and evolving. It is a prefigurative post-representational politics, a politics that is intellectual, affective, subjective and collective. As Sitrin illustrates in relation to Argentina – but which can also be used to express a dominant strand in the political realities within the CTUs:

The movements…see their everyday experiences and creations as the revolution they are making. It is the use of horizontalidad as a tool and a goal, along with self-organized autogestion, taking place in territories, both geographic as well as in the imaginary, that come together to help in the process of creating dignity and freedom in the now.

(Sitrin, this book: 271)

This also illustrates a number of important processes for academics whose aim is to work with such movements to co-produce epistemological practices that are also prefigurative and post-representational. It suggests that movements based in particular places can develop theoretical knowledge via a systematization based on their political experiences, that knowledge for social transformation and political change can be relational and open, and that this process is immanent to these concrete experiences as opposed to territorially or intellectually transcendent. Such experiences cannot be engaged with sufficiently by many of the traditional radical epistemological categories that have been used to research social movements due to their rootedness in transcendent (territorial and intellectual) conceptualizations of the nature of theoretical knowledge. A classic example of this is the use of critical realism as the epistemological and ontological foundation of social movement research. This mismatch between epistemological categories and post-representational forms of politicization in the CTUs (and other similar movements) suggests the need for epistemological reflection (Escobar, 1992; De Sousa Santos, 2007, 2008; Shukaitis, 2009; Motta, 2009). Thus in this
chapter I seek to think through an epistemological praxis that can complement such new forms of subaltern politics. I thus take the critique of the politics of representation (Holloway, 2002a, 2002b; Bonefeld, 2003; Tischler, 2008) to the epistemological realm.

I develop this critique by engaging with the work of social movement researcher Hilary Wainwright, who bases her research in the methodology of critical realism. I argue that Wainwright’s engagement with new social movements does move our engagement forward by conceptualizing the multiple forms that knowledge can take, embedding theory making within the concrete experiences and histories of communities in resistance, and visualizing the practical, concrete knowledge produced by social movements. However, this engagement re-inscribes a vanguardist and disempowering division of labour in its conceptualization of how theoretical knowledge is created and the limitations on the role that she gives to social movements in this process; a re-inscription, I argue, that can be traced to the epistemological and ontological assumptions of critical realism. The ontological premises of her research are that structures and structural processes are hidden to concrete experience, and require a transcendent mediation to uncover them as their ontological origin is outside of concrete places and in the space of the national and international (Wainwright, 1994, 2003). This introduces an externality and dualism between structure and agency, which suggests different levels of being which result in different types of knowledge. Epistemologically, then, local communities produce concrete practical knowledge (congruent with the level of being they experience), which, whilst necessary, is unable to develop the abstract knowledge that can uncover and challenge structural processes and power relations and thereby produce systemic political change and social transformation. Accordingly, for Wainwright, the process of theoretical knowledge production occurs at a different level of abstraction and is developed with the use of qualitative methods, testing and trusted frameworks of theoretical knowledge (Wainwright, 1994, 2003, 2005, 2009). Thus theoretical knowledge is conceptualized as an object that can be created away from the concrete and then used to orientate the concrete knowledge of movements. By positing this understanding of theoretical knowledge and of the knowledge produced by social movements, a division of labour is re-inscribed in which there is intellectual labour and practical labour; and a epistemological and ontological dualism erected between the concrete knowledge (of particular places and communities) which is relational, and universal knowledge (in the space of structures by intellectual experts) which is fixed. Critical realism and its use in social movement research is thus unable to transcend an epistemology (and politics) of representation.

I argue that it is necessary to build on the insights of such engagements with ‘other’ types of knowledge by recognizing their ability to produce negative critique: to throw a brick in the window of normality and
destabilize the mystification and naturalization of capitalist social relations (Holloway, 2002b; Dinerstein, 2003). However, I also suggest that it is necessary to transcend the framework of critical realism and move towards a distinct ontological and epistemological conceptualization which opens up the possibilities of relational forms of theoretical knowledge construction immanent to the concrete political experiences of movements, knowledge as a verb, or a practice as opposed to a noun, or a thing (Gilbert, 2009). This builds and transcends negative critique, and moves towards the construction of positive critique (Bonefeld, 1992; Mohanty, 2003; Charnock, 2008; Tischler, 2008) as a prefigurative moment of social transformation. I suggest that the practices of knowledge construction as illustrated above by the CTUs, particularly their ‘methodologies of democratic practice’, are a useful starting point to begin to systematize and make visible ways of making knowledge that turn the ontological and epistemological assumptions of critical realism on their head. Their praxis suggests that it is not through individual abstraction away from movement struggle that universal/systematic knowledge able to support a post-representational politics can be constructed. Rather, it is constructed as a process of critical collective reflection within the moment of struggle. It is a form of theoretical knowledge that is relational and immanent, rather than fixed and transcendent. This suggests something about the nature of social reproduction and the relationship between structure and agency. Structures become theorized as processes comprised of alienated human practice, fundamentally reproduced because of the repeated performance of such inverted human practice. Therefore the local is the global as the global is a web of alienated social relations. Accordingly, the universal and systematic are immanent to the concrete.

