Knowledge Production and Emancipatory Social Movements from the Heart of Globalised Hipsterdom, Williamsburg, Brooklyn

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Abstract: The nature of capitalism in its neoliberal form is decreasing higher education’s exclusive domain of knowledge production by exposing students to and exploiting local knowledge production. This has created a paradox. Experiential learning is being supported as ‘academic’ because students learn skills, values and perspectives by engaging in communities of practice. Through community service learning and social justice oriented internships, students learn about emancipatory social movements while simultaneously providing their intellectual capital. Urban Semester Program students participate in the movement for affordable housing, with its origins in post-war Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where many Puerto Ricans settled. Engaged in a struggle against displacement, for self-determination and developing community sustainability by advocating and winning low and moderate income housing, residents are determined to remain in their neighbourhood. Students are engaged in this struggle and connect this exposure to their internships, and the globalising world economy, the role of the state, and corporate power.

Keywords: capitalism, experiential learning, knowledge production, neoliberal, social justice, social movements, sustainability, urbanism

University–Community Engagement

Universities remain centres of liberal learning; however, by following business models (Strathern 2000) and responding to market pressures of a globalised neoliberal economy, academic knowledge is commoditised and becomes a high priced, scarce or luxury good (Basch et al. 1999). A change is taking place in how and where students acquire their knowledge and its relationship to personal and professional practice and how to live a life of hope (Freire 1996). Universities have refocused their mission to prepare students for careers, with the liberal arts providing the skills development part of the curriculum. While academics and their students are increasingly pressed to ‘engage’ the world, administrators are stripping the undergraduate liberal arts orientation to its utilitarian function in favour of science, technology and medicine. Simultaneously a techno-mechanical approach to learning is giving rise to distance learning, what McKenna referred to as ‘predatory pedagogy’ (2013, see McLaren 1995). Didactic presentations of knowledge that must be memorised remain central to ‘teaching’ with its focus on transferring knowledge from experts to students in large classes, also known as ‘banking’ (Freire 1970). Such monologist and techno-mechanical pedagogy assumes an unequal power arrangement that silences and pacifies students while imposing the instructor’s language.

An alternative pedagogy is the potentially more egalitarian dialogic, a social interaction focused on ‘transformative learning’ (Cranton 2006; Mezirow 1991), a praxis that has an inherent potential for ‘transformative action’ (McLaren 1996: xi). This kind of
learning is not merely the mimesis of apprenticeship (Coy 1989; Sennett 2008: 179–93) or a studio model. Beyond providing a dialogue-rich environment, dialogic is relational and hence an endlessly engaged process of social interaction that supports self-reflection and self-direction to build confidence and change the way a learner perceives and thinks. This perspective leads to a deeper form of learning (praxis); the dialectical arrangement of action-reflection that points to theorising and intentionally informed action (Freire 1973, 1996) and importantly hope (Gadotti 1996). Under these conditions, learning is a continuous process enhancing the ability for further action and change. When tied to experience and reflection, it is powerful indeed (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Schon demonstrated that ‘reflection-in-action links the art of practice … to the scientist’s art of research’ (1983: 69). In a later work (1990), he indicated that practice sites are places for knowledge production, not only where knowledge is applied. This occurs through a process of reflective practice. Internships focused on developing critical thinking skills are applications to in-context, in-process, work-related problem solving. Community service learning engages students in citizenship participation and instils the idea of ‘service’ (Butin 2010). Each demonstrates the linkage between theory and practice, makes abstract subject matter relevant as real-world experiences and delivers practice-based exposure. Such experiences extend the notion of college learning by recognising the value added by non-classroom experiences and identifying learning as a social activity (Dewey 1916). Here we face a conundrum that refocuses what ‘learning’ and ‘teaching’ is all about and who it is that is involved with students besides the academic (see Goldstein et al. 2014 as an example). The case of Cornell’s Urban Semester Program in New York City exemplifies Dewey’s notion about how truths ‘tested by experience and by consequential action in public’ (Bender 1997: 44) found resonance in a university setting. This approach to teaching and learning involves undergraduate students in internships, community service and participatory research in non-profit social justice organisations in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Williamsburg

The media now describe Williamsburg as if no one else lives there except the new class of artists, hipsters and young urban professionals. It is portrayed as the heartland of innovation brought to New York City by the “creative class” of people who came to live in Williamsburg (Florida 2002). The Latino population living there is either ignored, discussed as the victim of gentrification and displacement, or living under slum conditions. However, Latino Williamsburg always included creative types, represented by neighbourhood artists. The mythic image of contemporary Williamsburg as that of a frontier that needed to be cultivated and civilised, essentially ‘colonised’, by an in-migrating creative class to make it a place of value (Moses 2005) is propagated by government agencies and real-estate developers.

