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Knowledge as a commodity and participatory research

That a mass of men should be led to think about the immediate reality in a united and coherent way is a more important and original 'philosophical fact' than the discovery by a 'genius' of a new truth which remains the patrimony of a small group of intellectuals. (A. Gramsci).

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Background

It is important to situate this article within the critical historical period in which we are now living. The fact that we have such terms as 'the new international order' is evidence that there is nearly universal agreement that the fabric of the international economic system and its corresponding market mechanisms have reached a state of severe disrepair. It is worth noting that the official statements from agencies like the World Bank, Unesco and FAO are as stark and foreboding as the most radical papers of ten or fifteen years ago.

But for us as scholars, administrators and intellectuals of various sorts engaged in questions of social transformation, these times offer one advantage. We no longer need to quibble about whether the world is really in as bad shape as the critics have said. We may disagree about the causes of the decay, and the paths towards solution, but we all stand together in the recognition that, whatever else has happened during the past twenty years, we have not reduced the gaps in wealth between nations nor those between the peasants and working class and the ruling classes. Our ability to work together and co-operate depends on our ability to commit ourselves to the radical transformation of a world which we now agree has not worked for most of the people in it.

And so we turn to the discussion of universities. What is the role of universities to be in the new international order? Based on existing analysis and the experience this author has had in the fields of both youth and adult education, in Nigeria, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and the United Republic of Tanzania, one would suggest that we should not expect too much. Universities (as education generally) inevitably reflect the existing social relations.

Supported by the State, funded by the governments of most countries or from the surplus of industrial production in the case of some private institutions, universities on the whole exist to serve the needs of those who rule. The extent to which this means the majority of the population is determined by the specific political conditions in a given country.

This is not to say, however, that the discussion is not of critical importance, for it is only by understanding the role of universities in the existing international order that we can hope to create more favourable conditions. Universities offer, in most nations, higher tolerance for political deviance than any other institution. It is expected that students and scholars will live somewhat closer to the edge of heresy or revolt than others. Such deviancy is usually tolerated as long as the activities are confined to the realm of ideas.

It is within this context then—a commonly recognized economic failure and a realistic view of the role of universities—that we come to the discussion of knowledge.

The production of knowledge as a commodity

The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that in consequence the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are, in general, subject to it. (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, German Ideology.)

The production of knowledge throughout the world has become a big business. Evidence of this can be found in the size and structure of the universities and research establishments that we deal with. As early as 1962, estimates were that 28.7 per cent of current GNP of the United States was concerned with the production or dissemination of knowledge (Machlup, 1962, p. 5).

What is important about these observations is that if the production of knowledge has become a business, then knowledge itself has to some extent become a commodity. Commodities, as products for exchange, are directly subject to the influences of the market economy. This implies that the type of knowledge created is by and large determined by the material social relations.

John Horton, in discussing sociology as a focus of social-scientific

knowledge production, has described the situation as follows (Horton, 1971, p. 175):

A reifying scientific consciousness expressed the commodity organization of scientific labour. Sociologists have escaped neither the commodity market nor commodity thinking. . . . Like other workers in a capitalist society, intellectuals survive by producing commodities for exchange.

That there is a form of commodity production is clear. As individual academics our ideas are 'packaged' in the form of papers, books, journal articles and reports, which are exchanged directly or indirectly through seminars, international conferences and symposia. Departments within universities are developed and supported by 'selling' their services to the State or directly to industry. Within the many industrialized capitalist states, international studies as a specialization have come about directly through the initiative and support of national governments which have a need for a knowledge base about Third World countries. The 'institution-building' grants of the United States Agency for International Development, grants by the Ministry of Overseas Development in the United Kingdom to institutions such as the Institute for Development Studies, and at least partial support for various university departments through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) in Canada, are examples of how the economic need stimulates production.

I have in an earlier paper (Hall, 1977, p. 23) characterized the situations as follows:

For a person working in a university or a research institution knowledge is effectively a commodity. In the narrowest sense, researchers gather or 'mine' ideas and information in order to survive and advance economically. Priorities are given to collecting data in a central point, summarizing it and then packaging it in such a way that it can be marketed. The need to serve policy-makers is also recognized by some as an additional market (usually the best-funded projects). The need to serve the people from whom the information has been gathered (the unemployed, urban immigrants, poor farmers, etc.) is indirect and by necessity of low priority. These groups will not buy the results (and perhaps didn't want the research in the first place).

