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Jonathan Fox

Introduction

> *Dr. Martin Diskin was a very engaged and vital member of the Latin American Studies Association community for some 30 or more years. Martin also gave us [at Oxfam America] 18 years of his life . . . . He shaped over this period our commitment to human rights. He guided our grant-making in Latin America through several generations of institutional leaders and staff. (He was around longer than three directors and some 20 board members.) He encouraged our staff to speak out forcefully against injustice and to position ourselves as a staunch critic of US foreign policy in Central America and Cuba. He demonstrated to us the value of linking research to advocacy and being informed and strategic advocates. Most importantly, he modeled for us how to be courageous, tough-minded, outspoken and sail against the wind. . . He embodied the quintessential activist academic.*

> *Oxfam America wishes to remember Martin through this lectureship as a way of putting a flag in the ground in his honor that commemorates: his commitment to human rights activism; his prophetic voice in a world so in need of courage and hopeful vision; his commitment to academic rigor in service of humanity; and his generosity as mentor and friend. (Remarks by Raymond Offenheiser, President, Oxfam America, at the Latin American Studies Association Congress, Chicago, IL, 25 September 1998.)*

I am very grateful to the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) for sharing this great honour with me. Martin Diskin was first my teacher and mentor, then a research and teaching colleague, and always a friend. Not so long ago, I was thinking about Martin a great deal as I read his brother Saul's moving memoir (Diskin 2001). Here one can learn what it takes to face the life-threatening illness that was looming behind Martin's smile for so many years, unbeknown to all but family. Like so many defenders of human rights, he sustained an intense commitment to justice for all, in spite of an ever-present arbitrary threat to his own existence.

   I'd like to begin by recognising some of the many *different* ways of bridging scholarly and activist commitments. Martin's own trajectory reflected many of them, including his deep commitment to teaching (outside as well as inside the university), his behind-the-scenes contribution to building progressive organisations for the long haul (as reflected in his service to Oxfam America), not to mention media work, fundraising, as well as creating free spaces within the university itself.

Here, I'll focus on some of the lessons that emerge from one specific approach to bridging activism and scholarship – the collaborative research partnership between scholars and activists. I will try to get to the point – without being 'merely academic' – by framing my points in the form of ten propositions for discussion. What these lessons share is a focus on *recognising difference in order to bring people together.*

1 There is a great deal of complementarity between different traditions of action research, but they are different

This point builds on the two brilliant Diskin lectures from the 2003 LASA congress, when anthropologists Rodolfo Stavenhagen and Aída Hernández shared their insights into Latin American action research, past and present.[1] The approach emphasises grassroots *participatory action research*.[2] Over time, this tradition shifted from an implicit assumption that the researcher's job is to help to 'raise the awareness' of social actors – which sometimes involved unconsciously paternalistic assumptions – to a much more balanced goal of *mutual* learning and agenda sharing. One could call this a shift from trying to *build* the movement to partnering *with* the movement.

I have learned a great deal from this world of participatory action research, but my work also draws on a parallel North American tradition: *power-structure research*. This approach was inspired in part by a century of muckraking investigative journalism, which was dedicated to exposing injustice, hypocrisy, and abuse – and was also informed by the structural analytical frameworks that dominated our field in the 1960s and 1970s. For North Americans committed to Latin America, both inside and outside academia, the power-structure research strategy was pioneered by the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), which had a formative impact on many of us.[3] This approach builds on but goes beyond investigative journalism because it not only goes *behind* the headlines, it also prepares us for what the *future* headlines are likely to be.

In contrast to participatory action research, power-structure research follows an *indirect* strategy for encouraging and facilitating participation. The goal is to produce information and analysis that are both accessible and counter-hegemonic. The resulting tools seek to reveal how powerful institutions *really* work. We used to have 'citizens' guides' to your favourite corporation or university, which would reveal the vested interests behind the façade of neutral scholarship, documenting the interlocking directorates and the many faces of the military-industrial complex. Now we have websites that make Freedom of Information documents accessible in practice and not just in theory.[4]

