

# Liberating Community-based Research: Rescuing Gramsci's Legacy of Organic Intellectuals

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Article abstract

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# Liberating Community-based Research: Rescuing Gramsci's Legacy of Organic Intellectuals

**José Wellington Sousa**

**ABSTRACT** This article aims to provoke a discussion around conceiving community members as community-based research facilitators and leaders of their own process of change. It argues this is possible by rescuing Gramsci's legacy of organic intellectuals that is present in community-based research literature, particularly under the participatory research rubric. However, this perspective has been overshadowed by a strong emphasis on community-based research (CBR) as a collaborative research approach rather than a people's approach for knowledge production that leads to social transformation. Furthermore, such a view of community-based research is fruitful within an adult education and social movement learning framework. In a sense, social movements provide an environment that facilitates critical consciousness and the formation of organic intellectuals and in which communities and academics learn to better engage in partnership for community-led social change. In this context, CBR is still a collaborative approach, but one led primarily by organic intellectuals.

**KEYWORDS** organic intellectuals, adult education, community-based research facilitation

Community-based research (CBR) has been one of the preferred terminologies employed in the Global North to refer to a range of action-oriented research approaches, including Participatory Action Research (PAR), Participatory Research (PR), Action Research for Citizen-led Change and other less critical approaches (Etmanski et al., 2014). CBR is also the taxonomy promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education (Hall et al., 2016), which has great power to influence practice and policy worldwide (Grace, 2013). Nevertheless, from PAR to PR (Hall, 2005; Pynch, 2012), and lately CBR, the approach has shifted from a strong emphasis on people-led practice (see, for example, Rahman, 1991) to the collaboration between academics and community members (see Hall et al., 2016; Strand et al., 2003). This is not a problem at first glance. In essence, regardless of taxonomy, action-oriented research has always been conceived as a collaborative inquiry. However, a problem emerges when the emphasis on collaboration overshadows the protagonism of marginalized communities in facilitating their own process of change. One of the implications of this shift is the vanishing of Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals as a foundational element of CBR and its radical roots.

This article explores the concept of organic intellectuals as an attempt to liberate CBR by rescuing its community-led and social movement orientation. Through Gramsci's lens, community members are not only partners but also leaders and facilitators in community-based research processes. Furthermore, I argue that the field of adult education, particularly through the concept of social movement learning, provides a useful framework to understand the formation of ordinary people into organic intellectuals who are leaders in the process of producing knowledge for social transformation. I start by reviewing the concept of organic intellectuals. Then, I consider how the concept of organic intellectuals is interwoven throughout CBR. Lastly, I explore how community members rise as organic intellectuals by moving from spontaneous philosophy to critical consciousness and how adult education plays a critical role in this process.

### **Organic Intellectuals and Social Transformation**

The adult education social movement's goal of creating a new social order, finds its roots in the thoughts of the political activist and Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (Ledwith, 2020; Mayo, 1999). Gramsci's most influential concepts, such as "hegemony" and "organic intellectuals" (Boggs, 2010), were written in prison between 1929-1935 in the context of the increasing fascist threat in Italy and Germany (Hawley, 1980). Gramsci's notebooks focused on the Italian context but laid the foundation for an international political and ideological analysis that could explain advances of capitalism and failures of socialist revolutions in the West and the elaboration of counter-strategies (Forgacs, 1988; Hawley, 1980; Ledwith, 2020).

Gramsci took Marxism a step further by rejecting its determinism and explaining why the exploitation of a dominant class over subaltern groups does not intensify the class struggle that leads to revolution. His conclusion was that subaltern groups, "subordinate to the ruling group's policies and initiatives" (Green, 2011, p. 69), consent to exploitation (Gencarella, 2010; Green, 2011). For Gramsci, consent is a result of hegemony, which refers to ideological control exerted through institutions promoting a worldview spread through socialization and internalized as common sense (Peet & Hartwick, 2015). Peet and Hartwick (2015) elucidated that hegemony "mystifies power relations, camouflages the causes of public issues and events, encourages fatalism and political passivity, and justifies the deprivation of many so that few can live well" (p. 200). In essence, as Femia (1975) suggested, hegemony is how power operates in order to shape the cognition and feelings through which non-dominant groups perceive and analyze the struggles of everyday life.