After the Second World War, New York City maintained a strong manufacturing base, with a well-organised white ethnic working class. Williamsburg, then a working-class community with a large manufacturing area along the East River, underwent a significant transformation. As more prosperous white ethnics left for new post-war housing in the suburbs and the better parts of New York City, the Hasidim, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans arrived, and African Americans moved into Bedford Stuyvesant. They all came for copious well-paying factory jobs; in 1961 there were nearly 100,000 manufacturing jobs in the area.

White ethnic working-class neighbourhoods transitioned into mixed Latino and black neighbourhoods. Williamsburg attracted the Hasidim who initially settled in the older Jewish section and, as their population numbers increased, spread out. Together with changing demographics, the demolition of Williamsburg’s built environment began in 1948 with the construction of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway (BQE), planned under the direction of Robert Moses as early as 1937 (Caro 1974). When the BQE opened to traffic in 1952, the highway cut through the Broadway business district and densely populated neighbourhoods of working-class Orthodox Jews, Italians, Poles and Russians eliminating many homes as it cut Williamsburg in half. Between 1950 and 1960, the census tracts next to the BQE lost almost 9 per cent of their population. Hasidic Jews who survived the Holocaust found this area attractive and Puerto Ricans who left their island homeland to settle interspersed among the Hasidim. The Hasidim sought to recreate Eastern European shtetl life in Williamsburg. Their necessity to live close to the Rebbe, the charismatic spiritual leader of the community, raised real-estate prices because the area where the Hasidim settled was relatively circumscribed and competition for housing near the religious leader was intense (Kranzler 1961, 1995; Mintz 1992: 27–42; Rubin 1997).

Williamsburg’s built environment changed drastically, with the abandonment of manufacturing in the 1960s and 1970s, leaving wide swaths of abandoned
loft and industrial buildings along the East River. The housing situation worsened considerably with rapid and widespread deindustrialisation and the loss of jobs. Landlords who kept their buildings, while collecting rent, drew in as much capital as they could without investing in their upkeep, leaving buildings in disrepair, even cutting off heat and electricity. Some landlords torched their buildings to collect insurance very much like in the Bronx (Finucane 2007; Mahler 2005). In the 1970s New York City nearly went bankrupt resulting in the withdrawal of municipal services (Tabb 1982). As a result, Latinos tended to live in cold, leaky and dark apartments making life in Williamsburg wretched and a daily struggle. A compelling documentary by Diego Echeverria recorded the darker side of those times (1984).

**Gentrification and Its Discontents**

Those from the earlier Jewish community, a smaller group of newcomer professionals and more affluent neighbourhood people purchased three- and four-story buildings as real-estate prices dropped. Paradoxically, as the growing Hasidic area was being renovated, driving up real-estate prices, other parts of Williamsburg experienced economic deterioration causing real-estate prices to decline.

In the 1980s unoccupied loft and industrial buildings in the Northside became attractive squats for artists who were being priced out of Manhattan. They settled in the part of Williamsburg the Polish, other East Europeans and Italians called home. For well over a century, Irish, German and Austrian capitalists flourished here with their businesses, homes and churches. Williamsburg was known for its many German breweries like Schaefer, Rheingold and Pils among other breweries that disappeared by the 1970s.

