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E-Seminar 58

On media practices and the radical imagination

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Dear all

I'd like to thank Veronica Barassi for the opportunity to comment on Alex Khasnabish's working paper, titled "On Media Practices and the Radical Imagination", and Alex himself for taking the time to share his work with us. The paper can be found here: http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars

This paper is based on a long-term academic/activist initiative named "the Radical Imagination Project" led by Alex and his colleague Max Haiven since 2010. By radical imagination they mean 'the collective, dialogic capacity to envision how the world might be otherwise that sparks between people in the context of generative, critical encounters'. The idea of the initiative is to 'not only explore or document the radical imagination but to bring it into being – to convoke it – with radical social justice activists and organizers.' The project is based in Halifax (pop. ca. 400,000), Nova Scotia, Canada.

Alex asks in what ways specific media practices may aid or hinder the growth of a radical imagination among activists in the 'Anglophone North Atlantic'. The case study is radical activists' reactions to the public screening in Halifax of a pro-vegan film by examining two discussion threads in the Radical Imagination Project's Facebook group. What they found was discouraging. Instead of a Habermasian realm of critical rationality, they encountered some of the worst traits of the radical activist world: cliqueism, sectarianism, echo chambers. People were talking past one another and sticking to their ideological guns rather than engaging in constructive criticism, particularly those holding pro-vegan views. Indeed, their positions hardened as the exchanges unfolded. The paper ends with a call for further research into the media practices of radical activists.

A few brief comments and questions to kick off the seminar:

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1. Genre. I found it really refreshing - and unusual - to read an academic piece based on ethnographic research in which the author is pulling no punches, whilst being respectful towards his research participants. This is no rant. In other words, Alex practices in his own writing what he preaches. We nonetheless get a strong sense of Alex's frustration with the discursive and political impasse (we can hear it in his voice, so to speak). In my view, the paper is a timely call for sustained activist and academic attention to the political possibilities and limitations of pursuing different media strategies.

2. Locality. I think we need to know more about Halifax as a locality to be able to place it within that vast 'Anglophone North Atlantic' region that Alex refers to. I for one would be keen to find out more about the history of its 'radical milieu' and its field of socio-technical relations. Geertz's (1973) famous dictum 'Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods ...); they study in villages' won't help us here. In fact, anthropologists study both localities and *in* localities, both 'small places' and 'large issues', as Thomas H. Eriksen (2001) puts it. So my query is: Who are these activists? Where do they come from? How does their place of residence (Halifax or elsewhere) shape their activism, if at all? etc.

3. Scale. This brings me to Eriksen's (2016) recent essay on the 'acceleration' and 'overheating' of our planet. Eriksen argues that 'while trying to weave the big picture and connecting the dots, the credibility of the anthropological story about globalization depends on its ability to show how global processes interact with local
lives, in ways which are both similar and different across the planet.' Eriksen calls for 'multiscalar analysis connecting local realities with large-scale processes'. A good example of this in relation to internet activism would be a terrific essay by Susan K. Sell (2013) on the 2012 transnational mobilisation against SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act). Sell suggests that 'the Internet facilitated scaling up and scale shifting, thereby amplifying constituent mobilization [...] and expanding the sites of contention'. So going back to the paper: How do these radical activists scale up or down their struggles, if at all? What part do internet and other digital technologies play in this scale shifting?

4.Timing. To what extent does this case study capture this particular moment in time, 2015-2016? I'm thinking of the Occupy movement and its aftermath in North America. Had this taken place at the height of the protests (Sep-Oct 2011) would the 'scene' be radically different? When I did research among activists in Barcelona in May 2011, I experienced multiple little scenes being swallowed up by this huge wave of popular mobilisation, after which the civic 'space' was never quite the same again.

5. Media. There are potentially very interesting links in this paper to be made to the media anthropology literature, e.g. Mark Hobart's (2010) work on Balinese media-related practices such as commenting on TV or theatre plays, where commenting is analysed as a significant practice in its own right, or Mark A. Peterson's (2003) work on intertextuality. Alex's example is intertextual (as well as intermedial) in that people are using a Facebook thread to talk about a public screening of a film. More thinking on transmediality would have practical political consequences, too. For instance, a few years ago a young, pony-tailed leftist political scientist at Complutense, University in Madrid taught himself the craft of TV communication. He started by appearing on low-budget alternative TV stations and then 'gatecrashed' the big conservative networks political talk shows. They saw him as an entertaining 'radical' (and the ratings went up). He then set up the new political party Podemos and used a 'transmedia' strategy to great effect, i.e. he and his team felt equally at home on the internet and on TV.

Many thanks for a great paper and I look forward to Alex's response and to the subsequent discussion!

John

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