

'Now smells like revolution': Migrants' activism, subjectivities and agency in contemporary London

Extended abstract

Gabriela Quevedo
PhD Research Student
University of Nottingham

Situating the research:

My doctoral research is about understanding the subjective lives of Latin American migrant activists in contemporary London. This means exploring and comparing the processes through which these migrants become engaged in political activism in order to understand why and how they mobilise. In particular, I am looking at the experiences of those migrants involved in movements seeking social justice through workers organisation and other forms of unionism. In practice, this is a study grounded in my own engagement as an activist in the city of London for the last three years and is exploring how alternative forms of knowledge can be created through a focus both on researcher and research participants subjectivities

In short, the aim of this research is to understand how the activists build their subjectivity in relation to their own current positions (material and symbolic), their past experiences and how they articulate the relationships between these, and to try to understand the potential links between the activists' subjectivities and the question of agency and social change.

Research objectives:

- Examine the political subjectivities of Latin American union activists in London, by looking at their stories and experiences of mobilisation
- Examine how these activists craft their goals and set out to pursue them, in order to assess the extent to which agency is configured through everyday practices of resistance.
- Explore the economic, social, cultural, and symbolic conditions that have influenced the activists' sense of self and their relationships with others through an in depth understanding of their stories of personal and collective mobilisation.

The methodological approach of this research is interdisciplinary in nature, and revolves around the notion of subjectivity, which will be looked at from the sociological, anthropological, psychological and political angle. In principle, subjectivities are understood as 'the intimate and collective processes through which individuals develop their will to act, to be recognized as actors, and to change themselves and the world around them' (Touraine, 1995: 207). This is a concept that can be used as a meeting point of the different relevant frameworks that are deemed relevant to understand the politics of 'becoming' agents of change. Human actions (transformative or otherwise) are always situated in context, and in this sense, Bourdieu contends that they can only be apprehended through the habits ('*habitus*') they generate, this is, the socially constituted system of dispositions that orient "thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions" (Bourdieu 1990: 55). *Habitus* are formed through repetition of action and thought, are influenced by prior activity and have durable self-sustaining qualities. Through their *habitus*, individuals carry the marks of their own unique history.

In order to study the activists' subjectivities I have been mapping out the generative processes which give rise to the specific *habitus* that the activists themselves manifest through their own discourses and