But is knowledge strictly speaking a commodity? Are intellectuals workers in the academic form of a capitalist mode of production?

Martin Shaw has argued that the products of the knowledge industry are in fact 'pseudo-commodities'. He argues that the prices

of the articles exchanged, the books and articles, etc., are not as important as the act of publication itself. Most academics are content to have articles published with no direct payment at all. The role which knowledge production plays has much more to do with the career structure within the academic world. Nicholaus (1972, p. 56) describes the American social-science picture in the following way:

In the post-war era the road to prominence, hence office within the profession has been paved with research publication. Once he obtains financing for a research venture, the sociologist builds up, through publication, his professional reputation. This form of capital is then convertible into academic promotion, which yields better access to more research funds, permitting further publication and so on up, until, as supervisor of graduate students, the successful sociological entrepreneur is in a position to start and manage younger persons on the same spiral.

While Shaw is correct about the pseudo-commodity relationship of the products of individual academics, the viewpoint of knowledge as a commodity can be seen in its direct sense in the form of consultancies, either done on an individual basis, in a university department or in specialized agencies. Large groups of consultants operate in Europe and North America as well as within the international sphere. Consultants do not aspire to political or academic independence. They respond to the direct needs of the State or private industry. Their commodities are clear and obvious. And while there is not space enough at this juncture to expand this issue, it is quite evident that within both the national and international spheres the influence and power of these firms is substantial.

If one carries the analysis of knowledge as commodity production further, the parallels with general commodity production are more clear. Two of the characteristics of commodity production are the creation of uneven development and the facilitation of capitalist penetration and dependency.

To what extent is there an uneven development of knowledge production within the international sphere or even among the universities within countries such as the United States? Is there not a tendency for the large or already important universities to attract more funds for research by virtue of their reputations? Nearly all the books used in sociology courses in African universities are written in the United States, the United Kingdom, or France. The sheer volume of knowledge production is absurdly tipped in the direction of those nations that dominate the international economic markets. Cultural

dependency and cultural imperialism result directly from the uneven development characteristic of other forms of capitalist development. This extends, as we will see later, into the questions of legitimating research and research methods.

What seems important to consider in the context of the new international order is the extent to which the existing order has spread these patterns to the universities of the Third World. Do the researchers and faculty at the universities of Nairobi, Madras and Peru have more in common with the other academics in the international academic world than they do with the people and problems in their nations? Has the pattern of knowledge transfer, which is still ongoing, exported more than institutional structures? Does the fact that most of the academics at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania have had their educations in either the United States, Canada or the United Kingdom have wider implications than have been generally attributed? What does this say about the kinds of people who produce our world's knowledge?

Is the production of knowledge a monopoly?

Have we created a structure for the production of knowledge that has nearly ensured that it is impossible for a farmer living in Bwakira Chini, a Tanzanian village, to contribute to the world's store of information? The standard for research that is put forth by the various influential academic societies and intellectuals has been shaped necessarily by the need the State has for research. We have created a set of requirements in terms of techniques and style that requires years of specialized training, most likely a Ph.D., to achieve. In practice, this has resulted in a situation where a few persons of bourgeois class positions are working on the theoretical and practical academic discussions, are creating knowledge, about the entire universe of people and problems.

What is important to recognize is that some people's common sense becomes recognized as philosophy and other people's does not. Gramsci has suggested that 'all men are intellectuals . . . but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals' (1971, p. 9). He goes on to describe two groups of intellectuals. In the first place there are 'traditional' intellectuals, the scholars, scientists and so forth who, although seemingly detached from class positions, nevertheless are the result of specific historical class formations. Secondly,

there are the 'organic' intellectuals, the thinking and organizing persons in any class. These persons are not usually recognized as intellectuals, or in our terms as persons capable of creating knowledge, but are the union leaders, community organizers and farm organizers. Gramsci goes on to point out that the working class is capable of producing its own intellectuals and that one of the functions of those who are engaged in organized working-class politics should be to make the links between the intellectuals of both types and foster the recognition of the workers' right to create philosophy.

