



The affective spaces of global civil society and why they matter



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ABSTRACT

Many early-career researchers aim at making research socially engaged. In the initial stages of my research on international volunteering for development I learnt very quickly that any push towards social justice has been blunted by the damaging mechanisms of neoliberal power. The temptation is therefore to make research socially engaged by exposing such malign presences of power in volunteering organisations. This paper grows out of this interest and builds an argument of how researchers can engage power and write into being a better future. This brings into contrast the capitalocentric orientation of fieldwork preparation against the micro-processes of meeting and being with other bodies come together to constitute work in the field. Through work with an NGO in New Delhi the case is put that such meetings of bodies are affective and this is central to making research socially engaged. Affective moments give rise to love, solidarity and hope. Making research sensitive to such intersubjective moments writes into being the possibilities of a better and more just future. The paper makes an attempt to put this approach to research into practice.

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When you're in a dark tunnel you don't need folks to tell you, "It's dark in here." Analysis of the darkness is important and critique is necessary, but in these kinds of times we need to be very clear about the vision that lures us toward hope and the sources of that vision. We have to remind ourselves what we look like at our best and what has been bequeathed to us at our best – particularly now, as we're witnessing the waning of democratic sensibilities

Cornel West (2004, *Tikkun Magazine*)

You can make political films and you can film politically

Jean-Luc Godard

As part of my doctoral research I arranged to work with Pravah,¹ an NGO in New Delhi that works with young people to encourage “active citizenship” through volunteering. My research interests lie in volunteering and global civil society and the ways they take shape under neoliberalism. I also consider myself socially engaged and I am keen for my research to at least have the potential to contribute to a better future, however that is imagined. Consequently much of my research is concerned with the negative presences of neoliberal power in global civil society and the work in India was to give me the opportunity to document

this. Through the process of doing the research, however, the idea of being socially engaged evolved in a way that effected consideration of methodological issues. This led to an altered perspective on the ways that research conceptualises power. This reconsideration was an unstructured process and here I hope to present it in a more cohesive way and to make a case for including affective methodologies as an important tool of socially engaged research.

1. Global civil society and socially engaged research

Like many researchers I am politically engaged and became involved in social science because of its capacity to unpick the injustices embedded in the fabric of the world. Social science is, as I understand and want to practice it, ‘always already concerned about power and oppression’ (Cannella and Lincoln, 2011: 81) and I would identify with calls to make research more ‘problem-driven, action-oriented and applied’ (Jensen and Glasmeier, 2010: 83). There is therefore no pretension to detachment and the ‘the essential motivation is to change the world not just to analyse it’ (Martin, 2001: 18). The main site for this approach is capitalism and its ability to infiltrate various aspects of economic, political and cultural life. Over recent years academic commentaries have increasingly framed the discussion of such sites through neoliberalism (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009) where the process of “the market” imposing on social life is understood as a constitutive element of a “neoliberal agenda” (Larner, 2000).

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¹ <http://www.pravah.org/>.

Such an understanding of neoliberalism provides the critical thrust of much work on volunteering and civil society and an increasing amount of work is devoted to detecting neoliberalism's imposition of market forces on the "third sector". One specific focus is on "global civil society", the imagined community of non-state actors that stretches across the globe on different scales from UNESCO to grassroots organisations such as Pravah, and there is a large amount of literature on global civil society's continuing "neoliberalisation". Mary Kaldor, for example, has argued that the joining together of non-state actors functions as 'a mechanism for market reform and the introduction of parliamentary democracy' (Kaldor, 2003: 589) and thus enters a longer debate on how the third sector has the potential to work incognito as a 'shadow state' (Wolch, 1989). More empirical research has mapped the ways in which the geography of global civil society is heavily inflected by the international distribution of power (Smith and Wiest, 2005); how state politico-legal frameworks function to 'disable undesirable programmes' (Chandhoke, 2002); how grassroots dissenting voices are stifled (Kothari, 2005) and co-opted (Baillie-Smith and Jenkins, 2011; Kothari and Minogue, 2002); the way that NGO activity is predicated on western forms of knowledge (Shukla, 2009) and how progressive organisations are 'reined in' by less progressive funders (Dolhinow, 2005: 567).

Going into these literatures as an "early-career researcher", eager to engage power and injustice, it is easy to draw out a narrative of "bad" neoliberalism undermining "good" global civil society. This undoubtedly comes in part from an (my) eagerness to aim directly at power but it also comes out of a prevailing power-centric academic performance of a cohesive "neoliberal agenda" (Larner, 2000). Consequently the discernable narrative of neoliberalism's negative presence in charities and NGOs made this an ideal area for research that wants to push the world in a certain direction. This understanding of neoliberalism as 'a top-down impositional discourse' (Larner, 2003) shaped wholly the initial stages of my research and the imperative was clear: to seek and to expose the presence of such processes in the organisations I was to research. Being involved in an NGO in New Delhi would give me access to this and would hopefully enable me – in some small way – to get at the unjust presence of neoliberalism in global civil society organisations.