Nevertheless, the existence of political passivity does not extinguish resistance and efforts of transformation. Gencarella (2010) clarified that "hegemonic orders are always in competition—rising, falling, incorporating, and being incorporated into others" (p. 223). This statement suggests that a Gramscian picture of society is a social space of struggle for hegemonic control, in which groups are in constant dispute to institutionalize their values, beliefs, and morality. The organic intellectual is an important social agent in this struggle for moral leadership. In general terms, Gramsci et al. (1971) proposed that every social group or class creates their own group of intellectuals from within. These agents support the class in achieving its hegemonic goals. For instance, the capitalist class creates "industrial technician,

the specialist in political economy, the organizer of a new culture, of a new legal system, etc” (p. 5). According to Gramsci et al. (1971), these organic intellectuals are deputies who are responsible for organizing the “systems of relationships” (p. 6) that create an environment propitious to the advancement of their class.

In the same way, subordinated classes, such as the working class, are also able to create their own organic intellectuals. These intellectuals rise up among ordinary people, the civil society (Sumner, 2005), on the basis that “all [people] are intellectuals” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 9). Gramsci’s statement rests on the understanding that there is no human activity in which people do not exert intellectual effort. He elaborated further by saying that:

each [person] finally, outside [their] professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, [a person] is a “philosopher”, an artist, a [person] of taste, [a person] participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is to bring into being new modes of thought. (p. 9)

In other words, Gramsci et al. (1971) was saying that the peasant, the woman, the proletariat, and so on, are all philosophers and as such they can function as organic intellectuals. Gramsci et al. (1971) explained that:

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, “permanent persuader” and not just simple orator (but superior at the same time to the abstract mathematical spirit; from technique-as-work one precedes to technique-as-science and to humanist conception of history, without which one remains “specialized” and does not become “directive” (specialized and political). (p. 10)

As Gramsci et al. (1971) suggested, the philosopher from the margins is a human being, a labourer, and also a political being. In essence, they become political through *praxis*, a radical interaction between theory and practice that makes one aware of themselves as socially and historically forged. *Praxis* allows one to discern hegemonic strategies that produce consent. In essence, a critical consciousness leads to counter-hegemonic practices through intersectoral alliances in society (historical *bloc*), which creates a hegemonic cohesion (Ledwith, 2020) to dismantle structures of domination that result in consent (Hoare & Sperber, 2016). Indeed, the organic intellectual is a leader, a community organizer who is nurtured by the struggle of their own class and is committed to the cause of the group (Cassidy, 2008). Furthermore, as holder of a critical consciousness, their function is to lead their own people towards a critical consciousness through the revolutionary party, which provides education and culture and is the expression of the collective will (Hawley, 1980).

The concept of organic intellectuals contrasts with the notion of traditional intellectuals. Gramsci perceives traditional intellectuals as more independent from the struggles in the social space; they do not hold a political function. In essence, any political function or leadership performed by these intellectuals is “superseded by the more socially generalized ideological leadership of organic intellectuals” (Hawley, 1980, p. 588). For Gramsci et al. (1971), the ecclesiastics are the most typical of the traditional intellectuals who for many years were solely responsible for “the philosophy and science of the age, together with schools, education, morality, justice, charity, good work, etc.” (p. 7). Nevertheless, due to the expansion of monarchical power, other kinds of traditional intellectuals arose in the form of scientists, scholars, and non-ecclesiastical philosophers.

Although traditional intellectuals do not function as organic intellectuals, they can work as catalysts of transformation by facilitating processes of consciousness raising and helping move the counter-hegemonic project forward. Yet, they are more likely to bail when facing pressure and persecution (Ledwith, 2011). Furthermore, the involvement of traditional intellectuals in grassroots struggles may create an opportunity for manipulation and a sense of entitlement, such as they are the ones who really know about the reality of the people and therefore can represent the community (Ander-Erg, 2003). Gramsci’s (1971) proposition rests on the assertion that the oppressed themselves lead the dismantlement of structures of oppression and the creation of a new social order rather than the outsiders and/or vanguard groups as ruled by orthodox Marxists. Nevertheless, in Gramsci’s original elaboration, it is the responsibility of the political party to channel the work of organic intellectuals, including connections with traditional intellectuals, in order to advance the hegemonic goals of the class.