Let me illustrate this in a very concrete form. I worked in a university in Africa as head of a research unit in adult education. I worked in a team with others who were from the country. Our work related to the educational needs of peasants and rural workers in various parts of the country. We were struggling with the identification of problems that might be solved in part through educational programmes. We dealt with, through our research, questions of shortage of water, shortage of food, absence of preventive or curative medical care, and the high incidence of disease. We attempted to interpret and analyse various kinds of data about the lives of these people and their concrete problems.

At the same time as we were working on the concrete problems of these people in their villages, our own lives continued. Our problems continued, but they were not the same problems. Why is this important? The point is that with all the best intentions in the world, the group of us was never going to fully comprehend, much less intuitively grasp, the conditions and the priorities for survival and growth in the villages. We were not even likely to understand the problems of our fellow urban dwellers, living in the shanty towns. In the end our ability to plan educational programmes depended on the closeness of our interpretation of their world to reality. By virtue of the fact of our class positions and our class interests, the knowledge we 'created' about their lives was bound to be in error.

A. F. Blum has explained the problem differently. If our analysis shows that knowledge is constructed to serve the interests of its producers, then knowledge by definition is constructed by those who do not share the interests of the masses. If furthermore we relate our concept of reality to the world of the masses, the majority of people, then the knowledge that has been created is obviously biased and invalid (Blum, 1971, p. 119).

We have come dangerously close to creating a situation in the social sciences that effectively denies recognition of the knowledge-

creating abilities in most of the people of the world. Modes of indigenous education in Africa that have provided structural frameworks and interpretations of the world are missing from what we represent as a universal body of knowledge. What are the implications, for example, of the fact that the peoples of southern Venezuela have a precision in naming the types and colours of grass that grow there which is beyond the scope of common English or Spanish? What is the importance of the fact that the vocabulary for ants found in Hausa in northern Nigeria is far richer than that of any European language or that the Maasai have concepts for cattle exchange relationships and physical types that even the Texans can't match?

What is the role of research within the State?

We have already touched somewhat on the role of research in the context of the State, but it bears further discussion if we are to get a firmer grasp of the directions in which we might look for alternatives. C. Wright Mills (1959, p. 177) has noted that 'increasingly, research is used and social scientists are used for bureaucratic and ideological purposes'.

There is, to begin with, the quite basic need of hierarchically oriented administrators and policy-makers to gather information from those who do not make decisions in order to make decisions for them. This operates at both the national level as government ministries go about the task of attempting to 'solve' various problems of inequity and distribution and at international levels as outside organizations or intergovernmental agencies carry out a similar role. As Shaw (1975, p. 11) has noted:

Information is not only collected on every conceivable kind of social activity; it is also tabulated and what is more important interpreted in an enormous range of private and published documents for the purposes of informing and guiding the decisions of those who control in our society.

In spite of the tendency of capitalism to play down the nature of class relations and to represent them in abstract terms, there is a need for the system to understand the human social reality of the worker. But, says Shaw (1975, p. 11), 'it needs to do this in a way which helps to maintain its social relations of production, not one which calls them into question'.

Another way in which research may be serving as an instrument of social control is through (what at first seems a contradiction) offering a safety valve for dissenters and radicals to vent their concerns. It occupies the time of some in the production of paper rather than power. This can be seen in many universities, which now have groups of Marxist scholars who are completely occupied with the production and counter-production of papers for the sole consumption of the academic world.

The use of research as a legitimizing tool is all too common to us. The government department needs to make a decision and then hires several researchers to study alternative futures, one of which is bound to contain the decision that has to be made. The field of evaluation is especially vulnerable to the plights of government programmes that have to find some way to show that they have been worth the workers' surpluses. In short, the research backs up the decisions that have to be made or, given a set of specific constraints from the start, identifies the range of acceptable solutions.

