Inventing Militant Scholarship for Political and Intellectual Emancipation: A Response to Mirka Koro’s Speculative Experimentation in (Methodological) Pluriverse

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Abstract

In this response to Mirka Koro’s article “Speculative Experimentation in (Methodological) Pluriverse,” I emphasize the need for militant scholarship as a methodological counterforce for the far-right populist and Manichean rhetorics and the ruthless economic order against the oppressed. We should not accept these provocations face value, but as militant scholars learn to conceptualize them as ideologies. As militants, we aim to overcome neoliberalism’s dominant discourse and resist predatory forms of capitalism by imagining the unimaginable. A militant wants to create discourse and action “that troubles the world.”

Keywords

qualitative research, methodologies, critical pedagogy, pedagogy, participatory action research

Mirka Koro is in the front lines of qualitative methodologies debate, as her 2021 Egon Guba lecture “Speculative Experimentation in (Methodological) Pluriverse” demonstrates forcefully. She legitimately yearns for “adventures of ideas and concepts created and crafted by scholars, surrounding materiality and all citizens of the entire world in the sphere of pluriverse.” What does this mean in today’s world of multiple exclusions from the far-right populist front of the political spectrum? Donald Trump in the United States and his fellow authoritarian populists such as Victor Orban in Hungary and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil have promoted exclusive politics and deceived people in need of political idols with their Manichean rhetoric (Çinar et al., 2020). As symbolic and structural violence acts, they have ridiculed gender equality, the workers’ and ethnic minorities’ rights, and exercised sexual harassment. Besides, they have fabricated dangerous antagonisms between people, sowed the seeds of homophobia, patriarchy, racism, and oppression of the poor (see McLaren, 2019).

At the same time, as Alex Callinicos (2021) has observed, far-right currents have grown spectacularly in the past few years thanks to the accumulated discontents of the neoliberal period, intensified by the economic suffering and dislocation caused by the global financial crisis. These currents have succeeded in directing the resulting anger, at least in certain sections on the population, onto, on the one hand, a “cosmopolitan elite,” and, on the other, migrants and refugees.

Thus, as an antidote, we need to create a new pluriversity and cherish the idea that we live and belong to the same world as Badiou advises us:

The African worker I see in the restaurant kitchen, the Moroccan I see digging a hole in the road, the veiled woman looking after children in a park. That is where we reverse the dominant idea of the world united by objects and signs, to make a unity in terms of living, acting beings, here and now. These people, different from me in terms of language, clothes, religion, food, education, exist exactly as I do myself; since they exist like me, I can discuss with them—and, as with anyone else, we can agree and disagree about things. But on the precondition that they and I exist in the same world. (Badiou, 2008, p. 39)

As Badiou clarifies his philosophical argument, “The single world is precisely the place where an unlimited set of differences exist.” But, as he continues, we cannot hope that this same world would realize without profound political changes, abolishing capitalist social relations. Yet, this seems to be the hardest thing to grasp for different reasons. “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism,” as

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Fredric Jameson (1994) has put it. But precisely, this difficulty demands us as qualitative scholars to “stop engaging in research activities for research’s sake only” (Koro-Ljungberg & Boeteng, 2014, p. 317). Instead, “it is time to consider how to increase methodological attentiveness and the potential of collaborative inquiry that builds on collective yet contradictory stories, abstract and material life experiences” (Koro-Ljungberg & Boeteng, 2014, p. 317).

Perhaps it is also time to become dangerous, again, politically and methodologically, for the left, not to mention the leftist qualitative scholars and public intellectuals, no longer frighten anyone as in the 1960s and still the 1970s. At least two routes are available in becoming methodologically dangerous. First, researchers can take a ruthlessly analytic stance to expose the ruling elite’s and other misanthropists’ rhetoric tricks and lies, for example, the way Adorno (2020) did in his lecture on right-wing extremism. Or they could use more direct and operismo-like qualitative methodology, participatory action research, or rebellious research (Carmichael, 2020; Suoranta & Ryynänen, 2014) to act together with different grassroots groups, activists, social movements, and progressive political parties in various sites of struggle such as workplaces, public spaces, universities, occupational spaces, or demonstrations. These methodologies can be rehearsals for “revolutionary awareness” (Berger, 1968) or conscientização, critical collective consciousness (Freire, 2018).