Gramsci’s thoughts were not popular until the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. His ideas had a strong influence on the American and European new left (Boggs, 2010; Hawley, 1980). Furthermore, Gramsci’s concepts such as hegemony, organic intellectuals, popular consciousness, historical *bloc*, and *praxis* have gained relevance throughout the years, particularly in the fields of adult education and community development (Beck & Purcell, 2020; Ledwith, 2020). These concepts provide a framework and inspire models to organize and engage community groups in loops of critical learning and action in order to bring about transformation and build a more just society.

### **Gramsci’s Legacy of the Organic Intellectual and Community-based Research**

Gramsci’s organic intellectual is relevant to this article because it is based on the understanding that marginalized groups are able to create their own intellectuals to lead and nurture the critical consciousness of the group. According to the introduction provided by Hoare and Smith (1971) in *Gramsci*, this proposition contrasts with Lenin’s (1902) perspective of the intellectual who as an outsider, a “refugee” from the dominant class. Dominant class brings critical consciousness to the working class. Acknowledging Gramsci’s contribution to Marxism and social change theory, how can his concept of organic intellectuals inform the endeavour of conceiving community members as CBR facilitators?

A starting point to answer this question relies on the assertion that academics in the Global North acknowledges that CBR is rooted in the PAR tradition of the Global South (see Etmanski et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2016). Greatly influenced by Gramsci's thoughts, the southern tradition evokes the scholarship and practice of authors such as Orlando Fals Borda and Mohammad Anisur Rahman, who trusted in the liberatory power of the oppressed. For instance, Rahman (1991) presented participatory research as a popular approach for knowledge production and transformative action. He stated that the participatory action research process is "to be one of the people's own independent inquiry, in which outsiders may be consulted at the initiative of the people" (Rahman, 1991, p. 17). Indeed, Rahman (1991) inverted the dominance of the binary researcher/community by recognizing ordinary people as being able to perform research and produce knowledge oriented by the transformation of their reality. Rahman's (1991) statement seems to echo Gramsci's (1971) notion of organic intellectuals.



**Antonio Gramsci**

Taken from <https://socialistaction.ca/2021/04/04/the-revolutionary-ideas-of-antonio-gramsci/>

Gaventa (1993) also characterized the participatory research movement as research performed by the people. Although Gaventa (1993) did not mention the concept of organic intellectuals, he demonstrated his understanding by clearly acknowledging Gramsci's idea that every person is an intellectual. In a sense, this conviction is Gramsci's starting point for the construction of the concept of organic intellectuals (Fischman & McLaren, 2005). Indeed, by acknowledging Gramsci's tradition, Gaventa (1993) affirmed the participatory research status of people's science and consequently affirmed the capacity of common people to transform popular wisdom or common sense into good sense. Building on the same Gramscian idea, Fals Borda (1992) affirmed popular knowledge as one of the foundations of PAR. He argued that popular knowledge is valid knowledge and useful to fix many deformed academic versions of history and society. It is also useful to defend the popular class against external and disorienting attacks. According to Gaventa (1993), this kind of knowledge does not fit the scientific structure but is a response to the domination of the expert. Gaventa (1993) also proposed the development of research centers controlled by the people instead of academics.

Indeed, there are many authors who referred to and/or acknowledged the contribution of Gramsci's organic intellectuals to CBR (for example, Bowd et al., 2010; Caraballo et al., 2017; Fals Borda, 1992; Hall, 1981, 1993; Korff & Rothfuss, 2011; Mayo, 2015; Selener, 1997; Stewart & Lucio, 2017). Despite the relevance of the idea of organic intellectuals to CBR's emancipatory and transformational vocation, this concept is seldom explored; it needs attention and elaboration.

