Space Invaders

Radical Geographies of Protest

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*Spatial Strategies, Sites of Intervention
and Scholar Activism*

Protestors are space invaders. In the course of protests, all kinds of spaces – such as homes, corporate offices, streets and factories – are used, occupied, defended and abandoned. Particular places provide protestors with opportunities and constraints as they wage their struggles. Places can influence the character of protests as well as being transformed by them. Protestors make space, and in so doing they can imbue places with different meanings and feelings. In short, protest always has a geographical character and this has implications for the emergence, character, impact and outcomes of particular struggles.

Protests form part of a broader set of interactions, repertoires and processes that are termed 'contentious politics', which can include strike waves, revolutions, armed conflict, civil wars, guerrilla insurgencies and democratic processes involving political actors and governments.[1] Protests are prosecuted by a spectrum of different societal actors including individuals, groups and, of particular interest to this book, social movements – that is, organisations of varying size that share a collective identity and solidarity, are engaged in forms of conflict in opposition to an adversary (such as a government or corporation), and attempt to challenge or transform particular elements within a social system (such as governments, laws, policies, cultural codes and so on).[2]

Whether it be the alter-globalisation mobilisations of the turn of the century, the flurry of Occupy protests that peppered the planet a few years ago, the recent wave of anti-austerity mobilisations or ongoing protests against the construction of dams or the spread of agribusiness, there is a geographical logic to all forms of protest. Through a discussion of different case studies, I will explain how an understanding of 'radical' geography – an approach to geography that is motivated by concerns for social and environmental justice within a global capitalist economy

– enables us to make sense of protests around the world, and provides a series of geographical strategies of use to protestors.

This book will consider two distinct yet interrelated geographical logics that are critical in overall strategic approaches to the prosecution of protest: a primary logic of *spatial strategies*, by which the character of protest is informed by, and shapes, the geographical contexts in which it takes place; and a secondary logic concerning key *sites of intervention*, physical and conceptual targets within a system that are directly related to a protest's concerns, goals or broader strategies. Taken together, these 'logics' provide an innovative approach to protest that enables us to understand why such mobilisations occur where they do, and provides useful insights for students and activists wishing to make sense of the world of protest and build effective campaigns.

In this chapter I will discuss what is meant by geography, and in particular, radical geography and the contributions that it has made to social movement theory. I will also consider the practice of scholar activism, and issues of ethics and representation concerning collaborating with and writing about political struggles. Following a discussion of politics, protest and power, I will introduce six spatial strategies and nine sites of intervention that I use to interpret political protest from a radical geographical perspective.

GEOGRAPHY AND THE RADICAL IMAGINATION

Human geography is concerned with the people and places that make up the world, their similarities and differences, their connections (or lack thereof) and the processes by which our world is structured into identifiable places and peoples. Two key geographical concepts used throughout this book are place and space. Place refers to a particular geographical locale distinguished by the cultural or subjective meanings through which it is constructed and differentiated (from other locales). These meanings can change over time, and places are always connected to other locales regionally, nationally and internationally through flows of people, investment, ideas, products and so on. Space refers to the ongoing flows, forms and social relations of the world in which we find ourselves. Space is never static, but rather plural, multiple and subject to transformation.[3]

At root is the recognition that everything happens somewhere, and that, for geographers, this is important. For example, where we are in the

world is fundamental to what we see (or do not see), what problems we face, what languages we speak and think in, what we do, what chances we have in life, who we interact with and so on. In the language of human geography, we say that human and non-human things exist in and through space: in very mundane ways, all of us live in homes that organise the world into private and public realms; we live in settlements that we name and categorise by whether they are villages, neighbourhoods, towns and cities and so on; we belong to and reside in specific territories (such as nation states) that are differentiated from others in particular ways; and we move between places and across territories due to work, leisure, migration and so forth. In other words, spaces have a material reality and a symbolic significance that are important to how we experience and engage with the world.[4]

In addition, the various processes that generate social differences and inequalities (regarding health, gender, race, class and so on) are a product of how power and resources are distributed, manipulated and struggled over, which themselves are geographical in character. Such disparities have real impacts on geographical processes such as the location and provision of schools and hospitals (and hence access to doctors and education), transport provision (and hence people's journey times) and the location of waste. In short, geographical (or spatial) patterns produce, and are produced by, social relations and socio-economic processes.[5]