But how does power-structure research actually work? The link between ideas and action is often taken for granted, but to make it explicit, there are two distinct steps involved. The first goal is get people to say 'ah-hah! – so that's what's *really* going on. . .' – what you could call the 'emperor has no clothes' effect. The hope is that revealing injustice and hypocrisy will provoke the *anger* that is so crucial for motivating action. But anger is not enough – it can motivate people to *want* to make a difference, but it is not enough to show *how* they can do so. Here power-structure research contributes a crucial second step – it also serves as a guide for how to be *strategic* about public action by revealing where the pressure points in the system are. My point here is that showing what's going wrong isn't enough – to really do its job, this research needs reveal the cracks in the system. The phrase 'follow the money' – or its Latin American cousin, *quien paga manda* - sums it up.[5] This use of public spotlights as a strategy for change is also encapsulated in the classic aphorism 'sunshine is the best disinfectant, electric light the best policeman'.[6]

Another action-research strategy involves exposing injustice in ways that *make invisible problems visible*. This means redefining what 'counts' as a problem. For a notable example,

consider the environmental justice movement, which from its origins in the 1980s has been moved forward by partnerships between engaged researchers and grassroots organisations. In the US debate, numbers and quantitative analysis were the key battleground for revealing the racial and class imbalance in exposure to toxic hazards. Alternative numbers empowered alternative ideas, turning them into mainstream common sense while retaining their power. This is a case where quantitative social science made a major contribution and the investment in harnessing mainstream methodologies paid off. Academic research played and still plays a central role in recasting environmental threats as issues of race and class, in the process broadening the environmental movement while homing in with greater precision on the perpetrators.

Coming from a more qualitative and humanist tradition, testimonial action research took off in the 1970s. Led by feminist scholars, this approach projects the voices, histories, and perspectives of grassroots leaders as individuals who are embedded in families and communities as well as in social movements. Over time, the testimonial approach came to recognise explicitly the implications of the researcher as protagonist, leading to a rich interpretive literature on agenda setting and framing. For our teaching, this now vast library provides a goldmine of resources for helping our students to understand the 'other'.

To sum up this first point, these approaches to research are complementary, not contradictory – yet each involves a different methodology, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Much of my own research brings together the first two approaches, looking for cracks in the system in partnership with social organisations and public-interest groups. 'Vertical integration' describes an action-research strategy that brings together different kinds of activists to monitor the 'powers that be', from the global to the local, without skipping the national and regional in between (Fox 2001).

2 Most action research thinks *inside* the box

This raises the question: 'what counts' as action research? Only the kind we agree with? If so, then we'd miss the big picture. Academic research that is carried out in partnership with social movements or public-interest groups represents just a tiny fraction of the broader world of so-called 'applied' research. This gets to our definitions – if action research is defined as *research designed to inform strategies for practical action*, then it would also include the vast array of intellectual resources that are at the service of those in power. For example, a great deal of applied research simply documents problems without addressing the causes – not to mention the huge body of conventional research on social issues that blames the victim.

We could define away this question of 'what counts' by simply saying that action research refers only to that which is designed to serve actors who promote social change – but that might overstate what is different about what we do. Social and political actors across the political spectrum each have their intellectual allies to provide ammunition in the battle of ideas. Probably the biggest difference between conservative, centrist, liberal, and alternative action research is that alternative approaches receive much less institutional support.

This brings us back to naming some of the institutional limits for academic involvement in action research. Within universities, most deans tend to look more favourably on faculty who advise policy makers and bring in grants with many zeros than on those who advise movement leaders and work on issues not currently in vogue with large foundations. In the social sciences, the well-oiled mainstream research apparatus and its associated media 'punditocracy' are staffed by literally thousands of PhDs whose livelihoods depend on thinking *inside* the box.

While recognising this, it is worth keeping in mind that some of this vast amount of conventional research is actually relevant to public-interest groups, for a range of possible reasons.

For example, if we manage to make an invisible problem visible enough to get mainstream research funders to address it, then that is an indicator of impact (even if we may not be happy with the way it is transformed in the process). Plus, how many times have we read a powerful progressive critique that says '*even* (fill in the blank of your favourite mainstream research producer) recognises that (fill in the blank with an injustice, abuse, or institutional failure)'? A review of the applied research apparatus funded from Washington, DC serves as a powerful reminder of how much money is invested in reinforcing hegemonic assumptions.

For an example from my own work, this approach has been critical for the credibility of the civil-society campaigns that challenge World Bank projects, when campaigners can say 'even *they* admit that . . .'.[7] This means that one kind of contribution that scholars can offer to social actors is to wade through, decipher, and boil down the mind-bending quantities of arcane and hard-to-access information that is produced by mainstream institutions. The bottom line, though, is that they have their action research and we have ours.