By the 1990s a young ‘hip’ population moved into North Williamsburg, away from both the Hasidic and the Latino communities, the latter perceived as particularly dangerous due to its reputation for drug dealing, crime and shootings that spilled out into other sections (Anasi 2012). Young people moved in because they could find larger apartments that, when shared, made them more affordable than Manhattan. They were encouraged to do so by the Hasidic leadership to make it possible to keep Hasidim in the neighbourhood and create enough density to keep the Hasidic community growing. While the Hasidim decided not to move into Northside Williamsburg, the Southside was open for settlement. Hasidic developers grabbed up as much property as they could, selling or renting out housing on the Northside to non-Hasidic populations; they also sold and rented housing to Hasidim on the Southside and into neighbouring Wallabout and Bedford Stuyvesant, subsidising many of those who make up the dense community of ultra-Orthodox Jews. They were encouraged to do so by the Hasidic leadership to make it possible to keep Hasidim in the community and create enough density to keep out anyone else. Anything South and West of Broadway rapidly became Hasidic housing and for the most part pushed the earlier Latino community out. The Transfiguration Roman Catholic Church, one of the Latino community’s centres, became an island in the

Another attractive feature in the neighbourhood is the L train that connects Williamsburg with Greenwich Village and the ‘hip’ East Village, and made for an easy commute between Williamsburg and Manhattan. The Williamsburg Bridge empties into the equally hip Lower East Side. Other subway lines similarly tied Williamsburg to Manhattan and became important corridors of gentrification. The re-zoning of the area in 2005 brought about the construction of luxury housing along the waterfront with prices competing with those of Manhattan. This generated the growth of a more stable population of young families and international investors. The rise of real-estate prices and the dramatic escalation in rents caused the displacement of Latinos. Artists, hipsters, young urban professionals and gentrifying retailers displaced the apartment-renting working poor and middle class. As gentrification increased and as the Hasidic community grew, pressure for affordable housing for the Latino population increased because landlords understood that the price of housing they rented to Latino families could be doubled and tripled when renting to the new groups looking for housing. Pressure increased on Latinos, severely impacting on the size and density of their population on the Southside (Los Sures).

It was not only the hipsters moving into Williamsburg that threatened the coherence of the Latino community. The Hasidim, a population whose adherence to pro-natal customs expressed in Jewish scriptures and the aspiration to recover its lost Holocaust populations, brought about swift population growth. According to one Jewish leader, the Hasidim are doubling in population size every ten years and with such a rate in growth they are rapidly outstripping their ability to house the new families that are being formed. While the Hasidim decided not to move into Northside Williamsburg, the Southside was open for settlement. Hasidic developers grabbed up as much property as they could, selling or renting out housing on the Northside to non-Hasidic populations; they also sold and rented housing to Hasidim on the Southside and into neighbouring Wallabout and Bedford Stuyvesant, subsidising many of those who make up the dense community of ultra-Orthodox Jews. They were encouraged to do so by the Hasidic leadership to make it possible to keep Hasidim in the neighbourhood and create enough density to keep out anyone else. Anything South and West of Broadway rapidly became Hasidic housing and for the most part pushed the earlier Latino community out. The Transfiguration Roman Catholic Church, one of the Latino community’s centres, became an island in the
middle of the Hasidic community. The Church, once an important centre for Williamsburg Puerto Ricans as they migrated from the mainland, became central to immigrants from the Dominican Republic who replaced them.

Los Sures

*Los Sures* was that part of Williamsburg that became home for Puerto Ricans as they arrived from Puerto Rico. A few Puerto Ricans came earlier, in the 1930s settling in the waterfront area of Brooklyn near and in Williamsburg. Puerto Ricans also settled into an area that is now included as part of Bedford-Stuyvesant. This is where Our Lady of Montserrat Roman Catholic Church was created in 1965 to serve the Spanish-speaking population in the area. It was carved out of the ground floor of an apartment building whose upper floors served as classrooms and residences for the clergy. It quickly became a Puerto Rican church. The other Roman Catholic Churches in the area, Transfiguration, Saint Peter and Paul, Most Holy Trinity, Saint Mary’s and All Saints, in the past, served white ethnic Catholics, remnant Irish, Germans and Italians; replaced by the new Spanish speakers.

Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States, a status that differentiates them from other Latinos that came to Williamsburg as immigrants. While they worked in many parts of New York City, many held jobs in the Greenpoint-Williamsburg area, a centre of employment for manufacturing. The Brooklyn Navy Yard alone employed thousands in the 1930s, and during the Second World War, when shipbuilding was at its heights, it employed as many as 70,000 people. The area also was a centre for garment manufacturing, employing thousands of local women. Puerto Ricans arrived to take advantage of the work opportunities available here.