In a personal reflection on the development of the participatory research worldview, Hall (1981) mentioned that the participants in the *International Forum on Participatory Research* held in Yugoslavia in 1980 were very interested in Gramsci and his concept of organic intellectuals.

Hall (1981) affirmed that while participants shared their field experiences, strengthened their international networks, and reasoned about guidelines and future practice, the exploration of the relationship between participatory research and organic intellectuals was a high priority. The discussion around the topic led to three positions on the concept with participants favouring the first and second positions. The first position conceives organic intellectuals as a collective expression of the working class, such as an organization that uses participatory research as a supporting tool. The second position is very close to Gramsci's original idea that an organic intellectual is an "individual member of the peasant/working class whose consciousness and technical expertise is raised through active struggle" (Hall, 1981, p. 11). Participatory research is one way to achieve such consciousness and expertise. The third position understands that organic intellectuals are radicalized middle-class intellectuals who engage in practical and/or intellectual work. In this case, participatory research is understood as intellectual work.

It is very important to highlight that Hall (1981) explained the notion of organic intellectuals in the participatory research context is placed outside of Gramsci's theoretical framework. Yet, Hall (1981) agreed that an organic intellectual refers to an inside person, a community member, who was nurtured by the reality of their people and rose as a leader. A little more than a decade later, Hall (1993) affirmed that participatory research is a tool for organic intellectuals to develop counter-hegemonic processes. However, Hall (1981) gave the role of participatory research facilitator to the outside researcher and maintains this perspective until now (see Hall et al., 2016). As a facilitator, the researcher is responsible for "building an indigenous capacity for collective analysis and action and the generation of new knowledge by the people concerned" (Hall, 1981, p. 10). By opposing the interests of their own class, this researcher can deepen the relationship with the community to the point where they become an insider and active contributor to the development of the community. Nevertheless, the role of this outside researcher and the fact that they could join the community as an insider seems to go against Gramsci's original idea. Gramsci et al. (1971) rejected the idea of any outsider, a "refugee from the bourgeois class" (p. 3), taking over the direction of the transformation process by providing theory, ideology, and leadership to the popular class.

Selener (1997) also differentiated between organic intellectuals and participatory research facilitators, but he presented a different idea of how organic intellectuals emerge. For Selener (1997), organic intellectuals can be "community organizers, farmers organizers, peasant or union leaders, etc." (p. 14), who create knowledge and articulate action for the liberation of their people. But Selener does not imply that these people are also responsible for facilitating participatory processes; the role of a facilitator, which is a subordinate role, is taken by social scientists who practice participatory research. Selener (1997) asserted that the researcher does not have to become a community member because the community is aware that the researcher is an outsider who is there to provide a service. The people are more concerned with the researcher's loyalty to the group. However, the researcher can be immersed in the people's reality to the point where there is no separation between community members and researcher; both are committed to the community struggle. The researcher then becomes the expression of what Gramsci calls an organic intellectual. In essence, Selener's (1997) understanding of

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organic intellectuals is based on Vio Grossi (1981), who proposed that the organic intellectual is formed when the researcher is immersed in the people's world. Then, the tensions between the researcher and the people disappear. In this, the researcher also gains the right to speak for the community.

Advocating for a people's science as the basis for social change, Fals Borda (1992) warned against this kind of academic-activist immersion. He advised that academics should be honest about their intentions and how their discipline can support the cause of the social group. While this position aligns with the proposition of Selener (1997), Fals Borda (1992) further explained that this becomes a problem when academics employ PAR to develop a science "for" the people instead of a genuine knowledge produced and systematized by the people in such a way that people can control and use it according to their own intentions. In order to mitigate this problem, he suggested that research and work reports, which may include different forms of communication such as film, music, zine, and so on, should be accessible to community groups. In addition, research techniques should be taught to the people (technical vulgarization) while encouraging them to perform their own investigation. Lastly, any decision made about the research process should be done in a dialogical way that seeks to break from the researcher-researched dichotomy and to stimulate community-led research, education, and action.