3 Who's who: *fronteras claras* between activists and academics

When I asked a movement intellectual from Colombia for his take on some practical lessons on what makes research collaboration with academics work, he responded that the academic and the activist need *fronteras claras* – clear boundaries – in terms of their respective roles. This may seem obvious, but it is easier said than done. He added that success depends on the specific moment, on the specific academic, and on the specific activist. I took this to mean that both need to be able and willing to make collaboration a priority – *at the same time*. Again, this is easier said than done, given our competing priorities. He also pointed out that the research will be relevant to the movement only if the movement is interested in the circulation of ideas, in addition to its immediate front-line commitments.

As academics, we also need to be clear about the nature of our own contribution. Is our role to disseminate knowledge *from* and about the movement to other constituencies, perhaps providing academic legitimacy to 'movement common sense'? If so, then it's worth recognising the risks of perceived distortion that come with the scholarly repackaging/interpreting process. Or does the scholar contribute by providing information and analysis about other actors or issues *to* the movement? In other words, it's worth recognising the *directionality* of the researcher's goals – are we drawing from the movement in order to project analysis *outward*, or are we drawing from the external environment in order to project analysis *inward*? This brings me to the fourth proposition.

4 There *are* tensions between activist and scholarly research agendas

The *fronteras claras* issue is an example of a broader point, which is that there *are* possible tensions built into these partnerships. By recognising this possibility before the tensions emerge, we can look for creative ways of dealing with them. Here I'll focus specifically on challenges involved in the *agenda-setting* process within action-research partnerships. Each side comes to the process with different criteria that inform the questions that we want research to address.

The reality is that our questions are informed by different sets of priorities. Some are our own and others are imposed by the logics of the institutions in which we are embedded. As a result, an *interesting* question may not been seen as *relevant* and a *relevant* question may not be seen as *interesting*. Sustained research partnerships need to be driven by questions that each side sees as *both* interesting *and* relevant.

For public-interest campaigners, the most valuable research agendas support existing claims and campaigns, legitimise struggles, expose abuses of power, make abstract problems tractable

and immediate, document the movement's accomplishments, project the voices of the movement's participants, and reveal invisible problems and enemies. Scholars may well share these goals but, when it comes to deciding what research questions are worth pursuing, we often bring an additional set of priorities to bear. Different status hierarchies are in effect, whether they are internalised or imposed by the expectations of the disciplines that control our access to employment. Thinking of how our institutional locations influence agendas is a reminder of the meanings of the term 'discipline'.

The most obvious high-status academic question would be: 'What does this tell us about theory?' Then we have 'what is this a case of?' and 'how does this contribute to the ongoing debate in the literature over (fill in the blank)?' Without getting into the issue of the ebbs and flows of theoretical fashion, we are trained to try to give a pre-emptive answer to the question: 'Why should someone who is not interested in the specifics of your work care?' And we all know that academics are expected to be ready to answer that classic seminar-stopper: 'But what's really new here?' More work on 'old problems' doesn't count for much in this status hierarchy, even if the old problems are still with us – unless they are thought about in new ways, which is key for being both relevant and interesting.

The status issue is of course refracted through the contested terrain of 'what counts' as productivity – the 'quantity' question, the 'pecking order among journals' question, the 'disciplinary versus interdisciplinary audience' question, the 'how to weigh collaborative research' question, and the 'what languages one publishes in' question – not to mention how to assign relative weights between scholarly research and other kinds of intellectual productivity.

If we look at these contested issues of status through a power-structure lens, we can also see the shadows cast by those especially influential disciplinary university departments. In the social sciences, the pressures for maximum possible 'generalisability' empower those scholars who make the most ambitious and expansive claims, often at an intellectual cost that makes area and applied specialists cringe. But given the inter-institutional status hierarchy that rules so many academic external review processes, a handful of flagship disciplinary departments can exercise power as gatekeepers for many others. We could call this 'trickle-down hegemony'. In the process, even the most committed scholars can feel pressured to cram complex realities into disciplinary boxes that fit at best uncomfortably.