Marx's own explanations (Marx and Engels, 1971, p. 35) of how the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas are quite helpful in this regard:

The division of labour . . . manifests itself also in the ruling class, as the division of mental and material labour, so that within this class one part appears as the thinkers of the class (its active conceptualizing ideologists, who make it their chief source of livelihood to develop and perfect the illusions of the class about itself) while the others have a more passive and receptive attitude to these ideas and illusions because they are in reality the active ones and have less time to make up ideas about themselves. This cleavage within the ruling class may even develop into a certain opposition and hostility between the two parts, but in the event of a collision in which the class itself is endangered, it disappears of its own accord and with it also the illusion that the ruling ideas were not the ideas of the ruling class and had a power distinct from the power of this class. The existence of revolutionary ideas in a particular age presupposes the existence of a revolutionary class.

The tactical question that must be raised at this point is: To what extent do universities or research institutions allow for some 'free space' in a political sense? Does the acceptance of a political economic interpretation of research in universities imply a situation of impotence, fatalism or some other form of inaction while waiting for the revolution? There are a great many committed academics who do not

agree. Paulo Freire speaks of committing 'class suicide', of dying as a member of the bourgeoisie and aligning oneself with the working class. Mao Tse-tung spoke of the concept of 'Redness' and 'expertness', the implication being that one could be both politically committed and specialized in an area of work. And while it might be argued that such a combination was unlikely outside the Chinese context, the question is perhaps the most important one we have to deal with. It is clear that the existence of some free space is assumed by several groups of researchers who are concerned with the methods by which knowledge is created.

How is knowledge created?

Discussions about how knowledge is created, in this interpretation how research is conducted, must inevitably begin with some concept of what is knowledge is. In order to avoid the pitfalls of epistemological debates, I will refer to the definition of Maurice Cornforth, who writes from a dialectical materialist position. 'We gain knowledge . . . only in so far as we develop our ideas in such a way that their correspondence with reality is proved and tested' (1955, p. 149). It is on the question of proving and testing correspondence with reality that social science has been engaged in one of its most vigorous debates.

By far the most criticism of research methods has focused around the use of the various forms of survey research. This is due in part to its ubiquitousness as a form. While not needing to dwell at length in this article on a subject that has been covered quite widely elsewhere, it is important to review some of the criticisms so as to see how alternative approaches differ.

The survey research approach oversimplifies social reality and is therefore inaccurate.

In addition to the arbitrariness of instrument construction or the class bias of such specific tools as semantic differential tests and various other tests devised by those who work from a primarily psychological base, these approaches have other weaknesses. A research process that extracts information from individuals in isolation from one another and aggregates this into a single set of figures does so at the expense of reducing the complexity and richness of human experience. Social responses to problems by groups of people are not necessarily the same as the total of individual responses of people acting alone. It is of

course correct to say that the use and interpretation of the figures 'depends on the institutional and social context within which the research is embedded' (Carr-Hill, 1974, p. 30). But even given an institutional framework that encourages popular participation or control of decision-making, the representation shown by a set of figures such as '22 per cent of those interviewed said that their home environment has had the most influence on their career choice', or '42.6 per cent of teachers report problems', is inadequate and unsatisfactory. The illusion of accuracy through numbers has been long perpetuated by many of us at least partly as a way of hiding, obscuring or mystifying research.

A second way in which survey research oversimplifies is the perspective of the forced choice. Information is sought through interviews or questionnaires that provide a framework for the responses. For example, many questions ask people what is the 'most influential', 'least satisfactory', 'first choice' or 'most responsible' regarding some specific attitude or decision when attitudes, decisions and behaviour do not reflect a single cause. The curious fact is that all of us have experience of this false choice. We have often filled in forms or questionnaires and have felt the desire to say 'that isn't really the right question'. The forced-choice approach reaches a fetish point in some educational research, as was seen in one case where a 'diagnostic tool' was being employed to help in the analysis of new adult students. Potential students of English were asked to choose the one form of literature in which they were most interested from a list that included novels, short stories, poetry, drama and non-fiction. Pity the person who either didn't know the difference between the forms (this is likely enough in modern literature), wanted some of all, or was curious about a specific period.

A third reason one-time surveys oversimplify is their presentation of a static picture of reality, a photograph of a group of people with neither a past nor a future. The very fact that the survey is ahistorical is a severe limitation; social change is a continuous process, a dialectic or movement from one pole to another over time.

