Organizational hierarchies and differences in the social power and material resources that participants bring to a group are familiar sources of problems for social movements. Both scholars and activists in a variety of movements have noted the conflicts among participants and the shifts in movement goals that can result from power struggles. Differences among participants or between members and leaders in an organization have been the primary focus of attention (Michels [1910] 1998; Polletta 2002). In this chapter, we shift the lens slightly to look at the power relationships between nonlocal academics, who want both to study and to collaborate with local social movements, and local activists, who may also be academics but who are more directly engaged in building the movement. We see this as a matter of strategic interaction, where all parties have multiple interests and identities that are under negotiation. These interactions can be especially complicated, as they were in this case, by differences among the parties in nationality, political culture, and material resources.

We begin with a brief discussion of the politics underlying the emergence of a transnational women's movement. We proceed to reflect on the context of research with women's groups in post-totalitarian Russia. As feminist researchers who also consider themselves activists, our experiences lead us to investigate the complicated ways that hierarchies manifest themselves in social movements where the identities of activist, researcher, and "expert" are continually reassessed. We then discuss some of the general theoretical questions we bring to the analysis that follows. We finally move to an exploration of what our encounters with the Russian women's movement taught
us about hierarchies, power, and inclusive learning in social movements, focusing especially on how local grassroots work can and should expand a culture of conversation in which participants learn to see themselves as expert and take ownership of making social change.

**Transnational Women’s Movements**

Negotiations over the meaning of a movement and the specific nature of movement goals have been very evident in the debates over feminism that have been happening transnationally. The UN-sponsored World Conference on Women and their associated forums of nongovernmental organizations involved tens of thousands of women from all over the world. While the first UN conference, held in Mexico City in 1975, produced confrontations between participants from the global South and those from more affluent countries, intervening decades saw a gradual process of increasing consensus that women’s rights and status were inevitably tied to issues of development and social justice that were not gender-specific. In the 1990s, the issues of what feminism means, who would call themselves feminists and why, and how gender equity relates to other social movements for justice and rights remained core debates within the increasingly transnational women’s movement.

How effective this emerging transnational women’s movement has been in legitimizing gender equality as a political goal is unclear. On the one hand, the 1995 governmental and nongovernmental organization conferences on women held in Beijing drew approximately thirty thousand women, and the Plan for Action that was formulated there was endorsed by the majority of the world’s governments. This suggests that demanding gender justice has become normatively acceptable across the globe (Naples and Desai 2002). Even countries far from realizing this goal sometimes accepted strategies for empowering women as a legitimate form of politics. On the other hand, the collapse of communism, the fission of the USSR into Russia and a number of smaller successor states, the transformation of Eastern European governments, and the redrawing of the national boundaries in the former Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Germany were frequently accompanied by rollbacks in the political representation of women and controversy over whether feminism was just a “Western import” (Einhorn 1993; Funk and Mueller 1993; Gal and Kligman 2000). The stigma attached to feminism and the marginalization of women from political institutions was still powerfully evident in this transformation.

The end of the Soviet Union was also a watershed in the development of democratic politics. The overbearing influence of the Communist party and Soviet Army had blocked the emergence of multiparty democracies and participatory forms of civil society throughout its sphere of influence. The end of totalitarianism in so many countries at once created enormous interest in the West in what kind of new democracies would be constructed in Russia and Eastern Europe. Western experts, often economists, frequently came as consultants to governments, and foundations in the United States and Western Europe invested in supporting a variety of emerging nongovernmental organizations in these countries. A key interest was in helping local groups form, both to be advocates for the interests of their members with government and to be the direct providers of social services and support to citizens, from training them to run businesses to counseling victims of domestic violence. Although the Western investment in developing free markets and an active civil society applied to both men and women, quite a few of these interventions were specifically designed to empower women as entrepreneurs and activists. Because the post-totalitarian societies of the USSR and Eastern Europe lacked a fund-raising infrastructure for nonprofit organizations such as those found in the West, these resources played an important role in supporting many women’s groups in the region (Sperling 1999).

**The Context of Our Research**

As American feminist academics with activist backgrounds and inclinations, we began a collaborative study of Russian feminist mobilization in 1994. In partnership with the Moscow Center for Gender Studies, Barbara had gotten funding for an exploratory meeting on possible collaborative social science work on gender in Russia from the National Science Foundation in 1992. At that exploratory meeting, Barbara and Myra met a former leader of the American Association of University Women (who was then working in Moscow on training seminars for women activists), some of the Russians the leader was working with in Tver and other cities around the country, and several Russian feminists active in the Moscow Center for Gender Studies, one of the first and most strongly institutionalized of the new feminist organizations springing up like mushrooms in Russia in the early 1990s. Barbara and Myra found interest there in starting some research on feminism in Russia. Valentina Konstaninova, from the Moscow Center, was particularly interested in research on the emerging women’s movement, though she was quick to say that such research should serve the needs of the movement and not become “the tail wagging the dog.” Valerie, who at that time was conducting fieldwork for her dissertation on the Russian women’s movement, also joined our research team.