The ontological and epistemological reflections about such processes of collective knowledge construction and theorization push towards the need for us to develop epistemological practice (as opposed to conceptual formula) in which the academic’s role is destabilized and can lead (dependent on the processes of which she or he is a part) to a variety of reformulations of the practice and self-identity of social movement researchers seeking to co-construct such forms of politics. Potentially, she or he becomes a node in the construction of a dialogue between and within movements that results in the development of ‘movement’ relevant research. The types of relationships formed in this process challenge traditional conceptualizations and practices of theoretical knowledge creation, of the relationship between academic and community and of the privileged theoretical and epistemological role of the academic. When talking to Andres Antillano, one of the founders of the first CTUs in La Vega, he used a verb that captures the orientation that structures the search for such an epistemology orientation; the verb is desaprender – to unlearn. In unlearning my training as a critical realist I seek to tentatively contribute to the epistemological foundations of the growing
scholarship about movement relevant research (Barker and Cox, 2002; Bevington and Dixon, 2005; http://www.interfacejournal.net/), stretch our understanding and practice of such research and suggest another way of thinking about epistemology and the categories of analysis with which we engage with post-representational forms of subaltern politics. It is from these movements’ practices that we can begin to unlearn our academic privilege and transform epistemology into a prefigurative practice of everyday life.

**Activist academics, critical realism and post-representational politics**

Social movement activist and academic Hilary Wainwright represents a strand of engagement with social movements that is complex and committed, and that captures many elements of new forms of popular political practice that challenge ‘old’ ways of thinking about and making politics. As she argues, such ‘new’ social movements are insisting that the power to change society is not something that you can delegate to others, to a political party; it is something that lies within yourself, working with others first to refuse to be complicit in existing power relations and therefore to find and invent the means of resistance and second, as we resist to create alternatives, to struggle to prefigure in the present what we are trying to achieve in the future. Change is therefore something that we make in our everyday life, in our own relationships, economic, social and political.

(Wainwright, 2004: 3)

Wainwright’s engagement with new forms of community politics challenges narrow functionalist understandings of politics, in which popular political agency is conceptually limited to the delegation of power to elected and non-elected elites. She makes visible the practical critique of such forms of political and social transformation occurring in many popular social movements. She thus widens our analytic and conceptual gaze. This opens a window upon subaltern politics that brings legitimacy and visibility to new forms of popular politics.

The development of democratic and inclusive political practices is premised, as she rightly argues, upon a challenge to traditional progressive understandings of knowledge which assumes that ‘the party and its leadership would develop, and disseminate this knowledge’ (ibid.: 4). New movements have developed ‘a radical critique of that understanding of knowledge and pointed, even in the way that they organize, to the importance of knowledge embedded in experience and in practice’ (ibid.).

Accordingly, Wainwright develops a critique of Leninism and traditional social democracy for its narrow conceptualization of power, knowledge and
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political change. In terms of knowledge, she criticizes the idea that there is one type of knowledge, produced by party leaders and intellectuals, which can lead the masses on a path to transformation. She therefore conceptualizes a variety of knowledge produced at different levels of abstraction and with different forms; those produced in everyday life, such as tacit, practical and empirical, and those developed through research, such as theoretical and abstract. She concludes that in order for political parties and intellectuals to recognize and engage with other types of knowledge requires a ‘genuine recognition of practical knowledge, of both tacit and ephemeral kinds, and a commitment to its expression’ (ibid.: 97). This, she argues, prevents the suppression, invisibilization and exclusion of workers and ordinary people’s creative capacities, experiences and contributions to knowledge.

She defends this from the methodological position of critical realism (CR). For Wainwright CR has the capacity to harmonize and clarify the practice of movements, aiding in the development of structural critique and transformation. In particular, it provides the tools to theorize the practical insights of movement activists. This is because, as she explains,

Critical realists have conducted a philosophical investigation which helps us to ground some of the insights implicit in movement practice, and to make use of them . . . . In its most radical form, critical realism argues that there exist several levels of being, or reality. Already this implies the likelihood of different kinds of knowledge: the existence of different forms of being requires different kinds of knowing if these distinct levels are to be understood.

(Ibid.: 103–4)