*Survey research is often alienating,
dominating or oppressive in character.*

If one accepts Freire's point that teaching methods have ideological implications then the same holds true for research methods. If one is concerned with increasing people's capacity to participate fully and gain some degree of control over their lives, then research methods

themselves can be part of this process, as shown by Swantz (1974a). Questionnaires or interviews designed in an office of a university or adult-education institution are by nature one-sided. This process regards people as sources of information, as having bits of isolated knowledge, but they are neither expected nor apparently assumed to be able to analyse a given social reality. At the extreme, researchers take up people's time with often badly formulated questions and make interpretations based on little experience in the area or social class and elaborate programmes that are then expected to be useful and relevant.

C. Wright Mills has noted (1959, p. 89):

The style of abstracted empiricism (and the methodological inhibition it sustains) is not well suited to a democratic political role. Those who practice this style as their sole activity . . . cannot perform a liberating educational role. . . . To tell individuals and publics that they can 'really' know social reality only by depending upon a necessarily bureaucratic kind of research is to place a taboo in the name of science upon their efforts to become independent men and substantive thinkers . . . it is precisely the job of liberal education and the political role of social science and its intellectual promise to enable men to transcend such fragmented and abstracted milieux (the social sciences) to become aware of historical structures and of their own place within them.

Research approaches of this style often create the illusion among those who are the suppliers of information that research is rigorous, highly technical and scientifically 'pure' and that the work can only be done by those who are university trained. The abilities of people to investigate their objective realities are not stimulated, and the pool of human creativity is kept within narrow confines. Those most familiar with the problems and whose daily existence is affected by poor health, poor nutrition, low levels of production or past failures of educational provision are effectively taken out of the active process of making the changes that might lead to improvements. Control is left to those who by definition and levels of training are outside the experiences within which change is sought.

One example of this on a large scale was noted in the Unesco evaluation of the Experimental World Literacy Programme. The emphasis on a large-scale, internationally comparable survey design resulted in a situation where few national researchers were viewed as competent to carry out the type of evaluation needed. The resultant instruments were not only grossly oversimplifying the relationship of literacy to

economic development (an admittedly narrow idea in any case), but went about it in a heavy-handed manner (Unesco, 1976, p. 153):

For example, under the general heading of transformation of the milieu, indicators were devised for testing changes in literates' behaviour in the following categories: means of production, volume of production, monetary income, income in kind, consumption of durable goods. These indicators say virtually nothing about vital behaviours concerning social, political or cultural 'transformation of the milieu', even though pertinent data were available in certain project evaluations. . . . In one EWLP country where per capita GNP is less than \$200, this 'consumption' criterion was broken down into indicators that included safety razors and wrist watches. . . .

Survey research does not provide easy links to possible subsequent action.

Much research in adult education is action oriented. It may be an attempt to determine a community's educational needs or an attempt to modify existing programmes through an evaluation/research process. In either case it is expected that when changes are made the people in the community or the participants in the adult education programme will participate more actively, more efficiently, or will gain increased benefits over what had existed before. Basic principles of planning stress that the likelihood of full and effective participation in any venture—educational, political or social—is improved by involving would-be participants in the decision-making process. In addition to resulting in a poor source of information, research that has alienated respondents, or at best treated them as sources of primitive information, has little likelihood of creating the active and supportive environment essential for change.

A research team working on questions of vocational education in the United Republic of Tanzania, in a reflection on their work, has described this problem well (CCT, 1977, p. 17):

The data-gathering methods were not strictly participatory ones and imposed questions upon the respondents, thus leaving them in a passive role. This antagonized their active participation in the research and hindered therefore the creation of a base of action and interaction within the research and after the research.

This lesson was taken seriously by the researchers, and in the meantime local research teams were formed in the areas where work was being done. These teams have been taking part in the continuation of the research and are in effect taking it over.

Work on alternative strategies

Some work has been done on finding an alternative approach. A general dissatisfaction with orthodox approaches has been expressed in the work of Mead and Blumber (Blumber, 1969). Qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, strategies have made their strongest entry with Glaser and Strauss, in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). Filstead's introduction in *Qualitative Methodology* provides a useful discussion substantiating the need for alternatives (1970). Pilsworth and Ruddock have described an alternative approach based on a phenomenological position (1975, p. 33). Still other approaches have borrowed from anthropology and stress the value of participant observation (McCall and Simmons, 1969). Beltran has outlined convincingly the western bias in social science research methods (1976). Helen Callaway has similarly singled out the cultural trap which researchers are prey to when attempting allegedly objective research in non-Western cultures (1976).