Puerto Ricans arrived in New York City in substantial numbers and found housing in the traditional areas where poor immigrants first settled. Williamsburg was one of those places and had the advantage of having local work sites available for them. Roman Catholic Churches dot the area and were mostly founded and built during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Germans, Irish, Italian and Eastern European populations, who attended services there, were replaced by the Puerto Ricans. In 1952, Transfiguration Church attracted a young priest named Bryan Karvelis who joined the community and quickly became a charismatic leader among the Puerto Ricans. He learned Spanish and rapidly fitted into the community of devout Latino Catholics by living among them, refusing the greater comfort and convenience of the Rectory. He eventually moved into the Rectory and invited the homeless to live with him, often cooking their meals. Over the nearly fifty years of service, he was instrumental in spiritually organising members of the parish’s lay community, encouraging them to believe that they deserved the same dignity and respect as any other American and that they had the right to fight for available resources to improve their lives.

Life in *Los Sures* became more difficult with the withdrawal of government services and private capital in the 1970s. As the manufacturing industry closed up shop, abandoned buildings and lots were left to the vermin that found shelter there. Due to the easy access that the Williamsburg Bridge, BQE and subway commuters had to Williamsburg, the illicit drug trade was able to flourish there. The consequences of the presence of illegal drugs in the community were dramatic, especially among the young. Youths formed territorial associations, ‘gangs’, to protect drug trade turf. Gangs were formed in an age grade system among children and youth who grew up together on a particular street. As one community leader still recalls, ‘We had teenagers dying every day; it was a killing field!’

Seeing what was happening in his community, Father Karvelis found an alternative to the gangs by organising the youth around spiritual and productive activities. Those who experienced this time remember how each group of youths the priest organised had their own identifying sweaters. They cultivated an identity that otherwise gang membership would give them. This was a time when monolingual Spanish-speaking parents who may also have been illiterate were raising their children in an atmosphere where Puerto Rican identity was perceived by white society and the media as being as bad as African American. Children experienced the limitations of living with racism and xenophobia and of being identified as members of a racial minority. The young were seeking a positive self-identity. They were not quite American nor quite Puerto Rican.

Among a number of institutions that Father Karvelis was instrumental in building, the one that has the most relevance in this article was the struggle for housing. Karvelis was aware that if he wanted to keep his flock in the community and improve their lives, housing had to improve. Puerto Ricans were moving out of dilapidated housing and unsafe streets to better housing and neighbourhoods whenever they could. He mobilised the youths to help neighbours fix their
apartments. While landlords abandoned buildings or refused to fix buildings in ill-repair, teenaged boys who Father Karvelis organised fixed toilets, repaired walls, restored boilers, fixed roofs and so on.

From such beginnings, those who were most enthusiastic about improving their neighbourhood, refusing to permit housing to be lost that would cause more people to leave, went into the business of repairing homes. In 1972 Southside United HDFC, or Los Sures, was organised. This was truly a community-based organisation that involved many members of the community. It was responsible for obtaining contracts from the city and the federal government to refurbish buildings, build new housing and manage housing units. Los Sures also helped many Puerto Ricans gain control over their buildings, cooperativise them and teach residents how to manage their buildings. While initially some of the expertise to carry out this work came from VISTA volunteers and non-Puerto Ricans who lived in the community or became allies in this struggle, most of the people employed were neighbours, family members or friends, often those people who attended the churches involved in the creation of this organisation. They remain the heart and soul of the organisation.

Churches United

By the 1990s, more people who were priced out of Manhattan’s real-estate market started to move into buildings that were zoned for manufacturing. Artists squatted or rented low-cost spaces in Williamsburg’s Northside, as did young urban professionals working in this area. By 2005, city government successfully rezoned the waterfront area for luxury residential housing. This is when the second phase of housing-based organising and mobilisation began.