Her embrace of CR methodology therefore implies a particular conceptualization of the ontology of social reproduction. It is based on the ontological claim that social reality is constituted by underlying social structures and causal mechanisms which we can identify and explain through scientific investigation (Bhaskar, 1998: 21–2). Scientific investigation allows the development of causal explanations and concepts. Accordingly, events are considered to have real ‘structural’ causes, whereby a particular configuration of social relations enables the production (or ‘generation’) of a particular observed event (Bhaskar, 1975, 1998). Thus, any attempt to explain the occurrence of such an event requires the identification and conceptualization of the social relations that generated it (and the ‘generative’ mechanisms that are part of these relations). Structures are external to events and agents, despite ultimately being changeable and reproduced by agents, this capacity for transformation being dependent on the development of their understanding of such structural processes and forces (Wainwright, 1994; Bailey, 2009). Social movement struggle therefore unfolds within the structures of the capitalist market and state.
The process of scientific discovery is therefore to identify, conceptualize and improve upon existing conceptions of generative social relations and the process through which these relations generate observed events. These causal explanations are largely explicated via qualitative research that seeks to uncover the structures, mechanisms and emergent properties of the social world. The conceptual and explanatory validity of CR theories is based upon those that most accurately depict real social relations and mechanisms and, as a result, are also those that will be most ‘usable’ over time precisely because they are (more) true. Thus, whilst accepting that ‘truth’ is ultimately a matter of established conventions between social actors, ‘not just any conventions will do: they must be usable in practice’ (Sayer, 1992: 69). Realists accordingly reject the fact-value divide. They therefore argue that they can expose the ideological distortions of the social world (together with the reasons for the prevalence of such ‘false consciousnesses’). CR social researchers aim ‘to make the mundane exotic and the exotic mundane’ (Wacquant and Bourdieu, 1992: 68) by showing the complex processes that explain the world of appearances comprised of facts and events, and therefore demystify normality. Scientific knowledge takes the form of an object that can be used to understand the production of specific events of exclusion, for example, concrete experiences of disempowerment and exploitation. It can be combined, therefore, with the concrete knowledge derived from communities’ experiences of the specific manifestations of these processes in everyday life.

Wainwright’s praxis visibilizes other forms of knowledge, stretches our understanding of politics and social transformation and supports an open, experimental and creative theory and politics of knowledge. In this she does indeed engage with elements of new social movement practice and knowledge creation. However, Wainwright conceptualizes the categories of knowledge that movements create in a way that, whilst recognizing their creative capacities, also infantilizes those capacities by limiting them to a certain form: practical, tacit and empirical. For Wainwright, movements are based in particular contexts within which they experience the effects of broader social processes and attempt to find ways to overcome the particular form of these power relations in their local communities. As she argues,

In their ways of organising – whether it was the consciousness raising groups of the women’s movement or the multi-union, multi-workplace committees of the radical trade union movement – the social movements lived out their rejection of existing views about knowledge. They valued practical, often tacit knowledge not available in codified, written form but embedded in people’s skills, emotions and creative activity.

(Wainwright, 2005: 3)

However, she goes on to argue that such emotional and practical knowledge, in order to become strategic and global, needs to be combined with
theoretical research-based knowledge. This dualism between the global and the local, between structure and agency, and between types of knowledge, how these different types of knowledge are produced differently and the different agents they are produced by, re-inscribes ontological reification and epistemological vanguardism. This re-inscription is premised in a particular division of labour in which theoretical and strategic knowledge is produced at a distance from social movement struggle with the use of particular tools of analysis. It is a conceptualization of theoretical knowledge and concurrent practice that is non-relational and transcendent; knowledge as a noun, or a thing (Gilbert, 2009).

CR's claim to be a form of emancipatory critique is therefore limited, as its epistemological framework and ontological conceptualization is unable to move away from elitism and a reification of the categories of social reality as they are. CR's elitism is based in the claim that conceptual abstraction away from the observable and lived experience of ordinary people is at the heart of critical theory. As Wainwright argues,

It shows how experimental activity in social science presupposes the existence of social structures or mechanisms which generate or produce more or less directly observable phenomena. These structures and mechanisms are not themselves necessarily directly observable – though in some cases they can be. They need to be discovered, through experimentation, through investigation following various clues and with empirical controls of different sorts.

(Wainwright, 1994: 104)

Consequently, a dualism between theory and practice is embedded within the epistemological premises of CR research. This leads to the construction of theory which is based on the process of the reification of categories of analysis. This is premised upon a conceptualization of ontology in which structures have an externality to agency. Agency works within structures which have internal contradictions (in the case of capital) or are distinct from capital (in the case of the state). This form of structuralism externalizes the relationship between structure and agency and global and local. However, it can be argued that the notion of social objectivity is itself a reified abstraction, as the reality in which humans exist has no independent existence from us. Rather, it is the social practice of labour which constitutes capitalist 'structures'. Therefore structures are conceptualized as practices and processes which must be constantly reproduced through alienated social practices, relations and subjectivities (Bonefeld, 2003; Fedirici, 2004). Understanding the constitution of social reality like this enables us to see the generic as inherent to the specific and the abstract as inherent to the concrete (Bonefeld, 2003; Motta, 2009). This destabilizes the epistemological division of labour suggested by CR as it demystifies the claim of
ontological stratification as itself a reification of perverted forms of social existence.

Thus, CR conceptualization and analysis can uncover structural causes of observable events such as inequality, but it does so in a way that reifies such structures as forms outside of our human practice. It can therefore potentially contribute to negative critique by destabilizing the mystifications and naturalizations of everyday social relations. However, this is not the same as either developing the desire for transcendence or achieving such transcendence in practical negation and constructive critique (MacIntyre, 1994; Amsler, 2009). CR research therefore in practice reproduces capitalist social reality through its rigid stratification of contradictory practice into structures of thought.