Scholars have taken the relationship between outside academics and community and ways to create more power balance between partners as the most important issues in CBR (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). For instance, Steward and Lucio (2017) are very assertive in trying to balance political commitment and objectivity in PAR. Meanwhile, academics strive to guarantee democratic participation of the researched community despite the constraints imposed by the neoliberal university. Steward and Lucio (2017) made the binary researcher/researched very clear but recognized the people's position as organic intellectuals, which is relevant to creating a counter-narrative and research agenda relevant to emancipation. In order to reduce knowledge asymmetry between academics and community, Morrison and Sacchetto (2018) proposed a double movement based on Gramsci. As academics and community members work together, communities move from common sense to good sense through critical consciousness and researchers break from over-rationalization (I discuss this movement from common sense to good sense later in this article). Nevertheless, these authors do not mention any effort for technical vulgarization, perhaps because it is not the context of their work. Yet, Steward and Lucio (2017) did acknowledge that one does not have to be based in the university to perform PAR.

Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals is a fundamental element of CBR if it is to be conceptualized as "the people's own independent inquiry" (Rahman, 1991, p. 17). In this endeavour, at least two aspects of Gramsci's framework have to be taken into consideration. First, for Gramsci et al. (1971), it is the responsibility of the party to form the organic intellectual by channelling their activities and connecting them with traditional intellectuals. These traditional intellectuals, as Ledwith (2016) explained, are useful as catalysts for raising a critical consciousness and triggering transformation. Building on these thoughts, Rahman's (1991) proposition makes sense when he states that the community can invite traditional researchers to assist them in the change process. In this context, the community can take a

form of collective representation, such as the party and/or a community-based organization. It would be close to the first position about organic intellectuals proposed in the International Forum on Participatory Research in Yugoslavia (Hall, 1981).

Second, considering Gramsci's (1971) description of organic intellectuals and second position of the participants in the Yugoslavian Forum (Hall, 1981), even though these intellectuals were formed by experiencing struggle and social transformation through CBR, these people should also be able to become CBR facilitators themselves. This idea is particularly relevant because, as Rahman (1991) stated, transformative strategies led by a vanguard body deemed as holder of an advanced consciousness "inevitably contains seeds of newer forms of domination" (p. 14). Therefore, consciousness-raising and knowledge production must be a grassroots-based process.

Gramsci's (1971) description of organic intellectuals as workers, organizers and thinkers suggests that organic intellectuals are facilitators of reflection and action for change so then, CBR can become a tool for such change, which becomes clearer when one compares Gramsci's description to how the literature refers to facilitators (see Diaz-Puente et al., 2013; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Ledwith, 2016). Chambers (1997), one of the most influential participatory development scholars, also shares this idea that community members should take over the CBR facilitation process in their communities. He affirmed that outsiders should share methods with community members; they should equip local people to perform participatory methodologies. In other words, as Kapoor (2002) explained, in Chambers's approach to CBR, even though outsiders work as facilitators, there is an expectation that community members will take over this role. However, one should be aware that Chambers's work is less radical. His approach does not imply any class-bound counter-hegemonic project nor a radical social transformation. Nevertheless, Chambers, and others under the rubric of people-centred development, advocates for higher level of community participation in development to the point that people can organize themselves for learning and action independent from external agents (see Kumar 2002; Negri et al., 1998).

Indeed, my intention is not to demean the role played by academic researchers in action-oriented research but to decenter it by rescuing the notion of CBR as "the people's own independent inquiry" (Rahman, 1991, p. 17). In this process, the traces of Gramsci's organic intellectuals found in the liberatory historical tradition of CBR also decenter it as an academic endeavour that includes community members. The class-bound Gramscian concept leads one to define CBR as a community-led change approach in which research is a part of it but not the main enterprise. In such an approach, the facilitation performed by those who are nurtured by the struggle of their own social group is relevant to the commitment to the cause as well as community autonomy. In light of this notion of the organic intellectual, how are these facilitators formed?