Father Jim O’Shea of the Passionist Order of Roman Catholic priests, who lived and worked in North Brooklyn, recognised in 2003 that the people in this area, who were also responsible for managing churches, it was in their self-interest to maintain their laity, whose numbers were dwindling. Cimino (2011) discusses the relationship between religion in North Brooklyn, gentrification and sustaining of a religious commons. One of the signs of this demographic shift was the closing of parochial schools and Church consolidations and closings. If a movement to stabilise and perhaps even grow the Latino population could not be initiated, Catholic churches may have to face their closure due to the loss of population. While a longer discussion on how he was able to mobilise churches is not possible here, the short of it is that he was successful.

His success as a leader in the affordable housing movement was celebrated but short lived. Due to the internal politics of Brooklyn and the decision of the Bishop of Brooklyn and Queens, Nicholas DiMarzio, to ally himself with the then Assemblyman and Democratic Party strongman, Vito Lopez, of North Brooklyn, Father Jim fell out of the Bishop’s good graces and was not only asked to step down from the leadership of Churches United, Corp., which he was instrumental in creating, but was told to leave. He resigned from Churches United but refused to leave in order to carry on his work in his community, a matter that remains a thorn in the Bishop’s side.

There was some confusion in the community about what had happened with the organisation. The members of the Board of Churches United, Corp., split up between the religious leaders who had to obey the Bishop, the lay members who felt they needed to retain their allegiance to the Bishop or the Assemblyman, and the lay members who were outraged by what had happened. Among the latter group, three young men – Rob Solano, Juan Ramos and Esteban Duran – set out to carry on what Father Jim had started. They identified themselves as members of the lay portion of Churches United, Corp., renamed their group, ‘Churches United for Fair Housing’, and formally incorporated a month after Father Jim resigned in 2009. Having learned their lesson about episcopal oversight, they created a new board made up exclusively of lay members. Soon thereafter I worked out
relationships with Rob Solano, who became executive director of Churches United for Fair Housing, to have my students carry out community service under his supervision. By participating in this organisation’s grassroots initiatives, college students are folded into the community through a structured reflection process with experiential and practice-based learning opportunities, as in the following case.

**Transformative Learning and Participatory Research in Williamsburg**

Through Cornell’s Urban Semester Program, undergraduates who come to New York City participate in internships they have chosen, together with community service and participation. These experiences, combined with reflective writing and seminars, constitute a holistic approach, grounded in ethnographic research methods. As a result, students begin to integrate what they learn in one field of experience to other fields, as in the case of community service and participatory research at Churches United for Fair Housing (CUFFH) in North Brooklyn and their respective internships.

CUFFH is a 501(c)(3) faith-based, nonpartisan grassroots organisation seeking to create a sustainable living community responsive to housing, open space, education, health and economic development needs in North Brooklyn. It organises community-wide campaigns to ensure the growth of affordable housing. CUFFH has made it possible for low- and moderate-income people of colour to continue to live and raise their families in Williamsburg. As of 2013, CUFFH had an executive director, one full-time and two part-time staff members. A cadre of volunteers can be called on at any moment. Where it lacks budget and personnel, its strength lies in its capacity to mobilise, organise and lead community coalitions through alliances with churches and community organisations. CUFFH also monitors and ensures that city government agencies fulfil commitments made to build affordable housing as part of the 2005 Greenpoint–Williamsburg re-zoning of North Brooklyn properties. CUFFH also works to ensure that tax-abated luxury housing projects provide a minimum of 20 per cent affordability.

In developing a relationship with CUFFH, its executive director, Rob Solano, and I worked out an understanding based on a handshake. The first is that our relationship will be long-term; second, the relationship is based on general reciprocity; third, that students will make significant contributions to CUFFH as members of this community-based organisation; fourth, that CUFFH members would act as ‘teachers’ of their knowledge, wisdom and experience, with the idea that students would learn; and fifth, that students would make contributions based on what CUFFH needed, not on the research or learning agenda of the course instructor.

Organising a course along these lines contradicts much of how we normally organise university courses. There are a number of difficulties built into such an approach; the most central is that students doubt that an eight-hour contribution each week to CUFFH work has any merit since it seems so little time spent in an activity. Second, they doubt that the work they contribute, sometimes clerical work, such as data input, is significant to the workings of the organisation; and third, they feel that they are not learning much, if anything, and they do not necessarily ‘feel good’ about making such contributions.