Radical geographers are not interested in merely mapping such differences within or between regions, cities and so on, but rather in investigating why and how 'context' enables an explanation for such differences. Such a geographical interpretation of social life enables us to begin to understand the reasons for the emergence of protest in particular places. For example, the environmental justice movement began in Warren County, North Carolina, in 1973, after the decision by the US state government to build a landfill for contaminated soil following the dumping of 31,000 gallons of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) by the Ward Transformers Company on the side of roads in fourteen counties in the state. The location of the landfill was Shocco, a predominantly poor rural town in Warren County whose residents were predominantly African American, with neither a mayor nor a city council. Residents feared that their groundwater would be contaminated by the toxic waste and so local community leaders organised protests against the construction of the landfill. Their protests attracted the support of civil rights groups across the nation and focused national attention on the

interrelated issues of class, race and lack of political representation, and how they influenced environmental policy-making.[6]

Radical geographers are also committed to challenging relations of power and oppression in order to construct more socially and environmentally just ways of being and living. This means that radical geography has a particular interest in understanding practices and processes of social conflict and change, often in the form of social movements such as trade unions, farmers' movements and environmental justice movements. At times, it also means that radical geographers are involved in these processes and practices themselves. At root, radical geography is concerned with the *where* of protest and how this influences or shapes the dynamics of contentious politics.

CONTENTIOUS POLITICS, SPACE AND POWER: SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY AND GEOGRAPHY

Since the 1960s, the majority of social movement research that has emerged out of Europe and North America has focused on four key themes.[7] First, there has been research into the mechanisms by which the resources necessary for collective action are mobilised. Resource mobilisation theorists[8] have investigated the availability of organisational and personal resources, the importance of leaders as political catalysts and the role of interpersonal and inter-organisational networks in the circulation of resources and the creation of solidarities.[9]

Second, there has been interest in the relationship between structural changes and transformations in patterns of social conflict. Research on 'new social movements' explored how feminist and environmental movements reflected shifting concerns in society away from the production of material goods (the traditional focus of trade unions and other class-based forms of collective action) to the production of knowledge.[10] This also implied the construction of new forms of social conflict that focused on issues of cultural and political identity as well as the use of new technologies in protests.[11]

Third, there has been research into the role of cultural representations in enabling collective action. This has investigated how processes of symbolic production and identity construction have acted as key frames by which collective action is interpreted and motivated.[12] Since the 1990s, the role of emotional responses in collective action has also been examined.[13]

Fourth, 'political process' research has investigated the effects of the political and institutional context on social movements' development and evolution, focusing on the degrees of openness of formal political access, the degrees of (in)stability of political alignments, political conflicts within elite groups and the availability of potential allies.[14]

While these different approaches to understanding social movements have often implied the importance of geography, they have rarely explicitly investigated the implications of a spatial perspective.[15] Therefore, over the past 25 years, geographers have begun to address this lacuna by considering issues of place, spatial inequalities, networks and scale, and everyday spaces of activism.[16]

The Politics of Place

It is within particular places where everyday politics is practised and made real. This is because the processes undertaken by macro-scale institutions such as governments are translated into being in particular places. Because different social groups endow space with an amalgam of different meanings and values, particular places frequently become sites of conflict, where, for example, government policies are contested and reworked by social movements.[17] This is most evident in instances where different ethnic or nationalist groups contest the same political space (for example, Israel/Palestine).