Our initial intention was to study the emergence of a women’s movement
and to help in any way we could to assist its birth. We wanted to understand what was bringing Russian women to feminism (or not), how it spoke to their needs or aspirations, what organizational strategies for recruitment to activism were working, and what specific impediments they faced. Our actual research focused on a series of seminars on women's civic activism that the American organizer and her Russian colleague conducted in Zhukovsky, Obninsk, Cheboksary, Tver, Novocherkassk, Izhevsk, and Ekaterinburg in 1995–96 (Ferree et al. 1999; Sperling, Ferree, and Risman 2001). These seminars were pitched as creating a “Women’s Agenda,” and were designed to educate local women in largely Western techniques for promoting women's interests through civic activism, such as lobbying, media outreach, and so on. With the seminar leaders' cooperation, Valentina and Valerie were allowed to attend the seminars, although the constraints placed on their participation varied at different times, as we will later discuss. We conducted surveys (collaboratively developed by the research team) of participants at some sites, had focus group discussions at some sites, and had a participant-observer taking field notes at some sites, but we never had all three types of data together at any one site, since the research also needed to fit into the schedule for training. We ended up focusing our research on the interactions between the activist seminar leaders and the local activists who participated in the seminars because that is where our data was best. However, we could also describe and differentiate among the groups of women who presented themselves (and were selected) for training in this seminar context.

There were three different subgroups of activists attending these workshops. The first described themselves as “long-time activists in the women's movement,” and they were veterans of the Soviet zhensovet, or women's councils. They had been subordinate to the Communist party but specifically assigned to work with women on “women's issues.” Mostly their work had been defined as mobilizing women for party goals, and while some could express this work in terms of challenging gender relations, for many it was more about mobilizing women than making any kind of change. The second were the self-described “feminists” who were active in new, autonomous feminist groups. They drew a considerable amount of their self-image and sense of support from contacts with feminists elsewhere in the world but also looked to Russian forebears for models and legitimation. The third were women active in mobilizing women in civil society, and thus part of what we would call the women's movement, but who were not focused on challenging gender relations as a goal and thus not feminist as we would define this term, at least when they came to the seminar initially (Ferree and Mueller 2004). They worked on all sorts of issues within the new Russia, from expanding women's opportunities in business to trying to clean up environmental problems to confronting drunkenness and opposing the war in Chechnya. Unlike the veterans of the zhensovet, they were part of the new civic culture that challenged party hegemony and was very much oriented to democracy, but their goals were to engage women as women in the general tasks of building a certain kind of new social order, not to question the gender relations inherent in that order.

Theoretical Issues

In this chapter, we discuss the strategic interactions among these diverse activists, the seminar leaders, the research team (ourselves and Valentina) that had come to study and to support the women's movement emerging in Russia, and several Russian and non-Russian experts who were invited to various of the seminars to address issues of goals, strategies, and tactics for the movement. We focus particularly on the ways in which the interactions among these different parties revealed new dimensions of power to us. We try to tease out the implications of power differences among groups like these for the development of social movements and civil society in general and for the transnational growth of feminism specifically.

We suggest that issues of hierarchy are particularly interesting in relation to four specific themes. First, we analyze the interactions between “locals” and “outsiders” in the development of political theory and the construction and legitimation of particular movement goals in relation to such theory. Second, we discuss the negotiation of the identities between “activist” and “expert” in relation to each other and in relation to academic credentials, local movement involvement, and particular forms of knowledge and skill that people bring to this interaction. Third, we propose that the cultural infrastructure of civil society that is necessary to support democratic participation and that is produced through the process of such participation is a culture of conversation rather than a culture of lecture. Fourth, we show how the material infrastructure available for movement building, the struggles over who possesses what goods that the movement needs, and who benefits directly from the material resources and organizational frameworks that are being generated in this process create complicated relationships between activists and researchers, locals and outsiders.