The paradoxical theoretical and ontological frame of CR is expressed in the paradoxes of its epistemological contribution. Even as critical realism can affirm the existence of other knowledge, it argues that theoretical knowledge is produced through research and research conducted in a particular way (Wainwright, 1994). This, however, reproduces the practice/theory dualism in a way that is internal to the conceptualization of theory: that is, the mass produces concrete practical knowledge, whilst the theorist produces universal theoretical knowledge. This is not to claim that communities by the very act of their coming together develop a critique of the social relations through which their experiences of domination and exclusion are manifested. Rather, it is a critique of CR’s conceptualization of social reality and the resultant epistemological assumptions about the process and methodology via which communities can and do achieve such an understanding and analysis. This critique opens up the possibilities of thinking through with the communities in resistance in which we participate how we might practice an epistemology that is prefigurative and post-representational.

Wainwright argues that we need a new politics of knowledge and a new epistemology. I agree. Wainwright can help us to negate theoretically the social relations of capitalism, but she falls short of practical negation and the creation of worlds beyond capitalism. We can learn a lot about what a new epistemological practice and politics might look like by engaging with the epistemological praxis of movements like the CTUs. Academics who seek to move beyond epistemological privilege can, in dialogue with such movements, begin to imagine and practice prefigurative epistemologies.

The CTUs and prefigurative epistemologies in everyday life

[T]he masses no longer need [the intellectual] to gain knowledge: they know perfectly well, without illusion; they know far better than he and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves.

(Foucault and Deleuze, 1977: 4)
This intervention seeks to suggest some elements of an epistemology that can contribute to a reflexive and open conceptualization of movement-relevant research able to engage with social movements that develop a post-representational anti-capitalist politics. This suggests a deconstruction of academic epistemic privilege and to some extent an unlearning of what we ‘know’ (Tischler, 2008; Shukaitis, 2009). The epistemological underpinnings of CR appear unable to escape from the confines of a capitalist division of labour and reification of capitalist social relations. They can contribute to a theoretical negation of social reality, but fall short in their ability to enable practical negation and creation. How do we (as academics seeking to move beyond epistemological privilege) therefore develop an epistemological orientation that enables the development of prefigurative knowledge practices that support the creation of the worlds beyond capitalism that we desire?

I turn here to the reflexive praxis of the CTUs in order to illustrate the ways in which theory is created by ordinary people in struggle and the types of questions and reflections this suggests for researchers who wish to co-construct prefigurative epistemologies. Underlying the politics of the CTUs is the practice of realizing the generic in the concrete, in theoretical analysis and in epistemological practice. This has been developed out of reflection about their experiences with vanguardism in the Punto Fijo period, which were disempowering and disarming, and the attempts from that period to create more horizontal forms of politics linked to liberation theology and popular education. Learning from experience and creating from the position of insubordination and negation characterizes the epistemological politics of the CTUs. They illustrate some of the elements of a prefigurative post-representational epistemology, particularly through the development of a methodology of democratic practice, elements of which can be reflectively embedded into our epistemological practices.

The CTUs, created in February 2002 as the result of a presidential decree (1666), now constitute one of most powerful and autonomous organizations of the popular sectors, with over 6000 CTUs nationally. The original decree stated the need, in light of the illegal status of the majority of shantytown dwellers, for the formation of Urban Land Committees based on local community assemblies that would coordinate and organize the struggle for the legalization of their individual property rights. However as Irma commented, ‘This process began as a decree. It is us who have made it real, have given it its meaning and content, through our struggles, our mistakes and our successes.’ Thus, whilst initiated by the central government, it has created a context for the development of a praxis that escapes the boundaries of the decree’s original intent.

The CTUs’ immediate objectives were reached relatively quickly. By January 2003, over 1000 titles had been granted. Many of the CTUs’
founding members of La Vega had worked from the 1980s in popular education projects around culture and literacy, and had been involved in struggles over access to water and education (Ruiz, 2007; Fernandes, 2008). From these experiences, an uneven political culture emerged, in which politics was conceptualized as community self-actualization based upon equal collective participation in the formation of analysis, identity and strategy. Therefore, some key individuals organized regular meetings to discuss problems in the community related to housing and environment. They found that despite their successes in achieving legalized recognition of their property rights, this did not solve the problem of decent housing, as there was a lack of water and electricity, unpaved roads and community problems such as delinquency. The understanding of their objectives, through a process of reflection and discussion based on their concrete experiences, began to expand. The forging of a post-representational epistemology therefore came out of their negation of vanguardist politics and embrace of bassista politics linked to liberation theology and popular education. From their beginnings they thus explored collective processes of systematization of experience from the concrete. At this stage, this focused on developing analysis to understand the limitations of juridical rights in the overcoming of disempowerment and exclusion and the links between education, health and housing in their experiences of domination and forging of resistance.