Places can have a key role in shaping the claims, character and capacities of social movements, giving rise to particular 'terrains of resistance'.[18] Social movements frequently draw upon local knowledge cultural practices and vernacular languages to articulate their grievances. Indeed, particular activisms are embodied in and through particular places. This plays a distinct role in shaping both the political claims of actors and the perception of political opportunities, or what have been termed 'place frames'.[19] For example, the Zapatista insurgency (see Chapter 5) was informed and framed by the place-specific political and cultural economy of indigenous Mayan people in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Zapatista activists wear black ski masks, not only because the mask is an important cultural symbol in Mexico, but also because ski masks act to hide activists' identities from the state and symbolise the fact that Mayan indigenous people have been historically invisible to the ruling elites of Mexico.[20]

Spatial proximity between activists also enables strong social and cultural ties to be established (through trust and kinship networks, for example, and through shared language and traditions), which can then be drawn on to enable collective action.[21] For example, trade unions in Canada and the UK have recognised the importance of developing ties with other social movements in the places where they operate, generating 'community unionism' that addresses low levels of unionism and workplace protection for home workers.[22]

Having said this, it is important to recognise that places are the product of greater and lesser flows of people, capital, technology, cultural artefacts, commodities and media. As Doreen Massey has argued, 'each place is the focus of a distinct *mixture* of wider and more local social relations'.[23] As a result, the politics of place should not be thought of as somehow neatly bounded off from broader processes within society. For example, spatial imaginaries – that is, individual and collective cognitive frameworks constituted through the lived experiences, perceptions and conceptions of the world around them – mediate how activists evaluate the potential risks and opportunities of joining social movements.[24] They are also at work in transgressive political practices that challenge everyday understandings of places and frame certain protestors and their activities as 'out of place'. For example, in Argentina during the 1970s and 1980s, the *Plaza de Mayo Madres* (also known as 'the mothers of the disappeared') conducted mass popular protests against the 'disappearance' of family members during the military junta that ruled the country from 1976 to 1982. Motivated by anger, sadness and a clear sense of injustice, the protests took place in public spaces such as public squares and streets. The traditional understanding of such spaces in Argentina was that they were non-political (since proper politics was meant to take place in government buildings) and masculine (since public space was more associated with male activity – such as working or commuting to work – while women's activity occurred in more private spaces such as the home). These traditional understandings of space were challenged when the movement mobilised in public squares across the country.[25]

Spatial Inequalities

Economic and political processes occur in geographically uneven ways that produce variations in the grievances, available resources and development of social movements.[26] For example, the uneven

urbanisation process within the Southern states of the USA resulted in the concentration of organisational resources (such as churches, people, money, social networks) available to African Americans involved in the Civil Rights Movement in only a handful of urban centres.[27]

Geographical variations in the relationship between states and civil society actors are important in understanding the context from which social movements emerge. Social movements are confronted by more or less democratic political systems, and this can influence the political opportunities available to them.[28] For example, trade unions are still accepted as legitimate 'social partners' in much of Western Europe, though they have been under attack in the United States, the UK and Australia, and are heavily censored or state-dominated in parts of Asia and Eastern Europe. Within countries, variations are also evident. For example, in the United States, the American Federation of Labour (AFL-CIO) has faced a more favourable organising environment in Northern states than unions in Southern states because in the former, unions were accepted as legitimate social actors and had long-standing traditions of local union membership and organising.[29]

Networks and the Politics of Scale

Social movements are networks of people, resources and connections. Most operate at the intersection of a series of overlapping scales – from more local municipalities, through regions to the nation state and, increasingly, international forums. These different politics of scale – and their associated networks of activity – provide movements with a range of opportunities and constraints.

The role of the internet in activist networks has been discussed widely.[30] For example, studies have been made of how national and international connections require activists from different struggles to negotiate between differently placed cultural identities, interests and imaginaries.[31] The identification with particular places can be of strategic importance for the mobilisation strategies of movements. Activists may deploy symbolic images of places to match the interests and collective identities of other groups in other places, and thereby mobilise others in terms of a common cause. Hence the ties to particular places can be mobile, appealing to, and mobilising, different groups in different localities.[32]

Nevertheless, movements that are local or national in character derive their principal strength from acting at these scales rather than at the global level. For example, transnational corporations such as Nestlé, McDonalds and Nike have usually been disrupted primarily due to the efficacy of local campaigns.[33] Where international campaigns are organised, local and national scales of action can be as important as international ones. For example, between 1995 and 1998, the Liverpool dockers went on strike to demand the reinstatement of colleagues who had been sacked. Their international campaign was instigated at the grassroots level and coordinated and operationalised by dockers beyond the UK working within established union frameworks.[34] Movements also utilise political opportunities at one scale to create opportunities at others. For example, trade unions have employed a range of multi-scalar spatial strategies to transcend national-level organisational constraints in order to challenge multinational corporations through lobbying key global institutions such as the World Bank and IMF.[35]