In our conclusion, we attempt to apply the insights from this particular case study of movement interaction to better understand the overall nature of social movements in countries where civil society is now developing, to place our Russian experience in the context of the larger dynamics of transnational feminism, and to analyze doing gender politics in post-totalitarian settings.
The Role of Locals and Outsiders in Defining Women’s Interests

The variety among types of activists we observed reminded us initially of the distinctions that Maxine Molyneux (1985, 1998) drew between what she called “practical (or pragmatic) gender interests” rooted in the context of women’s existing social relations and helping women to better meet their needs within that context and so-called strategic gender interests that would target the subordination of women as a social issue and attempt to transform gendered social relationships so as to reduce or eliminate women’s gender disadvantages. But when we looked more closely at the activists and what they said they wanted, what they did at the seminars, and what they found most rewarding in the training, we began to question the framework for thinking about political theory and gender interests that Molyneux offered.

First, Molyneux suggests that strategic gender interests arise from the outside, based in a theory about what is good for women and how to achieve it. This would suggest that the transnational and Moscow-based activists leading the seminars would be primary vectors for carrying a wider and more challenging view of gender relations to the local activists. This was not typically what we saw. Instead, in the seminars, the leaders often had a predefined view of what women’s interests might be, whether that was increasing women’s representation in the Duma through more active participation in party politics or using the media and local lobbying of city and state officials to get more attention paid to children’s needs and family policy. While these leaders clearly saw these interests as strategically feminist, in that these would be ways to improve women’s collective status and power, the local activists were dubious about the agenda, not because they did not think strategically but because they saw these methods as not well suited to the conditions that needed to be changed. They questioned the use of media when the media were not free but in the control of oligarchs, of lobbying politicians who could not be held accountable in the absence of real party competition, or of running for office if women were co-opted into doing “dirty politics” just like the men.

For many local activists, the priority was first to strengthen the institutional basis of civil society and then to work on the more specific goal of women’s equality. As they put it, the leaders were trying to teach them “to ride a bicycle” when the problem was that the skill was not yet relevant. As one participant put it, in America “the bicycle is already made. But somebody (in Russia) has to begin to make the bicycle from the beginning” before anyone could learn to ride it. Or as another said, women’s projects were like “the buttons on the dress,” but the dress needed to be made first. Thus, rather than not being strategic about gender interests, the local activists were differently strategic. As one activist argued, “the point is to create a basis for the rule of law... without solving this problem, without constructing a law-abiding state, women’s social problems cannot be solved.” Thus, mobilizing women as women was part of their strategy for creating a participatory democratic state, and only then did they think that using the state to challenge gender relations could be considered pragmatic.

By stressing their local conditions, these activists reminded us that a strategy that may work within the context of established democracies is less useful in the context of a fragile and possibly failing democracy, and leaders were pressed to offer more suggestions for how to construct a general civic infrastructure. In a sense, the local activists were being both practical and strategic simultaneously, while the seminar leadership seemed at times more committed to the general set of issue goals than to any concrete way of getting there in the immediate and particular context.

This is the essence of the second problem we see in Molyneux. Her model seems to us to reflect the idea that movement strategy derives from a grand theory such as Marxism, making strategic feminism into an already formulated set of priorities that people with access to theory would know more about and could help others to grasp. Outsider feminists, with privileged access to transnational theorizing about women’s position in society, would thus be able to help the locals connect the dots and see how specific issues connect into a larger whole of gender oppression. How useful this model is for feminists should be questioned, not only because the means need to be locally appropriate but also because the perceived significance of the overall goal is the result of a complex mix of cognitive and emotional experiences.

What we observed was that local activists had concrete insights about the gender oppressions that they encountered in their own lives, including in their organizing work. One of the most valuable aspects of the seminars for them was the opportunity to network and share these experiences with women who were facing similar challenges. “To know you are not alone,” they said, was a significant emotional experience that gave you the strength to keep fighting.” Rather than a cognitive-theoretical analysis, the participants sought and valued an emotional experience of solidarity and community, reminiscent to us of consciousness-raising group experiences. This in turn supported a visceral sense that gender was important and helped to legitimize the priority they gave to gender as an issue.

The seminars thus fostered a feeling of identification with the goal of challenging gender stereotypes and oppressions, but did not necessarily
encourage adopting a particular theory or even the identity "feminist." Those who came to the seminar as feminists already had a complex agenda that connected challenging gender relations with adopting nonhierarchical and autonomous organizational forms such as are often used by grassroots feminists, especially radical feminists, in the West. But the other participants did not see any need to take up this sort of organizational style, which they identified with feminism, and they urged the group as a whole to stay away from the label, which they saw as carrying negative baggage and stereotypes rather than a useful analytic framework. The external, theoretically consistent, prepackaged concept of feminism could be rejected, however, without giving up a deep commitment to challenging gender inequity as a central goal. In Zhukovsky, for example, one Russian participant argued against the use of the term "feminism" because of its negative connotations, saying, "other words need to be used... 'feminist' should be avoided." Yet even in avoiding the word, she argued for a feminist definition of issues, saying:

From my point of view the main priority is to change the stereotypes of social consciousness that still push women to the back of social and political life, and that do not allow her to take a single step. That is, we are dealing with a vicious circle. Breaking it is the main task, the main priority.