Central to this was the practice of reflection upon and conceptualization of their history of struggle in order to build the knowledge to move forward with their project. Thus, in La Vega they began to make ‘Cartas del Barrio’, a local community history of each barrio (neighbourhood), based upon a collective endeavour to collect material from a barrio’s founders and to compile that material into a book and/or video form. This is then used as a tool for stimulating reflection and debate amongst the community. They also began to be involved in organizing community assemblies that discussed issues from culture to problems of community disintegration. Through their experiences, as Irma observes, ‘We put down roots with our communities. We were searching together for a path, an identity. We began to debate the questions of land, of democracy, of community and to work in assembly in order to improve our communities to democratise land, the city.’

As a result of these experiences in the Metropolitan Region Assembly the CTUs produced a publication, known as ‘el librito azul’ (the blue book) or ‘Democratización de la ciudad y transformación urbana’ in 2003. In this, the work of the CTU and their objectives were expanded from a narrow notion of legalization of property rights towards a notion of ‘democratization of the city’, in which access to decent living conditions, democratic participation in the organization of community relations, a dignified life and decent infrastructure within communities were seen as integral to the question of housing and environment (CTU, 2003). In 2004, the Centros de Participación para la
Transformación del Hábitat (Centres of Participation for the Transformation of Environment, CPTH) were born – physical spaces to unite the community around an integral, participatory approach to land and environment and deepen and develop the objectives of ‘democratizing the city’.

However, during this period, problems of maintaining participation and overcoming traditional hierarchical relationships within the CTUs surfaced. Thus as Mariela8 discussed, ‘I am so used to rallying the community and the community is so used to me speaking for them that when we get to the assembly if I am not there they wait for me. Then when I am there they look to me to structure the meeting.’ In light of such experiences the CTUs, via the OTN, organized an ‘equipo de formadores’: a group of individuals committed to using collective reflexive practice as a means of stimulating participation, the creation of emancipatory subjectivities and the formation of analysis by CTU communities. All the promoters are themselves from the communities of the CTUs and entered into a process in which they reflect upon their participation in the community together in order to develop a diagnosis and systemization of the causes of uneven participation and the reproduction of de facto leadership. This illustrates the creative, open and experimental nature of their politics. It also illustrates elements of their theoretical critique of domination; it is not theorized as merely something external but rather as internal, a form of alienating social practice that results in the production of particular subjects and behaviours.

In 2005, a proposal was developed of the Campamiento Pionero (Pioneer Community, CP), 13 of which now exist in the country. This proposal is a means of overcoming the individualization of communities that is prevalent amongst the shantytowns and a way to forge autonomous communities based around self-government and a collective identity and practice able to sustain itself over time. The proposal centres on the creation of collective property rights, collective credit and the building of communities in and outside of the shantytowns. This involves not only the building of housing but the construction of self-governing communities.

The methodology that informs the development of a CP reflects and consolidates the principles of popular education as the acquisition of collective knowledge is guided by the needs of communities in their struggle for emancipation. Accordingly, the process of forming a CP community is based upon the gathering of a number of families to discuss how they wish to organize, design and build their community. The principles guiding these meetings are those of equal and horizontal participation and the forging of a collective identity through discussion and reflection. Facilitators from the equipo de promotores have worked in the formation of a number of such communities, one of which, Petare, is based in Caracas. Their role is not to tell communities what to decide or think, or how to act, but rather to facilitate the formation of problem-based learning that is orientated towards the
achievement of a strategy for the building of self-governing communities. Nora Machado, CTU facilitator from La Vega, explains:

If we want to talk about projects coming from below, then we can’t take the role of leaders who come in and tell communities what, how and why they should do things. We have to create the conditions in which communities develop in equality and together their understanding of their situation, their analysis and their solutions. It is only in this way that we will break the old way of doing things.

The call to participate in the formation of a CP is open to all those who are either homeless or live in substandard or overcrowded conditions. CP meetings include a broad spectrum of people, from families who have been involved in political struggles for two decades to families who have never been involved in any collective organizing. The problems encountered in creating the conditions for equal collective reflection and participation are therefore immense. Many individuals are there in order to get a house, not necessarily to contribute to the formation of self-governing communities. Indeed, many of the conservative ideas that structure shantytown life are reinforced in discussions as individuals place blame on each other and neighbours for problems of crime and delinquency. Discussions about how to create a framework for collective reflection on experiences of impoverishment and reasons for joining the CP are being undertaken. This process, as I can testify, is neither spontaneous nor easily organized, as the political histories of the different communities and families within communities are diverse. Significantly, however, the CTUs are collectively facing and aware of these issues, and are attempting to develop forums and practices to overcome such unevenness. This is testimony to the reflexivity that structures their practice and how theoretical and conceptual knowledge creation is a practice embedded in their everyday political struggles. Such knowledge creation is constructed to prefigure the type of egalitarian post-representational politics they seek to construct. Collective theory making is both a process and an objective of their struggles.