“Vivent les riches, and to hell with the poor” (Badiou, 2008, p. 29) is the victorious slogan of today’s world at least since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, after which it was stated that the moment marked the end of history and ideologies to the neoliberal commentators and political and business elite. When the socialist paradigm was over, they rejoiced. It is as if they did not realize (and this thought habit has become common among ordinary people, too) that they were preaching yet another ideology.

As is well known, preachers of neoliberal doctrine had been around since the 1970s. What has been going on is the conservative revolution started by economist Milton Freedman at the University of Chicago. This ideology ratifies and glorifies the reign of what are called the financial markets, in other words, the return to a kind of radical capitalism, with no other law than that of maximum profit, an unfettered capitalism without any disguise, but rationalized, pushed to the limit of its economic efficacy by the introduction of modern forms of domination, such as “business administration,” and techniques of manipulation, such as market research and advertising. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 35)

The ruling ideology of radical capitalism is reproduced in the academic community today as scholars, who increasingly resemble self-employed entrepreneurs, swear in the name of evidence-based decision-making, sophisticated quantitative methods, and big data as manifestations of newly born neopositivism.

We should not accept these ideas for granted or assume the quantitative research paradigm’s superiority but learn to conceptualize them as ideologies. Therefore, we should teach that we live in an ideological world in our lectures and seminars on qualitative methods or say it even more bluntly: We are ideological beings. And where there is ideology, there is always the question of power and power relations.

We should realize that all realms of human conduct are social constructions made by human beings. Therefore, we can and we should think of them only as possible worlds. These ideas combined, humans as ideological beings, ideologies containing power and power relations, and the social world as construction mean that the ruling ideologies determine which possible world materializes.

What does that mean from the methodological perspective? It is precisely what Mirka Koro suggests: opening those horizons of possibilities in and out of academia that the ruling paradigm of neoliberalism has suppressed and closed. We need first to awaken and then nourish our sense of imagination in our era of confusion and injustice. Then, we must use our imagination to imagine the unimaginable that exists as “not yet,” but which is possible and in the process of becoming (there are plenty of qualitative methods to evoke and enrich these methodological practices, see Agostine-Wilson, 2013; Särkelä & Suoranta, 2020; Wallin et al., 2019). That which exists might yet have no name, but we can understand that it is already there. We need political and methodological courage to realize that something that does not have a name can still exist. This is the fundamental law of living in the same world.

Perhaps, we also need a new methodological figure to do the imagination work and invent “imaginative methodologies” (Jacobsen et al., 2014). The name for that figure could be a militant (see Badiou, 2012).

What, then, would be the task of a militant scholar and militant methodologist in this world of political and methodological imagination without name? In short, it is to overcome the dominant discourse of neoliberalism and to resist predatory forms of capitalism, to join forces with progressive movements and the multitudes of society. Those are, among others, student unions, labor unions, progressive religious groups in the lines of liberation theology, anti-racist social movements, leftist parties, and various activist groups that still dare to defend equality and social justice. With them, a militant wants to create discourse and action “that troubles the world” and understanding “that all inquiry is moral and political” (Denzin, 2016, p. 10).