Finally, Molyneux's emphasis on strategic feminism as the more developed, theoretical, and abstract form toward which "practical" and local feminism needs to develop assumes a single direction of growth and change. This was contradicted in our experience of the seminars, where struggles over the targets of change were ongoing, not only among the differently located participants who were recruited but also between the local participants and the seminar leadership. Sometimes there was a compromise; sometimes the goals were changed in the direction that the participants wanted. At one seminar in the southern Russian city of Novocherkassk, for example, local activists placed ending the war in Chechnya at the top of their agenda; for them, this was a prerequisite for any specific focus on women's needs or oppressions as women. Outsiders come into a situation on the basis of some cause or issue that makes a particular identity salient for them, but this does not actually mean that this is the only identity that matters.

As local activists make clear, all women have multiple identities simultaneously. Consequently, women's movement organizations with diverse goals, such as those at these Russian seminars, play key roles as bridge build-

ers, and their focus on multiple, concrete needs in their communities makes them central in grassroots mobilizations, as is also the case in American cities (Naples 1998) and African villages (Tripp 2000). Movements and activists with already formed feminist identities, if involved in local politics, may learn to take on these wider agendas no less often or importantly than local activists with a wide range of social change goals may learn to use a specific feminist rhetoric or adopt a particular theoretical model that privileges gender oppression alone. We suspect that the dialogue between local and outsider versions of needs, interests, and identities will be most productive if change takes place on both sides and in both directions. Fortunately, at least in this case, such mutual influence, rather than one-sided development toward some theoretically defined strategic feminist priorities, seems to happen in practice.

Overall, our experience suggested that Molyneux's widely influential strategic/pragmatic model is problematic in three important regards that reflect its privileging of outsider perspectives. First, it assumes that there is some external, overarching theoretical model that will permit judging the correctness of the analysis that guides the movement and makes it "strategically" address the "true" roots of gender inequality or not. In that sense, it replaces the grand theoretical claims of Marxist social analysis with equally comprehensive, but competing, claims for objective feminist truth. Second, it establishes a hierarchy between the strategic and the pragmatic, in which it is better when knowledge comes from theory rather than experience, and when extra-local experts lead and direct local activists. Particularly for feminists who found locally situated direct experience to be a potent source of criticism of established theoretical paradigms, the value system (vanguardism) thus embedded in the analytic categories is troubling. Finally, it suggests a single direction of change, in which "pragmatic" activists grow more strategic over time as they learn to adopt more explicit and more exclusive claims about gender inequality. This disallows the alternative dynamic, where theory-inspired feminists also learn to address gender issues in more locally specific, pragmatic ways or to adopt a more intersectional and less exclusively gendered analysis over time.

Such common forms of local, grassroots, intersectional politics are, as Linda Christiansen-Ruffman (1995) has argued, "in the closet"—not openly claiming to be political—because they are more distanced from state institutions. Women doing this political work do not usually name it as "politics" (Naples 1998; Roth 2003; Tripp 2000). The welfare mothers and ethnic-Acadian women that Christiansen-Ruffman studied in Canada (1995), the grassroots activists in the War on Poverty that Nancy Naples interviewed in
U.S. urban neighborhoods (1998), and the women dissidents in the former East Germany that Ingrid Miehe studied (1998) all said emphatically, "I don’t do politics; I work for my community." Women, especially women in some degree of opposition to their governments, do not always see their local, practical resistance as politics. Just as housework is made invisible as work even to its own practitioners, civil society’s practical grassroots politics is made conceptually invisible as politics. Bringing such work "out of the closet," to name it and own it, is part of what the trainers in these seminars were doing. Yet this process also raises questions about the identity and role of the "expert" doing "training" of the activists, and it is to these issues we now turn.

Negotiating Expert and Activist Identities

Although Molyneux’s schema would tend to invest “experts” with a special theoretical role, we also found that, in practice, the negotiations over expertise and the lines between academics and activists were far more fluid than her model would have suggested. The idea of expertise is important and can often be constructed as the opposite of activist commitment. The reality is more complex than that.