In 2005, the idea of a national conference of the CTUs was proposed. It was agreed that steps towards preparing this meeting would be based on a multiplicity of meetings at a variety of spatial scales based around the methodology of democratic practice as illustrated at the beginning of this chapter. The structuring of collective reflexive practice had the objectives of bringing together the experiences of CTUs nationally, and moving from collective discussion on the successes and failures of political struggle to the development of some uniting strategic principles. As Andres Antillano explained,

the forging of an identity and strategic theorizing is a basis for building a movement of the shanty towns based on the creation of communities as
subjects of change producing knowledge able to forge a distinctive project of social transformation.

The actual experiences of organizing a multiplicity of assemblies starting at the local level, moving to the regional level and then the national was uneven, reflecting the uneven development of CTUs nationally and the experimental nature of the process. However, over 200 meetings were held at the local and regional level in which nearly half of the 6000 national CTUs participated. In these meetings, ideas and proposals for the national event were developed and spokespeople were chosen to attend the national meeting. As Hernan Peralta, a CTU member, said, ‘I would say that this is the first [meeting] that begins to construct itself from the base . . . and the idea of the national meeting was to try to jump from the local meeting and to build a more profound discussion in terms of the mission, and expectations, and construction.’

The national meeting, held in November 2006 in Los Teques, Miranda State was described by participants as the ‘first of its kind’ because of the way it was organized. Approximately 500 spokespersons attended from around the country, representing their local CTUs. The three-day event was loaded with a rigorous schedule as participants split up in to three large working groups, which then broke in to smaller discussion groups composed of just over 15 people, in order to further elaborate proposals, experiences and comments on the three topics of debate: the CTUs’ relationship with government institutions; with the local community; and with each other and other organizations. On Sunday morning, the working groups presented their conclusions before the general assembly and in the afternoon met with their fellow regional spokespersons to analyse next steps in their separate regions. Among the many proposals which came out of the working groups on Sunday morning which were put together in a final report discussed in early 2007 were the reform of decree 1666, the creation of a comprehensive school for youth and community work, the creation of more CTU community media (radio and newspaper), direct ‘CTU support for the indigenous communities’, ‘the creation of a land bank’ and the ‘strengthening of community assemblies in order to offset party-aligned sectors that are not interested in grassroots power’ (Fox, 2006). The experimental nature of this process is expressed in the attempt to take the critical reflexive praxis of the creation of prefigurative epistemologies to a qualitatively more developed level.

These experiences have been systematized in the gradual development of what the CTUs call ‘a democratic methodology of practice’. Such a methodology illustrates prefigurative epistemologies of post-representational political struggle. The methodology is clearly influenced by the history of political struggle in the 1980s and 1990s, which was shaped by traditions of liberation theology, popular education and a focus on the capacity of communities to develop solutions to their own problems and in so doing create the
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conditions for social transformation. The methodology works from the principle that communities are theoretical and strategic knowledge producers and that the role of the CTU facilitator is to create an environment for the formation and development of such knowledge. The ultimate objective is that everyone will be facilitators and all will be able to generate the conditions for the production of emancipatory subjectivities, knowledge and practices.

Beyond academic privilege? Deconstructing radical academic subjectivity through pedagogies of insubordination

The experience of the CTUs (one amongst many) points to the necessity of developing an epistemological orientation in which the conceptual dualism between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge, and the division of labour that accompanies this, is transcended. Their experiences are illustrative of the formation in struggle of a synthesis of theory and practice. Experiences such as these have to be reflexively factored into our epistemologies. They imply a shift away from the hierarchical form of research in which the researcher is the subject creating theory of/for our object of study (the movement) towards a horizontal form of research in which the researcher is a node within a network of emancipatory praxis (Deleuze, 1994). This involves a change in how we conceptualize knowledge, away from its reification and fixation and towards a fluid and open understanding.

Elements of this process involve an epistemological rethink which focuses on a conceptual reimagining that fosters the destabilization of academic epistemic privilege and the subversion of academic subjectivity. This opens up the possibilities of moving towards the co-construction of prefigurative epistemologies with movements in the global South, and also with the communities in which we live and work in the global North.

Conceptually, the split between theory and practice needs to be overcome in a way that views each as complementary elements of a constructive moment in theory production, as opposed to a relationship of dualism in which theoretical knowledge involves academic research, and movement knowledge is based in experience and practice as in CR. Accordingly, this implies problematizing the idea that theory is produced by individuals at a distance from collective struggle, and with this problematizing the subjectivity of the academic. This turns on its head the division of labour within social movement research orientated by CR, in which the expert academic produces theoretical universal knowledge and the movement practical concrete knowledge. Embedded within this is a critique of representation in the formation of knowledge and theory for and about politics. As opposed to trained experts being able to develop concepts and analysis in isolation from collective political struggle, communities’ reflexive practice is the
site in which prefigurative collective knowledge practices are potentially created. This involves a shift away from a vertical understanding of theory production and towards a rhizomatic horizontal conceptualization of theory production in which theory is produced as internal to collective political struggle in the moment of reflexive practice about that struggle. In this discussion, I hope to have contributed to transcending this dualism conceptually, but I realize that I have not been able to do this practically.