Central to the community service and participation part of the curriculum and pedagogy is transformative learning (Mezirow et al. 2009). This is a critical thinking approach to teaching, with the expectation that experience-based learning promotes change. By participating in environments beyond their normal experiences, students come to question and assess the veracity and soundness of their deeply held beliefs and worldviews, particularly about poverty, race and ethnicity, and neighbourhoods of colour. The fundamental elements inherent in this approach to learning are individual experiences, critical reflection, dialogue, understanding (sociocultural, historical and political economic) context, and the nature and qualities of practice.

The majority of students, from relatively homogeneous and affluent communities and households, experience a degree of culture shock as they take subways into North Brooklyn and involve themselves with CUFFH, located in a neighbourhood defined as low-income and populated by Latinos and African Americans. They discuss this most often as ‘living outside of my comfort zone’. However, as students participate in CUFFH and get to know the neighbourhood and interact with people as they struggle to gain access to affordable housing, they begin to understand a condition of ‘living in the world’ very different from what they have experienced in their lives.

For transformative learning to succeed, students need a safe environment in which open and honest reflection and dialogue may take place. This requires the formation of trust between instructor and students and building trust among participating students for peer learning to take place. This non-normative ap-
mester Program places students in contexts of lived membership in the organisation with which they identify. A moral act and a behaviour associated with membership in the organisation is referred to as ‘Legitimate Peripheral Participation’ (Wenger 1998), and critically deepen their understanding of service. To accomplish this, Rob takes on the role of ‘instructor’, bringing with him his own personal history, values, and wisdom that he comfortably communicates to students.

One aspect that he brings to the students is the idea of accountability in leadership development. Rob acts as a role model for this sense of accountability and leadership. The nature of the relationship he builds with them is referred to as ‘reciprocal accountability’ best articulated by Dufour et al. (2006: 1): ‘Leaders who call upon others to engage in new work, achieve new standards, and accomplish new goals have a responsibility to develop the capacity of those they lead to be successful in meeting these challenges’.

Rob assigns tasks to students that allow them to discover how to accomplish them. One student was assigned the task of organising a youth group to play basketball while managing three teenaged volunteers. Students are encouraged to ask Rob questions. However, he encourages them to come to him with solution scenarios that were either tried or are being thought of as possibilities. In this process, students develop a firm grasp of CUFFH’s mission by participating and by taking on CUFFH responsibilities. They begin to identify with the organisation. By the end of the programme, they leave without the feeling of outsiders coming to help, an act of charity, but as members of the organisation making their contribution to improving people’s lives. This is a framework that Lave and Wenger identified as ‘Legitimate Peripheral Participation’ (1991). Service in this sense is not a ‘feel good’ charity but serving in action because ‘it is the right thing to do’, a moral act and a behaviour associated with membership in the organisation with which they identify.

Instead of out-of-context learning, the Urban Semester Program places students in contexts of lived experience, in action and as members of a community of practice, through which ‘[m]eaning arises out of a process of negotiation that combines both participation and reification’ (Wenger 1998: 135). Much of CUFFH work involves students preparing and managing workshops that take place in churches, gathering data on intake forms, digitising the data, analysing these and presenting their findings to the community. In this sense, the students are participating in and identifying with the social movement for affordable housing. Participation is not merely carrying out tasks but taking responsibility for carrying out actions and being accountable for them in relationship to the organisation’s mission. Meaning occurs through acts of reflection, either by writing journals or through orally recounting experiences in weekly seminars and informal interactions.

Students, whose life experiences are typically suburban, learn that in one of the most modern, urbanised and developed cities in the world, people in North Brooklyn are organising to protect and manage a resource they cherish: their sense of community, a ‘cultural commons’ (Nonini 2007). Roman Catholic Church leaders up until recently played a significant role in leading the Latino movement in Williamsburg as well as community-based organisations to defend the commons established by Puerto Ricans and later Dominicans in the post-Second World War period. Students are encouraged to contribute to CUFFH’s struggle to reproduce a Latino cultural commons by organisation to advocate for and obtain affordable housing. Together, they are devising long-term strategies to sustain their community institutions, even as powerful forces are ready to displace them.

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**Notes**

1. *Los Sures* refers to the area of Williamsburg where the Latino community forged its identity, not to be confused with the Los Sures HDFC.

**References**