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## Spontaneous Philosophy and Adult Education: Tensions and Possibilities in the Formation of Organic Intellectuals

For Gramsci, the engine of history as well as transformation is founded on the philosophy of *praxis* whereby action and thought engage in a radical unit in such a way that one cannot be conceived without the other. Gramsci elaborated on this understanding based on his philosophical anthropology as a starting point. He conceived a human being as a social and historical being. In this sense, reality is created as a result of people's relationships with each other, which are determined by the accumulation of social practices throughout the years. Therefore, taking into consideration the historical accumulation of social practices, "every human being is defined by the ensemble of [their] social relations" (Hoare & Sperber, 2016, p. 82). In other words, Gramsci proposed that history informs how one conceives life in the present. This conception of life and its ethical attributes are what Gramsci defines as philosophy (Hoare & Sperber, 2016) or spontaneous philosophy (Gramsci, 1971). In essence, a person's process of consciousness raising starts by knowing themselves as "a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in [them] an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 324). Then, this person engages in the active discernment of this inventory left by collective history.

According to Gramsci et al. (1971), spontaneous philosophy is found in the everyday life of ordinary people. It is found in language, folklore, common sense, and good sense. These elements are interrelated and are the starting point of critical consciousness. They are the source for ending consent and passivity.

Language carries worldviews and cultures within it and provides a constantly changing sense of how the world works; it reveals the historicity of groups at the same time that it is reinvented. In addition, members of particular groups are more likely to think and act alike by sharing the same language, not only in a grammatical sense but also in a conceptual sense (Gramsci et al., 1971). Gramsci et al. (1971) asserted that a language reveals a conception of the world. For instance, when a person learns a different language, they have access to different ways of seeing the world. Yet, Gencarella (2010) explained that choosing a second language to learn is a political engagement; it goes through a process of privileging a certain language and not another. Gencarella (2010) also elucidates that this political aspect of language is related to the idea of irradiation and conquest.

Language and folklore share a lot of characteristics. Gramsci et al. (1971) defined folklore as a popular religion, an "entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, way of seeing things and of acting" (p. 321). Like language, folklore is an expression of history at the same time it is open for innovation. It expresses a group's concept of the world and may become an obstacle for different understandings of the world, including political engagement. In other words, folklore and language entail the dominance of certain beliefs to the detriment of others (Gencarella, 2010). Folklore is closely related to Gramsci's notion of common sense. According to Gramsci et al. (1971), common sense refers to "the conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average [person] is developed" (p. 419). This is the "philosophy of the non-philosopher"

as opposed to the professional intellectual. Common sense, like folklore itself, is a fragmented and stratified philosophical, scientific, and political idea, which can be used hegemonically to reproduce the ruling class.

Hoare and Sperber (2016) have illuminated that Gramsci establishes a clear relationship between everyday life and philosophy. In essence, people live their lives based on spontaneous philosophy (language, folklore, and common sense). However, Gramsci et al. (1971) explained that an organic intellectual emerges in the midst of a subaltern group when they critically analyzes spontaneous philosophy. Critical analysis makes what is fragmented into a coherent unit by leading to an understanding of the world as historically and socially constructed. In other words, it turns common sense into good sense. Gramsci et al. (1971) posed that:

It must be a criticism of ‘common sense,’ basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that ‘everyone’ is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s individual life, but of renovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity. (p. 330)

It happens through the philosophy of *praxis*. The philosophy of *praxis* is the means for intellectual and moral reformation (Forgacs, 2000). In essence, Hoare and Sperber (2016) stated that when philosophy meets politics, theory and practice become a unit. In other words, *praxis* is the transformative unit formed by the theorization of social contradictions while the people themselves are aware of these contradictions in their everyday lives. This process of breaking from a false consciousness is the process of perceiving social contradictions as historical and social phenomena (Forgacs, 2000). Then, the people engage in action in order to transform the historically constructed system of social relations that forged them as marginalized and subaltern people (Gramsci et al., 1971). This process of changing the ensemble of social relations that constitute reality is what Gramsci defines as politics (Hoare & Spender, 2016). Yet, Gramsci et al. (1971) warned that an individual is not able to produce great change by themselves. However, Gramsci emphasized that by coming together as a collective, people are able to produce a radical change and consequently a new kind of society.