Here I am suggesting that we look beyond the intentions of the actors involved and turn our analytical tools on ourselves, to make the broader forces that shape the research process more transparent. To sum up this point, we are best prepared to find positive synergy between the needs of activist partners and the empirical and analytical rigour of scholarship if we recognise the tensions between the forces that shape the two sets of agendas

5 Sustainable partnerships rest on *realistic expectations*

This focus on what can make partnerships sustainable draws from 20 years of hands-on work with both cross-sectoral and cross-border coalition building (e.g. Brooks and Fox 2002). Whether we are looking at movement-to-movement coalitions or at cross-sectoral partnerships such as activist-researcher joint ventures, it's safe to say that misunderstandings are almost inevitable, and they often involve *conflicting expectations*. Given our passion both for our causes *and* for our research, it is very easy to get carried away about what is really possible, leading to expectations that may be difficult to fulfil.

Activist-scholar partnerships, if they are to work, need to be based on an understanding of the other, respect for difference, shared tractable goals, and a willingness to *agree to disagree*. Ideas like *partnership* and *coalition* – more than the term solidarity, for example – recognise that the participants are autonomous actors that each bring their/our own agendas, priorities,

and – whether we recognise it or not – baggage to the table. Coalitions and partnerships that last are grounded in more than shared values, but in shared *interests* as well.

Building on the previous point about agenda setting, activists and scholars often bring different approaches to the table regarding key process issues, such as methodology, how to spend money, and dissemination strategies. There are costs involved in working together on research, and those costs may or may not be compensated, and they may or may not be shared equally. Movement leaders may have to spend scarce time looking after researchers, orienting us, or just keeping us out of trouble. Sometimes certain academic theories or research methods are experienced as alienating by activists. Activists recruited to the information-gathering process may feel more like instruments than partners. Given the relatively high degree of autonomy enjoyed by scholars, especially when publishing in languages and publications that are remote from the activists, it's worth recognising that activists take *risks* by engaging in partnerships with researchers whose findings they usually cannot control.

This kind of partnership-based research is an investment for both – a gamble, really. Will it pay off? By what criteria? For the activists, will the scholar come through with something they find useful? Will it be worth the investment of time and the risk of distorted findings?

For scholars, will there be some academic product, in addition to serving the partner's needs? Especially for scholars without tenure, it's worth being explicit about how action-research partnerships need to generate timely academic products that engage proactively with the real-world hierarchies just mentioned – to use a euphemism – otherwise one risks letting *somebody* down. It's not just personal career survival that is at risk, one could add the risk of letting movement partners down by having to pull back from the partnership halfway through in the interests of career survival, the risk of feeling pressured to force the findings into a product that tries to meet academic expectations but in the end leaves no one happy, not to mention the cost to family and community that comes from trying to meet high levels of both academic and activist expectations at the same time.

The reality is that the costs and benefits of working together are often not clear up-front. How often have we said: 'If I'd only known how much work it would be, then. . .'. And we can imagine what activist partners think when the final product appears only years later and far away, sometimes with no budget left over for translation or the popular-education outreach version of the findings.

To sum up, let's look out for some of the *piedras en el camino* ('rocks in the path') so we don't trip over them while we are *haciendo el camino al andar* ('finding our path by walking').[8]

6 Invisible actors might question our assumptions

One kind of scholarly question that ranks high on my own hierarchy of what counts as both 'interesting' and 'relevant' involves looking for *unexpected outcomes*. On one level, this is a contradiction in terms – how can you look for what you can't see? To be more specific, how can you find actors that conventional analytical frameworks say do not exist?

My own search for invisible actors was influenced by my dissertation research, which found dynamic mass *campesino* and indigenous movements organised around collective identities and interests as rural *consumers*, not just as producers. This wasn't supposed to happen, since back in the late 1970s and early 1980s everyone knew that production rather than consumption was determinative. It turned out that *freedom of association* was determinative, not any pre-existing collective identity. A new government food programme allowed, even encouraged, many tens of thousands of peasants and indigenous people to build autonomous mass organisations for the first time. This led me to trip over another set of invisible actors who weren't supposed to exist, the hundreds of radicals who had been recruited by high-level reformists to go out to the

countryside and rock the boat. For them, the mass mobilisation that emerged was not an unexpected outcome, it was the result of a conscious political strategy that was *supposed* to be invisible, to avoid provoking a premature authoritarian backlash. Here was an opening from above that got pushed open wider by mobilisation from above (Fox 1992). But according to the best critical analysis of the Mexican state in the countryside at the time – the books that I read together with Martin when I was graduate student 23 years ago - this wasn't supposed to happen.

