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**Louden-Cooke, Samantha ORCID logoORCID:
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7997-1747> (2024) Book Review:
Laboratories of Learning by Mario Novelli et al. The
Sociological Review Magazine. doi:10.2307/jj.11033257**

Official URL: <https://thesociologicalreview.org/reviews/laboratories-of-learning-by-mario-novelli-et-al/>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/jj.11033257>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/14378>

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TSR Magazine

Book Reviews

Reviewer Name: Samantha Loudon-Cooke

Book Author Names: Mario Novelli, Birgül Kutan, Patrick Kane, Adnan Çelik, Tejendra Pherali & Saranel Benjamin

Book Title: Laboratories of Learning: Social Movements, Education and Knowledge-Making in the Global South

Publisher: Pluto Press

Date of Publication: 2024

Social movements are a fluid and diverse form of political resistance which always have a counter movement. They emerge in opposition to policies, conflict, oppression, and governments, amongst other things, and the ways in which they are often explored seeks to understand typologies, motivations and successes. Questions are asked about why social movements emerge at specific times, which typology they fall under, and how people get involved, predominantly within Western contexts, or through Western lenses. What this book does is take social movements, and re-present them as knowledge exchanges, or ‘laboratories of learning’, not only for those directly involved in their activism, but for those observing too. Moreover, it does this by dislocating the West as the primary lens through which this is viewed.

Laboratories of Learning is a fascinating amalgamation of experiences, observations, learning and educating in environments which do not conform to the assumed structures classrooms have taken. Inspired by Melucci’s (1989) definition of social movements as ‘cultural ‘laboratories of experience’ (p.213), this work builds on this idea, encapsulating the experiential aspect of learning and knowledge sharing, not only as part of social movements, but as part of the research project itself. Moreover, the project claims to be situated within Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ (2014) ‘epistemologies of the South’ project (p.4), drawing on types of knowledge which are often ignored or discredited by understandings rooted in the Global North. The label ‘Global South’ adopts a metaphorical purpose in this work, for those excluded from the ‘benefits’ capitalist, colonial and patriarchal power structures have afforded others, irrespective of their location.

Education is one of the benefits which is reflected on, highlighting the absence of high quality education in some states, and disparities of access in others; challenging assumptions that education can only occur within a formal environment. The prominence of education as a theme throughout this book reinforces the diversity of the term. The author’s pose the question ‘what does education mean?’, and what the book indicates is that education is the development and sharing of knowledge through a variety of methods, in no specific setting. The common assumption that education occurs within a classroom is dislocated throughout this work. The authors reference to social movements and local organisations as ‘laboratories of learning’, re-presents education and learning as experiential, adding elasticity to learning environments with the notion of classrooms as places where knowledge is imparted, become laboratories where knowledge is made, put into practice and experimented with.

In the conclusion, it is written that the book sought to do more than synthesise case studies; instead weaving understandings together in conversation with each other. These insights are successfully brought together under a variety of themes. The structure of the book explicitly focuses on the relationship between social movements and knowledge; what knowledge is, how it is made and shared,

and the role and importance of individuals and location in this process. When delving into the book, power and identity emerge prominently throughout, with individual and collective identities marrying neatly within the organisations being explored.

There are four main case studies employed throughout the book, with Turkey, South Africa, Colombia and Nepal providing exciting insights into the world of social movements and their development. Accompanying this is an insightful discussion surrounding the inclusivity of some movements, with individuals being encouraged to recognise their multiple identities, rather than being selective. Moreover, insights into the decentralisation of class as a key form of identity, in recognition of the importance of race, gender and ethnicity, amongst others, reinforces the ways in which movements reflect differing and multiple forms of oppression in their journeys to challenge and work with existing power structures.

The insights provided by activists accounts, reinforce the myriad of power structures at play when confronting issues impacting everyday lives. The determination of those involved becomes more apparent through these narrations, and the risks they face as a result of 'retaliation' from other movements and authorities, provides nuanced insights into activist resolve. What made this even more insightful, was the self-reflection on the part of the authors and their roles in not only data collection, but the nature of their relationship with the groups. Through reflecting on language and the education they received while in the field about terminology, once again speaks to the power of words and how information is (re)conveyed, and this includes through translation.

By engaging with the lifecycle of social movements, the author's contribute to the wealth of literature in the field by examining the pedagogical mechanisms of different groups. Methodological points of departure between groups, have become knowledge making discussion points, as is highlighted through the inspiration the Turkish case took from Colombia. This not only speaks to the power of observation, but also the manner in which this cross-cultural, geopolitically diverse project served as an alternative hub for knowledge. The triangulation of insights between learning and knowledge making, conceptual, and methodological separates this fascinatingly complex web of interactions, identities and information exchanges in a delicate manner.

As the authors say 'we have much to learn' (p.220), and this book is an outstanding contribution to the fields of social movements, political resistance and practical pedagogy. The impact of grassroots movements on individuals, institutions and society in the search for social justice is being made increasingly visible, and it is being done in a way that contributes to a more global, rather than Western, understanding.

Reviewer Bio:

Dr Samantha Loudon-Cooke is Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Politics, Education and Applied Sciences at the University of Gloucestershire. Her research explores secularism, activism and gender equality in the Middle East North Africa region and she recently published *Power, politics & resistance: secularism and women's marital rights in Egypt and Iran* in the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. She also edited *Non-Western Global Theories of International Relations*. You can find Samantha on X @DrSamCooke.