From Africa comes the work of Swantz and in some sense Malya with his approach to providing follow-up literacy material and investigation of a literacy environment (Swantz, 1974a, 1974b; Malya, 1975). In Latin America, Freire provides useful ideas in chapter three of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and a bit more in a talk given to the Institute of Adult Education in Tanzania (1974). Vio-Grossi describes some attempts at peasant participation in Chile under the Allende government (1976, p. 70). Beltran and Gerace have developed important concepts of communication among peasants rather than to them (Beltran, 1976; Gerace, 1973). These concepts of 'horizontal communication' are important links. In addition to Freire, Pinto has elaborated the forms of thematic investigation (1969). Within the field of sociology, the Oliveiras have put forward a compelling set of similar ideas in *The Militant Observer: A Sociological Alternative* (1975).

As a basis for examining or evaluating the various strategies that have been and are being put forward as alternatives, some of the central materialist concepts about knowledge are useful:

Knowledge is essentially a social product. Although knowledge is built up by individuals, it is built up by individuals working in co-operation, depending on one another, communicating their experiences and their ideas. An individual acting alone, cut off from contact with other people and relying only on himself, could acquire scarcely any knowledge at all—and that only of particular facts.

Knowledge is always expanding or changing. Knowledge is continually changing and expanding as the concrete reality is continually changing. The concrete historical conditions that are in effect now will change. One may be working elsewhere, engaged in a different aspect of production, or come into contact with different experiences which will require additional changes or modifications.

Knowledge in its development continually passes through a cycle of three phases: (a) social practice, the development of production and of social relations, setting problems for theoretical solutions; (b) the elaboration of theories arising from those problems based on the experiences; and (c) the application of those theories in social practice testing, verifying and correcting in the process of putting them to use.

There is no other way to discover knowledge except through entering into practical relations with real objects and processes, striving to master and change them, forming concepts on the basis of the experiences gained and then testing the conclusions once more in practice.

Knowledge does not exist apart from practice. People do not acquire knowledge of things about which their practice has not yet given them the need or opportunity of finding out anything.

The concepts of participatory research

The concepts of participatory research have grown from the general social science critique of the most recent years, but also from the experiences of persons working in various countries to find a way of combining active and engaged commitment with an approach to research. While not all of the persons working within the field of participatory research would base their work on the materialist epistemology presented, some would.

The point of raising it in this article is that it represents and attempts to deal with a possible strategy for research and the role of academics as activists which takes into account overall political economic context particularly bearing in mind the question of distributing not only knowledge but the means by which knowledge is produced to the working classes. In a nutshell, participatory research is defined as a three-pronged activity: it is a method of social investigation involving the full participation of the community; it is an educational process; and it is a means of taking action for develop-

ment. The following are the basic components of participatory research that are identified:

1. The problem originates in the community itself and the problem is defined, analysed, and solved by the community.
2. The ultimate goal of research is the radical transformation of social reality and the improvement of the lives of the people involved. The beneficiaries of the research are members of the community itself.
3. Participatory research involves the full and active participation of the community in the entire research process.
4. Participatory research involves a whole range of powerless groups of people: the exploited, the poor, the oppressed, the marginal, etc.
5. The process of participatory research can create a greater awareness in the people of their own resources and mobilize them for self-reliant development.
6. It is a more scientific method of research in that the participation of the community in the research process facilitates a more accurate and authentic analysis of social reality.
7. The researcher is a committed participant and learner in the process of research, which leads to militancy on his/her part, rather than detachment.

Final comments

While some of the analyses will benefit greatly from revision and correction, there are a few points which need to be brought out and which should remain after any modifications:

1. Any concern about the role of universities in the new international order must, by necessity, deal with the question of the production of knowledge.
2. The production of knowledge does not lie outside the general structure of material social relations.
3. It is important to ask who produces the knowledge and for what purpose.
4. The ability to maximize the 'free space' that exists within and around universities depends on individual and collective stances of commitment and militancy on the part of researchers.
5. The most promising direction for further work lies in the integration of theoretical work with concrete social practice in solidarity with the working classes.

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