Furthermore, we need international co-operation and collective intelligence to reconstruct the idea of critical thought, which is hiding in the small corners inside the university system, causing no threat to the structural order of things or anyone in the position of power. As Anna Stetsenko (2020) proclaims,
Drastic times call for drastic measures, including in exploring and advancing a flagrantly partisan (to use Dewey’s expression) scholarship with explicitly transformative activist agendas of strengthening the public and personal agency needed to constrain capital for the sake of social and economic justice. (p. 728)

The task of militants is to reclaim their voice but simultaneously acknowledge that voice and power are two different things. We can have a voice but still be powerless. The voice has to do with “universal voice” and voice at the grassroots level of everyday teaching and learning; that is, it has to do with the question of pedagogy. Too often, I am sad to hear from my students that their teaching follows a top-down model. At worst, during the Covid-19 pandemic, they have been forced to watch and listen to a prerecorded lecture, which I strongly feel is an insult to their intelligence and dialogical capacities as agents of history. In this model, one person in the class or seminar is a knowing subject while others are ignorant. That does not motivate the students but, if something, makes them angry and/or depresses them. Current online teaching, at worst, reproduces what Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire termed the banking model of education (Freire, 2018; Kohan, 2021). It turns students into customers who merely receive pedagogical messages, consume educational goods, and are supposed to graduate fast.

In these conditions, the universities have tried to play safe for years due to the increased directive power of external funding from the military, the capitalist elite, or the government as servants of the state–military–industrial complex. In their servant position, universities have reduced the roles of researchers and students from intellectuals to mechanists whose purpose is to publish and graduate but not develop their capacities to revolt and act as political beings.

From the militant point of view, universities might reclaim their status as the laboratories of public participation. In that laboratory, teachers could be more than information providers and talking heads and students more than an audience that receives information. Together, they could form the public and courageous agency, who carry in them lived experience in the educational journey into “deeper self-understanding of the historical and social contexts that have made them who they are” (Burawoy, 2005, p. 9).

On the eve of World War 2, Walter Benjamin (1940) wrote that

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.

In the spirit of the tradition of the oppressed, I conclude with some suggestions as supplements to imaginaries Mirka Koro presented in her article.

Let’s deconstruct the myth of the conservative revolution and its various myths of free economic markets, hyper-individuality, and the separation of economics from the social world.

Let’s remember that the world is not ready-made. The perverse idea that global capitalism is the end of history need not be taken as the ruling idea governing social imaginary. The same holds with the Western view, which has often assumed a world outside the western so-called civilized societies, a dump yard for the westerners’ waste, and a source of natural resources ready for the westerners’ exploitation.

Let’s eliminate the idea of the “economistic cult of productivity and profitability” that “maximum growth and therefore productivity and competitiveness are the ultimate and sole goal of human action; or that economic forces are givens that cannot be resisted” (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 30–31).

Let’s give up the radical assumption that the economic realm and the social realms are separate worlds or fields of study. This difference is also reflected in the language used in a perverted way (when a company fires its workers, it “reorganizes” its strategy or “develops” its structures).

Let’s define the qualitative research paradigms as open as possible and in the process of becoming. Let’s learn to question and resist rigid methodological tendencies and imagine the world from the perspective of “not-yet.”

Let’s take our students as younger colleagues who bring new methodological questions and ideas to the table. Let’s favor dialogical teaching methods and learning by giving up PowerPoints and prerecorded online “learning packets.” Instead, let’s teach and practice sociological, educational, and methodological imagination to counterpose the dominant ideology that says that the subordination of labor to the dominant class is inevitable.

Let’s open methodological paradigms and theories for furious criticism. Let’s reflect on our course readings and textbooks critically. Most of them are written in the United States, some come from Europe, but none from the global South (to use a generalizing term). If this is not a colonizing pedagogical practice, what is?

Let’s encourage our students and nonstudents to self-study and self-organize with those who want to learn qualitative methods. Let’s design broad and open methodological curricula with the students.

Let’s make universities forums for free discussion, debate, and criticism, not assembly lines. As university teachers and students, let’s bite the hands that feed us and commemorate the lessons of the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune (Löwy, 2021):

Let’s self-emancipate, self-organize, and build an internationalist movement to free us from the constraints of predatory structures of lucre! Let’s break the walls between other learners and us for political and intellectual emancipation!
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