Critical realists could well argue that what is being suggested is a form of constructivism which conflates ontology with epistemology and ends up romanticizing common sense, and in so doing re-reproduces conceptually and politically the reification and naturalization of social reality. This could be read from the focus here on lived experience. However, central to the epistemological position suggested is the assumption that it is possible for knowledge to be produced by communities in struggle when ‘common sense’ is problematized collectively and as a moment of political struggle. The work of the CTUs does exactly this, using a heritage of liberation theology and traditions of popular education. Thus the members of the CTUs have a political history influenced by the work of Freire and other popular educationalists. This suggests that the construction of prefigurative epistemologies involves questions of methodology and pedagogy, crucially the construction of pedagogies of insubordination. Perhaps the most important elements of this heritage that have impacted upon the CTUs’ methodology are the focus on dialogue; the horizontal, collective and political nature of knowledge production; the focus on everyday life as the substance of critical theoretical reflection; and the linkage made between knowledge creation and political transformation. This is not to suggest that such elements of popular education are methodologies that can be placed upon community practice. They need to emerge organically and in relation to the specificities of place, history and political struggles of communities. Rather, this is to suggest that by focusing our attention upon such practices they can become reflexively embedded into our own epistemological practices: thus opening the door to practical experimentation with overcoming the limitations of representational forms of knowledge construction that arguably reinforce the divisions of labour and alienated social relations of capitalism.

The dialogical approach to learning favours dialogue and open communication. In this method, all teach and all learn. The dialogical approach contrasts with the anti-dialogical method, which positions the teacher (or in this case, the researcher) as the transmitter of theoretical knowledge: a hierarchical framework that leads to domination and oppression through the silencing of students’ (or communities’) theoretical and universal knowledge. According to Freire (2000: 67), ‘no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. Men teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are “owned” by the teacher.’
Dialogue isn’t just about deepening understanding, but is part of making a difference in the world. Praxis – action that is informed (and linked to certain values) – is central to this process. Praxis involves the steps of application, evaluation, reflection; and then return to theorizing. Social transformation is the product of praxis at the collective level (ibid.: 75). An important element of this is conscientization – developing consciousness, but ‘consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform reality’ (Taylor, 1993: 52). Implicit within this is that meaning exists within ourselves, rather than in external forms.

Educational activity is accordingly situated in the lived experience of participants. The historically oppressed are subjects rather than objects. As subjects with mastery over their own education, learners become actively engaged in their own education, and ultimately in their own destinies. As subjects, those who live in oppressive circumstances ‘find their own voices’, and thus rename the world as they know and experience it, rather than in blind conformity with those who wield authority (Freire, 2006).

Central to these ideas is the concept of transformative (political) learning. Popular education aims at getting people to understand their world around them, so they can take back control collectively and develop their autonomy. This involves understanding, intervening and transforming the(ir) world (ibid.). These insights are directly relevant for the creation of prefigurative epistemologies. They suggest that knowledge is produced collectively, via reflection, within political struggle, based upon the lived experiences and struggles of excluded and marginalized communities. Researchers can potentially play a variety of roles within this process: from facilitator of reflexive praxis, to translator of movement theory from a particular context to other contexts, to participant in the process of developing such prefigurative knowledge practices. However, which role is played depends upon a dialogical relationship between researcher and community based upon respect and trust.

These reflections inevitably push us as researchers attempting to participate in the co-construction of prefigurative epistemologies with movements in the global South to deconstruct our epistemic privilege and blur the boundaries between research and politics, public and private, subject and community. They suggest that we cannot be engaged in such a politics of research and ignore the potential relevance of these practices and disruptions in the other spheres we inhabit in our life and work. De-politicizing and reifying our practices and positions within these other spheres, in light of these reflections, becomes increasingly uncomfortable and problematic. These experiences and the reflections and epistemological practices that may result, therefore, also push us to think about how the theoretical knowledge practices of movements such as the CTUs in the global South can teach us something about a politics and knowledge construction that is prefigurative.
and post-representational; one which can contribute to the creation of other worlds that we desire here. This disrupts not only academic privilege, and the dualisms between concrete knowledge and theoretical knowledge embedded within much social movement research, but also the dualisms between North and South, turning our (the) world upside down.

**Conclusion: notes towards prefigurative epistemologies**

This chapter does not seek to disqualify the work of social movement researchers such as Hilary Wainwright working in the critical realist tradition. Rather, it seeks to build on the positive elements of their rethinking of the politics of epistemology in order to overcome the limitations of such work: most importantly its reimposition of a traditional conceptualization of how theoretical knowledge is constructed which re-inscribes a disenabling and alienating division of labour between theoretical and concrete knowledges practices. Such social movement research is able to develop theoretical negation but unable to engage with practical negation and constructive creation of post-representational forms of politics. My aim has been to build upon Wainwright’s insights through an engagement with the CTUs’ processes and methodologies of theoretical knowledge construction, in order to suggest some elements of an epistemological orientation that can support the continued development of movement relevant research linked to social movements whose politics is post-representational and prefigurative.