This experience helped me to develop a set of lenses through which to look at other pyramidal authoritarian institutions that claim to fight poverty while oppressing the masses – like the World Bank, for example. As in the case of the Mexican state in the 1970s and 1980s, the World Bank also turns out to do lots of different things at once – mostly more of the same, while sometimes making non-trivial concessions to pressure from below. In both the Mexican state in the 1970s and 1980s and in the World Bank in the 1990s, splits *within* the institutions turned out to be crucial for creating pressure points that movements were able to use. Yet the dominant scholarly approaches assumed that both institutions were monolithic. In both cases, strategically minded activists knew better, and I was privileged to learn from them.

For another example of invisible actors, once taking up a post in California I began working with migrant mass organisations. Yet according to the scholarly literature a decade ago, migrants were made up of kinship networks, they constituted vast, implicitly anonymous flows. For some they were victims while for others they were threats – but most of the literature did not see them as *actors*, and certainly not as collective actors. Now we can see more clearly that Latin American migrants have been building their own civil society in the USA, including public spaces, alternative media, and representative mass organisations – not to mention the capacity to enter into coalitions with others, including researchers (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004).

To sum up, look for invisible actors – both within civil society and within powerful institutions – just in case they are there.

7 Movement impacts may not be obvious

How do we know whether movements are making a difference, and how *would* we know? The answers are not always obvious – as external observers we might be able to see broader impacts, or relationships between causes and effects, or unexpected outcomes that are not immediately visible to those on the front lines. But we face a methodological dilemma. On the one hand, we are biased, in the sense of having strong sympathies or preferences for the way we want the story to end. On the other hand, it is not going to help movements to assess past strategies and plan new ones if we just tell them what want to hear or already know. This means that it's worth trying to *disentangle objectivity from bias* – two ideas that are often conflated – in order to provide an objective analysis about what worked and what did not.

So where might we fit in? Impacts are not necessarily visible to actors because they can be indirect. We have the famous 'counterfactual', for example – something bad would have happened had not. . . Another version of this involves 'damage control', in cases where damage is done but not as much had not . . .(then fill in the blank with the campaign you are looking at). Other not-so-visible impacts include changes that happen far away from the movements involved – powerful institutions that face resistance in one place may choose to avoid such problems by not doing the same thing elsewhere, in a different time and place. That is, sometimes resistance movements win partial concessions that don't improve the specific problem they are fighting against but do provide new levers for social actors elsewhere. These are frustrating kinds of impacts, in that those who did most of the work and took most of the risks don't

see the fruits of their labour – but impacts that are felt elsewhere in space and time still count. Other kinds of impacts include responses from the powerful that manage to divide the opposition, or those that manage to co-opt some leaders and separate them from the base.

Then there are cases where movement decisions lead to harsh, sometimes tragic, backlash, and we know that sympathetic scholars often wait decades before daring to call mistakes mistakes. These all count as movement impacts, and our preferences for some over others should not prevent us from seeing the full array.

8 Partial concessions can be two-edged swords

Assessing whether initiatives to bring about change are having any impact turns out to be so difficult in part because most of the time, making any progress in dealing with powerful elite institutions inherently takes the form of *partial and uneven changes*. There is a huge grey area in between winning and losing – assuming that we know what winning is. But who decides 'what counts' as a significant change, and using what criteria?

Specifically, how do we distinguish between those responses from the powerful that are *dead ends* as opposed to those that can be *wedges* for broader and deeper changes? We could answer this question based on ideological assumptions – like minimalists who say 'something is better than nothing', or 'well, at least we got our issues on the agenda' while maximalists will observe that 'this just deals with the symptoms and not with the underlying structural problem'. Both of these positions are based on implicit assumptions about a predetermined relationship between winning a little bit now and whether such changes will or will not lead to more substantial changes down the line. The minimalist approach optimistically assumes that more will necessarily come later, while the maximalist assumes that a little bit now is somehow always instead of more later. Maybe both are right some of the time, depending in part on the balance of forces and specific strategic decisions, so it's worth being cautious about assuming that either set of outcomes is predetermined.