Collectives such as the party or the worker’s councils in Gramsci’s context (Hawley, 1980)—the collective intellectual (De Nardis & Caruso, 2011) are responsible for leading people towards transformation through *praxis*. Yet, in general terms, this function of the political party has been contested (Beck & Purcell, 2020). For instance, Purcell (2005) explained that the old political party is unable to understand and respond to the demands of the post-industrial society. He stated that these demands are based on personal autonomy and oriented by human rights. This view transcends party-based politics. Perhaps the field of adult education, particularly through the concept of community development and social movement learning, provides a step forward in solving this tension and broadly articulates insights into the formation of today’s organic intellectuals.

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### **Adult Education, Social Movement Learning, and the Formation of Organic Intellectuals**

In Canada, adult education is not only a field of study. Historically, it is also a social movement. For instance, Alex Laidlaw, a community developer, characterizes the golden age of Canadian adult education as “amateurs out to change the world” (Welton, 2013, p. 121). In other words, ordinary people were active citizens engaged in deepening justice, exploring cooperative ways of life, and creating a deliberative democracy without formal participation in university-based courses (Welton, 2013). Welton (2013) explained that countrywide community-based organizations were involved in the intellectual awakening through non-formal education. People were getting together to learn through study clubs, citizen forums, the radio, films, and so on. It was education, consciousness raising, action, and transformation. Welton (2013) mentioned that communities were also encouraged to assess their reality through research and strategic action in order to address community issues. However, this social movement and transformative orientation was weakened by a professionalized and institutionalized model (Welton, 1995). In addition, Hall and Clover (2014) stated that the field is constantly under the threat of university arrangement trends that insist on collapsing adult education into schooling.

The synergic relationship between community development and adult education is found in the concept of social movement. According to Morris (2005), the notion of social movement involves “a wide range of collective attempts to bring about a change in social institutions or to create a new social order” (p. 589). In essence, this concept is similar to how English and Mayo (2012) define community development. They state that the term is employed to “describe the activity of people working together for collective change” (p. 132). Morris (2005) explained that despite a network of formal associations constituting social movements, they are strongly defined by “a sense of group consciousness, a feeling of belonging and solidarity among the members of the movement” (p. 589). Solidarity also extends across movements. For instance, the feminist movement works across sectors by supporting other grassroots movements in addressing common sources of injustice (English & Irving, 2015). Yet, English and Mayo (2012) pointed out that a relevant issue in engaging in across-group sociality is to support each other in the struggle for social change without compromising the particularities of the movements. The authors refer to the World Social Forum (WSF) as an example of a movement of movements. Walton (2012) elucidated that the WSF is characterized by a “loose miscellany” (p. 195), an alternative political arrangement of autonomous grassroots organizations that come together as one anti-corporate movement.

Hall and Clover (2005) defined social movement as a site that brings forth new knowledge that articulates a conception of the world and practice. As a site of knowledge creation, Hall and Clover (2005) argued that learning is an intrinsic aspect of both the means and ends of social movements. According to them, social movement learning occurs through non-formal education within the movement with the purpose of educating both people who are actively engaged in the struggle as well as outsiders. In this context, CBR is a way not only to educate but also to change reality. Outsiders are also educated informally as a result of the movement’s action or simple existence. Hall and Clover (2005) further explained that because social movements provide a rich learning environment they work as epistemic communities. As

such, community members engage in a *praxis* that intertwines “emotion, action and thought” (Arribas Lozano, 2018, p. 452). Eyerman and Jamison (1991) characterized social movements as cognitive *praxis*. Their understanding is based on the actors’ experience of consciousness transformation in the struggle, which allows an articulation of collective identity. In this sense, according to Hall and Clover (2005), social movements provide a learning environment that facilitates both personal transformation and the transformation of the social order.

