

Book Review: *Laboratories of Learning: Social Movements, Education and Knowledge-Making in the Global South* by Mario Novelli, Birgül Kutan, Patrick Kane, Adnan Çelik, Tejendra Pherali, and Saranel Benjamin

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BOOK REVIEW

***LABORATORIES OF LEARNING:
SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE-MAKING IN
THE GLOBAL SOUTH***
**BY MARIO NOVELLI, BIRGÜL KUTAN, PATRICK KANE, ADNAN ÇELİK,
TEJENDRA PHERALI, AND SARANEL BENJAMIN**
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Laboratories of Learning: Social Movements, Education and Knowledge-Making in the Global South provides an in-depth description and analysis of the knowledge-making processes that occur within social movements. Through their examination of grassroots social movement institutions in the Global South, the authors offer a microlevel perspective on how social movements can serve as spaces for learning.

This work makes four central contributions to the fields of education in emergencies and comparative education. First, as the authors argue, the existing literature overlooks the extent to which social movements constitute spaces of knowledge production. By focusing on this domain of analysis, the authors highlight the role of learning in structuring and shaping social change, particularly in emergency contexts. They contribute more broadly to our understanding of the dynamics of learning and knowledge production in society. Second, this work offers a collection of qualitative studies that provide rich, novel data on the microlevel processes that take place within social movements. Third, by focusing on the Global South, a geographic location that has been traditionally understudied, this work adds to the increasing number of studies of countries that exist at the margins of the global economy. Finally, from a methodological perspective, by documenting close collaboration between researchers and social movements, the book details the successful use of a participatory research approach. This makes it a valuable reference for education in emergencies scholars who are interested in conducting studies that rely on strong partnerships with those directly related to the subject of interest.

Laboratories of Learning starts with two introductory chapters. The first provides background on social movement theory, while the second contextualizes the four social movements that guide the qualitative studies. Then, through rich description of these unique case studies, the authors present their findings, divided into three main chapters. First, they explore how learning occurs within social movements. The results show, as readers would expect, that members of these institutions can

1 Available at <https://www.plutobooks.com/open-access-ebooks/>.

learn in spaces explicitly structured around pedagogical purposes (e.g., workshops). That said, these investigations show, perhaps surprisingly, that much of the learning actually takes place through informal education (i.e., through social interaction) and incidental learning (i.e., through experiences). Second, the authors discuss what kinds of learning take place within movements and identify four common themes: (1) while it is known that earlier movements in the Global South often looked at the Global North as a central source of knowledge and inspiration, movements today tend to put greater value on “endogenous knowledge” (p. 90), including their own locally informed frameworks, to make sense of inequality, and they look at other movements in the Global South as sources of inspiration; (2) movements increasingly adapt their frameworks to incorporate diversity; (3) movements increasingly incorporate gender inequality into their central agendas; and (4) movements have shifted their attention away from utopian aspirations and toward more pragmatic and preset-oriented changes. Third, the authors analyze the effects of such knowledge-making and show how learning transforms the lives of these institutions’ members, shapes how countries make sense of their histories, affects movements’ internal practices, and influences the extent to which movements promote social transformation.

The richness of the data provided is central to the book. It is difficult to access data about what happens within social movements, which often are in conflict with powerful actors and facing strong resistance and repression. Therefore, perhaps for good reason, actors within social movements can be reluctant to share information with researchers about their daily processes. However, the authors of this book, because of their existing ties with the movements of interest, were able to implement a participatory approach and gain unique access to information about within-movement dynamics. In the book they report on four case studies of grassroots social movement institutions in the Global South. They first present a case study of NOMADESC, a human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Cali, Colombia. This NGO advises social movements on various areas, including capacity-building, legal support, and strategy development. For instance, the organization supports the Intercultural University of the Peoples (*Universidad Intercultural de los Pueblos*), an institution that provides pedagogy-oriented support to its partner social movements. The second case study centers on the People’s Democratic Congress (*Halkarm Demokratik Kongresi*), a peace- and social justice-oriented organization based in Türkiye. With its congress-type structure—that is, a horizontal, pluralist, and consensus-based structure that deviates from more traditional hierarchical structures—this umbrella organization brings together a variety of different social movements and organizations in Türkiye that have the common goal of supporting minoritized groups in the country. Soon after its foundation, the People’s Democratic Congress created its own political party, the Peoples’ Democratic Party. While this organization has often faced strong repression, it has, due to electoral successes, established a central role in Türkiye’s political landscape. In the third case study, readers learn about the Housing Assembly, a human rights institution based in Cape

Town, South Africa, that advocates for adequate housing for homeless families and those who live under precarious housing conditions. Finally, the authors present a case study of the Nepal Madhes Foundation, an NGO based in Nepal. The Nepal Madhes Foundation acts on two fronts to support the Madhesi communities. First, it mobilizes activists to promote the Madhes movement and, second, it receives and manages external funding to develop the social and economic conditions of the Madhesi communities. These case studies are informed by a rich data-collection process that includes various in-depth interviews, focus groups, and workshops, as well as a review of the documents produced by these movements. This data collection was guided by a “systematisation of experiences” approach that consists of “a collective research process which seeks to deepen understanding and improve practice through collective reflection and analysis of experience” (p. 12).

A noteworthy strength of *Laboratories of Learning* is its contribution to social movement theory. Much of the thinking around social movements is still informed by a structural or functionalist perspective, which is the desire to explain movements’ purposes, structures, successes, and failures in terms of broad social structures and macrolevel social conditions (Jasper 2010). In contrast, the fine-grained evidence presented in *Laboratories of Learning* empirically demonstrates that movements are, in fact, the products of complex microlevel processes. The book explains that, because their members are constantly involved in knowledge-making processes, social movements constitute dynamic institutions that change over time and adapt to varying social contexts. Therefore, in its alignment with microlevel models of social movement dynamics (e.g., Kim and Bearman 1997; Hedström, Sandell, and Stern 2000), this work provides strong evidence of the roles individual agency and microfoundations play in social movement theory.

That said, the book has an important shortcoming, in that its rich empirical findings are occasionally mixed with reflections and conclusions that are not fully backed by the empirical analysis provided. This is most evident when the authors attempt to establish a connection between knowledge-making within social movements and social transformation—that is, in discussions around the “the effects that these experiments in organizing had on the contexts that they were engaged in” (p. 189). The authors try to distance their claims from traditional causal frameworks, yet the notion of a tangible effect is often implied. Given that the data presented in the book relates to within-movement dynamics with little reference to possible determinants of societal changes, such proposed “societal effects” (p. 143) would be better articulated as theoretical hypotheses rather than actual effects. I fear that such occasional deviations from the data at hand might distract the reader from the book’s rich empirical contributions.

Laboratories of Learning is clearly a valuable resource for education in emergencies and social movement scholars, and for anyone interested in or involved with human rights and social justice movements.

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