For example, the NAFTA side-agreements were the most tangible response to the partly binational but mainly US civil society campaigning before what was a very close NAFTA vote in the US congress (Brooks and Fox 2002). Analysts of the vote agree that the environmental side-agreement, with support from the mainstream conservation groups, gave enough Democrats the cover they needed to pass the agreement when it was hanging by a thread. This is an example of a partial concession that succeeded in dividing the opposition. In exchange, mainstream environmental organisations got some discursive concessions and a tri-national commission that produces reports, some in response to citizen complaints. Some are not bad, as reports go, but they are just reports. For current examples of divisive concessions we could talk about the recent debates over whether to change social and environmental standards in the fair trade movement – some say they would be watered down, others claim that mainstreaming is worth sacrificing purity.

My current project focuses on comparing these different kinds of *information politics* – certified labels, citizen-complaint mechanisms, official investigative bodies – because, in the current debate over the social and environmental costs of globalisation, many of the concessions offered by powerful institutions involve more enlightened discourse plus some degree of increased official transparency – as in the case of the social and environmental impacts of trade.

But what *kinds* of transparency are likely to matter? It may be useful to distinguish between 'clear' and 'fuzzy' transparency (or what we could call 'hard' vs 'soft' versions). *Clear transparency* sheds public spotlights directly on those responsible for failing to meet minimum human rights and environmental standards by, for example, providing the reliable, accessible, and focused information needed to target advocacy campaigns with precision and to legitimise

public-interest critiques. Sometimes, these new investigative bodies actually do this at least some of the time, as in the case of the World Bank's Inspection Panel, the first eight years of which we and a team of activists tried to take stock (Clark, Fox, and Treakle 2003).

Fuzzy transparency, in contrast, is unfocused, fails to reveal the mechanisms through which basic standards are violated, and may be unreliable or biased. Not only does fuzzy transparency fail to serve as a guide to action, it may divide critics or divert attention from the need for more serious change efforts – as in the case of the NAFTA environmental side-agreement. The bottom line is that reforms on access to public information need to make very clear who is doing what to whom, if they are to expose abusers and empower rights advocates. Since transparency does *not* necessarily lead to accountability, the question that is both interesting and relevant is *under what conditions* it might.

As we consider the difficult dilemma of how to assess partial changes, we need to remember that where you stand really does depend on where you sit. Changes that may seem quite small when seen from San Francisco or Mexico City often loom very large when seen from below, at the receiving end.

9 When faced with dirty laundry, first do no harm

Any researcher who gets up close and personal with the real world is going to come across dirty laundry, and social movements are no exception. Sometimes the problems one finds are unrelated to the research, and one can decide to look the other way. At other times, one becomes immersed in a web of commitments and support projects surrounding the research that make it more difficult to pretend that nothing is wrong. What to do?

In addition to finding out for oneself what is really going on, rather that just having blind faith in the claims of interested parties, one of the safest rules of thumb is to 'first do no harm'. But how to apply this in practice may not be so easy. For example, what do we do if we find ourselves working with the leadership of an apparently progressive organisation promoting social change that turns out to violate internal democracy, to be corrupt, or to attack those members who are promoting gender equality? We may find ourselves having access to information about what the leadership is doing that the membership is not aware of. In this situation, for those of us who might like to talk about 'speaking truth to power', it turns out to not be so easy to 'speak truth to the powerless'. Simply blowing the whistle to the membership would be a form of external intervention, and in practice it may or may not help, especially if members are not in a position to use the information constructively. At the same time, continuing to support the leadership is simply a less obvious form of intervening in the organisation's internal balance of power – especially if one is involved with fundraising. Here we also face the problem of our interwoven loyalties to individuals as well as to broader organisations and causes. Loyalty must be earned, after all.[9]

These difficult situations force us to think about who the partnership is with. Is it with the leaders as individuals, or with the membership, whose trust the leaders may be violating? One key issue is whether there are better, alternative leaders waiting in the wings. 'Who are we to decide?' is a real question, but it should not be an excuse for pretending that nothing is wrong. Clearly, we need to reflect on the role of the researcher's autonomy within partnerships.