Critical realist research can provide explanations of the causes of events and surface appearances. In its more radical expressions, such as the work of Hilary Wainwright, it also recognizes other forms of knowledge, argues for the need to recognize the knowledge based in the experiences and practices of movements, and accordingly conceptualizes a need for a politics and politics of knowledge that are inclusive, participatory and creative. However, such research falls short of contributing to the creation of constructive critique via its re-inscription of the practice/theory dualism and classic vanguardist division of labour by arguing that movements produce particular and concrete knowledge and that the role of the theorist is to produce theoretical knowledge that can orientate that practical and concrete knowledge towards a more universal and general theorization able to challenge macro-structures of power.

Critical realism, therefore, reproduces the flaws of theoreticism and elitism. It can contribute to a type of theoretical negation that destabilizes mystifications of social reality and historicizes capitalism. However, it is unable to contribute to practical negation and constructive critique in relation to post-representational forms of politics, because of its ontological reification of the forms of capitalism that become epistemological straitjackets which reproduce alienated social practice. The epistemological
orientation that can begin to overcome some of the dualisms between theory and practice, expert and layperson, concrete and universal found in these frameworks are premised upon an expansion of our understanding of the nature of theory, the process of the construction of theory, the role of the academic as producer of knowledge and the role of practice. Accordingly, it is necessary to expand the notion of theoretical practice to include the collective reflection of communities in struggle. Theory, therefore, becomes an open instrument, derived from and by social movements in their attempts at systematization of experience and the creation of emancipatory subjectivities. The theorist becomes the collective reflexive thinker. A researcher in solidarity with such struggles for social justice can thereby engage in a horizontal relationship of mutual ‘learning’ in which abstraction is based upon closeness as opposed to distance from lived experience and in which epistemology becomes a prefigurative practice of everyday life.

The CTUs are an example in practice of prefigurative post-representational epistemologies which develop the immanent theoretical from the concrete. This is based on a heritage of liberation theology and popular education in their struggles over water, land and education in the 1980s and 1990s, and a rejection of vanguardist, representational politics characteristic of the punto fijo period and the orthodox Venezuelan left. Despite the challenges and uneven nature of this process, their self-reflexivity is demonstrated by their reactions to the successes and failures of organizing CTUs, developing the CP project and co-coordinating the 2006 national meeting. Theoretical knowledge production is collective, not individual; forged in the heart of struggle as opposed to the isolation of abstraction at a distance. Localized political struggles have the capacity to combine the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the universal. This capacity is immanent in the lived experiences of such communities of resistance. The type of theory that is a result of such collective reflexive praxis forges projects of social transformation which attempt to avoid the alienated relations of power characteristic of vanguardist forms of politics and knowledge creation.

This suggests a transcendence of academic epistemic privilege and a subversion of academic subjectivity: not only so ‘we’ as researchers in the global North can contribute to post-representational politics in the global South, and in so doing stretch the practice and understanding of movement relevant research; but fundamentally how we can learn from these practices, and reorientate our practices in the here and now. It suggests a rupture in the separations and categorizations that orientate academic/activist subjectivity, and a taking of the pedagogies and methodologies of prefigurative epistemologies into our everyday lives as researchers, teachers, workers, mothers, activists. Where this might lead (both individually and collectively) is unknown, but it contributes to opening up the possibilities of creating the worlds we desire in the present.
Notes

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1. The Metropolitan Region Assembly of the CTUs produced a publication, known as ‘el librito azul’ (the blue book) or ‘Democratización de la ciudad y transformación urbana’ in 2003. In this the work of the CTUs and their objectives were expanded from a narrow notion of legalization of property rights towards a notion of ‘city democratization’, in which access to decent living conditions, democratic participation in the organization of community relations, a dignified life and decent infrastructure within communities were seen as integral to the question of housing and environment.

2. My thanks for Alf Nilsen for suggesting I structure the chapter with a vignette at the beginning and for Jennifer Martinez for confirming that these practices were still structuring the CTU’s practice in her presentation ‘Collective Knowledge Production in Practice: A Window into the Life of a Social Movement and Venezuelan Politics’, Emancipatory Knowledge and Practice, Post Graduate Workshop, CSSGJ, University of Nottingham, 19 January 2010.

3. Contribution made in workshop organized by author comparing popular struggles in the UK with those of Venezuela, 18 August 2006, CPTH, La Independencia, La Vega, Caracas. The heritage of popular education and liberation theology is discussed in the book about a priest el padre Wuytack who arrived in Venezuela in 1966 to start a worker-priest mission, which was banned by the Pope. While living in La Vega, he helped to organize communities and took part in a famous strike at the local cement factory. He was expelled for subversive activities in 1972. For further details of Wuytack’s experiences in Venezuela and La Vega see Ruiz (2007).

4. Series of conversations between author and Andres Antillano, one of the founders of the CTUs in La Vega, national coordinator and academic, and Nora Machado,
also one of the founders of the CTUs in La Vega, and national coordinator, July/August 2006, Caracas.


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