In this paper I tell the story of a small part of my time with Pravah and focus on the way that my initial understanding of a space "saturated" with power contrasted with my experience on the ground. The experience was rich in intersubjective connections between people. I use an account of this to illustrate how sensing affective moments in the field opens up ways that research can engage with social justice. My main argument is that affective moments matter and documenting them presents a way to move on from an understanding of neoliberalism as an imposition of power and explores how social life instead escapes power. The move is thus simultaneously towards a more nuanced use of neoliberalism in the research process and an emphasis on the aspects of life that play out without deference to power. The aim is to put this into practice and build towards an "anti-capitalocentric" account of social life (Gibson-Graham, 2008) and consider what this might offer socially engaged research and the wider project of pushing for a better future. I begin with the story of some work in the field with Pravah.

2. The Jan Satyagraha: Gwalior, India, 2nd October 2012

It's 7 am, I've just eaten *pohe* and drunk a cup of super sweet chai. The sun's already burning my neck and I'm having problems with my *kamarband* – the cord that holds the *pajama* of the *kurta*. My trousers are falling down and it's embarrassing. I've been asked

to wear a *kurta* by the Pravah volunteer facilitator Nitin, who has agreed to let me take part in a 'Group Exposure', a programme that takes 20–30 metropolitan university students out of their comfort zone and puts them to work in rural communities. This Group Exposure is slightly different. The concept is the same except we're going to follow the first seven days of the 300 km-one-month *Jan Satyagraha* – a march for justice for rural Indians. This is a sensitive issue for many in India and provokes strong criticism of the government and much soul-searching as it draws focus on interreligious and intercaste discrimination and violence (see Carr-Harris and Parishad, 2005). So, it's hot, sweaty, we've slept little and we're about to start the first 23 km leg of the march along with 100,000 rural people who have committed to spending the next 30 days marching on parliament in New Delhi. There's a megaphone blaring out feedback and an *intensity* to the chanting I wouldn't expect so early in the morning.

The two evenings before the beginning of the march the other volunteers and I had been sent around the camp to record some individual stories of the marchers. As we spent time talking to them it became clear that this was a cause to which they were entirely committed. One family from Kerala (2000 km south of Gwalior) had been denied work by landlords who are obliged under the Right to Work Act (2005) to provide work and pay fairly.² They didn't have enough to eat and malnutrition was obvious but their cause was being ignored by the authorities. Another family had had their land taken away from them by corrupt forestry officials. Another's children were being denied schooling by higher caste Hindus in their village. One man from Madhya Pradesh had lost his land through caste discrimination, his words were poignant: 'in Delhi I find land reform or I die'. The testimonies were moving and characterised by the conviction that the state ignored, tolerated and – most maddeningly – colluded in the injustices these people suffer. The vast majority of the marchers had brought all they had and they had been planning for years; many had come out of desperation. To my mind this was significant, the protests and action I have been involved in in Europe grow out of exasperation rather than desperation: the difference between "we've had enough!" and "we can't go on!" is a shocking one that was brought home by the elderly, infirm and newly born all ready (or readied) to walk 300 km over 30 days. All while sleeping, eating and bathing on the road to New Delhi. Meeting, speaking and simply *being* with these people left us at times speechless and the two days of collecting testimonies, it is fair to say, had a profound effect on each of us.

Back to the morning of the march. The hot sun, the sober yet charged *atmosphere*, the orchestrated chant, the regimented lines; we were ready to go and there was a tangible sense of hope. We were trying to fit in: kurtas, scarves, *lungis*, no deodorant, make up or jewellery – no smoking. Of course we (I especially) were obvious outsiders but our efforts had meant that the people on the march were warm to us and, because of our reportage over previous days, we definitely felt an *affinity* with the people of the Jan Satyagraha. To add to this I was quite nervous, this experience was going to make or break the research. "I need to take this in", I thought, "to make valid observations". My mind moved onto how I was going to fit this into the reading I'd done, where was the presence of a neoliberalised global civil society here? What were the convoluted channels of global civil society and Pravah's place in it that had placed me in this field? How was the experience of these volunteers shaped in some way by market logic? How had Pravah had its activism blunted by funding requirements? Where, in short, was neoliberalism on this hot, sweaty, noisy, exciting and affective morning on a field in central India? Questions abound, this is the

² Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005).

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