Social movement learning can occur through non-formal learning models such as community-based education (Clover & Craig, 2009; English & Irving, 2015; Moreland & Lovett, 1997) or community development (Hamilton, 1992). Hamilton (1992) argued that in order to make these non-formal educational initiatives truly community-based, projects and programs should be controlled by and serve the interests of community members or identity groups. Westoby and Shevellar (2016) agreed with Hamilton (1992) by saying that the community-based component in community-based education implies that learning takes place in the community while the community members take responsibility for the process. In this sense, community members engage in a dialogical relationship of equal exchange, mutuality, reciprocity, and commitment to change whereby the individuals are not collapsed into the collective (Westoby & Shevellar, 2016). According to Westoby and Shevellar (2016), this creates an in-between space for learning and action in which individuals learn technical, practical knowledge and create emancipatory knowledge in their community and as a community.

Gramsci et al. (1971) proposed that the political party holds the function of “challenging the activity of these organic intellectuals and providing a link between the class and certain sections of the traditional intelligentsia” (p. 4). In this context, the organic intellectuals of the subaltern class, such as the working class, are focused on the party. However, political parties are part of broader social movements. Political parties are link nodes of a social network of organized communities, groups, and formal associations that are engaged in learning and collective action, commonly for progressive change (Morris, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2008). Yet, these organizations do not have to be overtly associated with or committed to a political party and do not have to be formal, as they can just be a “concerted action group” (Morris, 2005, p. 589). In this sense, a contemporary understanding of the function of organic intellectuals in organizing and leading people towards a critical consciousness and action should include, but not be limited to, the role of the political party.

The concept of social movement learning provides insights into aspects of the formation of organic intellectuals. In this sense, social movements create an environment that facilitates the production of knowledge and worldviews that are the foundation of the engagement in the struggle for transformation (Morris, 2005). Social movements also provide an environment for people to critically analyze their life stories through a critical lens and create a social identity (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991). Eyerman and Jamison (1991) defined the process of critical consciousness and identity creation as cognitive *praxis*. According to the authors, this cognitive *praxis* is responsible for transforming “groups of individuals into social movements” (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991, p. 3). This process of formation involves non-formal learning through community-based education of which CBR can be a part. People can learn informally by their

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active involvement in the movement (Hall & Clover, 2005). Informal learning also happens through lived experience and resources available in the person's environment (Moreland & Lovett, 1997).

Therefore, the concept of social movement learning suggests that organic intellectuals are formed and nurtured by the rich learning environment of social movements; it involves interweaving adult education and community development activities that shape identities and subjectivities. In this process, spontaneous philosophy is transformed into critical consciousness that leads to transformative action. Social movements provide a way to make ordinary people into intellectuals who can engage in leadership roles, including, but not limited to, organizing their own people and engaging with them in cycles of research and action that lead to social, economic, cultural, and political transformation. In this sense, CBR becomes a community-led approach whereby organic intellectuals, with or without the support of the university, engage their community in research and action for social change.

### **Final Considerations**

This article is an attempt to rescue Gramsci's legacy of organic intellectuals in CBR and consequently provoke discussion around how to liberate CBR. By acknowledging that the concept of organic intellectuals is a foundational aspect of CBR, community members start to be more than mere partners in the research process and instead become researchers, leaders, and CBR facilitators themselves. It echoes the southern critical tradition of CBR, in which ordinary people are able to produce knowledge with the purpose of changing their reality. Furthermore, although I am employing the concept of organic intellectuals to some degree outside of Gramsci's original framework, it provides insights into how to support oppressed groups who want to take control over their lives through research, critical education, and action.

In this community-led process, the community invites academic researchers to join their community effort in which the focus becomes community learning and empowerment for change. Hence, any other academic product becomes secondary. This emphasis challenges the academic political economy and consequently institutional priorities and culture, such as the centrality of students in community service learning, the individualistic "publish or perish" culture, and rigid deadlines. For some academics, this may be impractical, especially if they are fighting to achieve tenure.

Nevertheless, in order for this perspective to take place, CBR should be conceived as adult education, a community development model in itself within the context of social movements. In this sense, social movements become a fruitful environment in which communities and academics can explore ways of strengthening and practicing a subject-to-subject relationship to change the world as led by organic intellectuals.

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