10 Lessons from movement coalitions can be relevant for academic politics

As a member of the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) faculty coalition that built what is now our Department of Latin American and Latino Studies (LALS), my approach to

this academic-institutional project was very much informed by experiences with movement-to-movement exchanges. In brief: exchanges and dialogues between diverse movement actors, across borders and sectors, made mutual *understanding* possible, though only sometimes. Mutual understanding made mutual *support* possible, though only sometimes. Mutual support made actual *collaboration* possible, though only sometimes.

Building our department was also a process of coalition building among diverse actors who didn't yet know each other well. Each faculty member came to the table informed by her or his own experiences of trying to construct respect for difference, and our challenge was to apply this intellectual and ethical principle to the organisation of our own workplace. Our central lesson, emerging from years of collective discussions, is that the LALS project at UCSC does not involve a homogenising process of merger or fusion, nor does it try to incorporate one field into another. Instead, our approach to building this new field involves the conceptual *bridging* of two interlocking intellectual traditions. This process was made possible by a long-term, structured intellectual conversation carried out jointly with our Chicano-Latino Research Center and under the rubric of the Hemispheric Dialogues project. For building the *department*, we try to give meaning to the idea of 'intellectual dual citizenship'. For building our *field*, we try to give meaning to the idea of 'conceptual translation', a process that involves going beyond linguistic translation, to make our conceptual assumptions as explicit as possible. To make a long story short, rather than *merging* area and ethnic studies, we are encouraging *mutual understanding* between the Latin American and Latino Studies frameworks and experiences. LALS is a field, still under construction, that emerges at this intersection.

11 Thinking about the current political moment

To conclude, I've been wondering what could possibly be said about the current political moment that would not already be obvious to this crowd. One point that comes to mind is that we can gain many insights if we look at the USA through comparative Latin American lenses. For example, those who look at electoral institutions in Latin America might think about the US electoral regime, and our lack of a one-person, one-vote for the presidency. For example, it might be possible to have an independent, non-partisan body in charge of running the elections and responsible for making sure that almost everyone is registered, as in Mexico, or to consider prime-time election campaign TV advertising to be too important to leave to the private market, as in Brazil.

When it comes to the Iraq war, for many of us there is the creeping feeling of watching a horrible car crash in slow motion. The lessons of history from Indochina and Central America seem obvious to us, but it turns out that they are amazingly easy to voters to forget and for elites to distort – not to mention the non-voters. Incredibly, Kerry's willingness, when he was the age of our students, to have blind faith in what his government told him to do was considered a huge plus during his campaign, while his Senate leadership in the fight against US government support for the Contras in Nicaragua was used against him.

I wish that as scholars we had more to offer to help to explain why, in US politics, it is still so easy to fool so many people, so much of the time. As Martin Diskin wrote about the Central American wars, the goal of such writing was 'to activate the American people to ensure that the United States will become part of the solution, and not, as at present, part of the problem' (Diskin 1983: vi).

What would Martin have said about our current situation of *déjà vu*? No doubt he would have motivated us to take action with his zestful indignation, he would have raised our spirits with his wit, and he would have helped us to rethink the problem with his fresh insights.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1. See Stavenhagen (2003) and Hernández Castillo (2003).
2. For a comprehensive overview, see Fals Borda (1998). See also the new *Journal of Action Research*. For the historical and cross-cultural context, see Bell et al. (1990).
3. For the historical background, see a special issue of NACLA with a 35-year retrospective, *Report on the Americas* 36(3) Nov–Dec, 2002, also available at http://www.nacla.org/issue_disp.php?iss=36|3 (retrieved 14 June 2005).
4. See the pioneering work of the National Security Archive, a public interest law firm with the largest non-governmental archive of declassified documents in the USA at http://www.gwu.edu/∼ nsarchiv (retrieved 14 June 2005).
5. This could be loosely translated as 's/he who pays the piper, calls the tune'. A Google search on the phrase 'follow the money' produces more than a half million hits.
6. This 1913 phrase comes from the public-interest lawyer and later Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis.
7. For analysis of this dynamic interaction between external and internal critics, see Fox and Brown (1998), Fox (2003) and Clark, Fox, and Treakle (2003).
8. For Paulo Freire's approach to this Latin American aphorism, see Bell et al. (1990).
9. These reflections draw from a crisis of leadership accountability within the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front. For an unusually frank assessment, see Domínguez Santos (2004) and http://www.lals.ucsc.edu/conference/papers/English/Dominguez.html (retrieved 14 June 2005).

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