However, international alliances have to negotiate between action that is deeply embedded in place – that is, local experiences, social relations and power conditions – and action that facilitates more transnational coalitions. These may generate uneven political connections between activists and different types of geographical outcomes. For example, People's Global Action, an international network of social movements (discussed in Chapter 6), had to negotiate different understandings of gender and ethnicity between European and South Asian movements while attempting to forge an effective alliance against the processes of neoliberal globalisation.[36]

Everyday Spaces of Activism

Everyday practices of social reproduction such as cooking, knowledge-sharing and childcare have helped to mobilise, enable, resource and give shape to protests.[37] Particular infrastructures and practices are required to reproduce everyday life, such as food supply, shelter, sanitation and the maintenance of communal and private spaces, in protest camps such as those against road-building discussed in Chapter 3.[38] In addition, concerns over social reproduction can generate new spaces of activism in which women engage in activities in professional, public and private spaces.[39] Such concerns often necessitate under-standing the emotional repertoires and motivations of movements and

activists and how these are implicated in spaces of activism in different ways.[40] What has informed much of this geographical theorising has been a commitment by radical geographers to the practice of scholar activism.

EMPOWERING RADICAL GEOGRAPHY
THROUGH SCHOLAR ACTIVISM

Geographers' concern with issues of social justice dates back to the 1970s and has been particularly concerned with active participation in different forms of activism.[41] Feminist geographers in particular have considered the ethics and power relations generated through such participation, recognising that scholar activists have social responsibilities – given their training, access to information and freedom of expression – to make a difference 'on the ground'.[42]

   Scholar activism has been concerned with a range of issues. First, with developing practices aimed at social transformation, such as jointly producing knowledge with social movements to produce critical interpretations and readings of the world that are accessible, understandable to all those involved and actionable.[43] For example, the People's Geography Project organised at Syracuse University, New York, has attempted to make research and geographical concepts relevant to social struggles 'for' (and to an extent 'by') the people, such as through the Syracuse hunger project.[44] Second, with developing a politics of affinity with social movements, the connections and solidarities forged being a key part of activist research.[45] Third, with participating in the life-worlds of research subjects, and/or the participation of those research subjects in the production of geographical research.[46] Fourth, with actively contributing to the building of collectively organised non-capitalist spaces.[47] Finally, with considering how activist research can exist in relation to the neoliberal university.[48]

   My scholar activism has been motivated by the belief that critical thinking and critical practice are mutually constitutive: they inform and produce one another. Sites of knowledge production occur as much at the grassroots – created by social movements, indigenous peoples, farmers and so on – as they do within academia. Indeed, many of the theories and concepts that have gained currency within academia owe their origin to grassroots community activists.[49] What is important is that such knowledge production (or co-production between activists and academics) is an accountable and reciprocal process.

In my work I have been committed to participation in, and collaboration with, a range of different movements, campaigns and protest initiatives, many of which are discussed in this book. In so doing, I have attempted to practise 'situated solidarity'.[50] This involves being emotionally moved to collaborate with activists and movements because of core values – such as those concerning dignity, self-determination, justice – that I share with them. Situated solidarity also implies the recognition of various ethical concerns – for example, that the production of knowledge and hence my representations of events (including those in this book) are partial. They have been influenced by my reception and interpretation of information, the quality of the affective link generated between my collaborators and myself, by the workings of my memory, and by my emotions, subjective evaluations and personal limitations.

Further, the ethical concerns central to situated solidarity necessitate an acknowledgement that economic, political and institutional processes and structures shape the contexts of research (and the practices of solidarity by scholar activists) as well as its effects. As a result, I have had to confront and negotiate the unequal power relations that exist between my own society and those in which I have conducted my work, as well as those between my collaborators and myself. For example, I enjoy a range of privileges that accrue to a (white, male) academic employed at a UK

Figure 1.1   Scholar activism involving activists from the Assembly of the Poor, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2004. Photograph taken with the author's camera.