In the seminars we studied, few, if any, of the women participating were without any higher education, since the Russian women’s movement drew particularly strongly from among university-educated urban women, and many had postgraduate training, even if not necessarily in the social sciences. The American seminar leader had a background in university administration and her Russian counterpart was a physical scientist. Valentina Konstantinova was both a leading activist in the Moscow Center for Gender Studies and a feminist historian. We three outsider-researchers were social scientists (in sociology and political science), but our identity was also as feminist activists, and our engagement in this project was motivated by a mix of scientific research and feminist social change goals.

Within the research team, the questions of who was perceived as an activist and who as a researcher were actively negotiated in the course of the project, in part through conflicts over whether the goals of the research were serving or potentially interfering with the goals of the seminars. The seminars were based on a coalition-building model drawn from IAUW experience, with dot voting used to identify priority issues around which individuals and groups might coalesce. These issues were then used as examples to teach political lobbying and other social change techniques and so to produce “activists.” The seminar leaders had obtained grants from the Eurasia Foundation and the Peace Foundation to support these training seminars, which made it possible to bring these Russian women together, and had invited “experts” to come and speak to the participants formally. These experts included both American activists, such as Gloria Odel, a U.S. politician/activist who once ran against Bob Dole, and Russian women politicians, such as Nadezhda Bikalova, a state parliamentary deputy from Chuvashia. Their speeches were a complex mix of formal theories of political mobilization, effectiveness, and influence and some more or less specific suggestions of how to organize, lobby, and act politically.

Both in our own manuscripts and in the grant proposals we (the research team) were initially described as activist researchers and sometimes as evaluators. As researchers, we were granted access to the seminars but were asked to take a low-visibility role that would not compete with the experts. While this was something that suited our interest in not having an impact on what we were observing (which we felt might compromise our ability to describe a process of mobilization for which we were not the responsible organizers), we found our role increasingly under debate. We could not avoid answering questions posed by the participants, and we were also interested in nonhierarchical give-and-take discussion with them. Over time the interaction between the research team and the seminar participants became problematic to the seminar organizers, and they eventually requested that we cease data collection entirely. We negotiated a compromise where we were allowed to stay as researchers but not activists, with the proviso that our team should be as noninteractive “as a fly on the wall.”

We were willing to do this in principle, but in practice this was not possible. Valentina Konstantinova’s role, as both a leading activist in the Moscow Center for Gender Studies and as a fieldworker who was taking notes as part of the research team, was particularly complex and open to constant challenge and renegotiation. Valerie was sometimes asked what feminism was like in the United States, but was not supposed to (and did not want to) take on the role of expert to offer specific theories and strategies of movement development to the local activists, the way that the invited experts were doing. Although our goal was to help build the Russian women’s movement, we found ourselves not able or willing to be the sort of consultants who could do so, for this would have been at the cost both of challenging the seminar leaders’ control over their events and of undermining our own separation from leading the process that we wanted to observe.

In the end, we concluded that expertise is a valuable commodity in the context of building a social movement but that the negotiation over what it is and who has it is open-ended. In this particular setting expertise was socially constructed by the intentions of the participants more than it was
have been self-evident in the United States and was simply not part of the normative repertoire of these Russian activists. It is paradoxical—and somewhat amusing—to reflect how such a hierarchical gesture as setting a timer could be part of the process of developing an antihierarchical culture of conversation.

The culture of lecture also allowed participants to simply disregard the speaker when they were bored (a phenomenon not unknown to university lecturers confronted with students whispering among themselves, reading newspapers, or passing notes in class). In these seminars, participants would turn to each other and relatively openly and audibly begin conversations with each other when they were no longer interested in listening to what the expert in the front of the room was speaking about, or sometimes when engaged by the topic and wanting to share and voice their interest or to privately disagree with the speaker. For their part, the experts themselves typically gave lengthy, nonparticipatory lectures, not pausing to ask questions or to do the sorts of exercises that might engage their listeners with the material or encourage interaction. The gulf between the front of the room and the audience was thus very large, even though, as we noted earlier, the actual spread of expertise among the various types of activists and academics present was quite mixed and the boundaries between them in what they might know and be able to contribute were really indistinct.

Part of what the seminar leaders were trying to teach were skills for carrying on a more effective learning process and engaging the entire group in a collective process of setting goals and deciding on strategies. They imported specific strategies that had been developed in U.S. social movement contexts, such as the AAUW’s method of dot voting, which apportioned points to specific goals by each person placing their limited number of dots on a collectively brainstormed list of possible goals. They insisted on norms such as beginning with a round of self-introductions even when these were time-consuming and difficult to manage. They broke the bigger group into smaller discussion groups and asked for reports back to the whole. Yet the organization of the workshops presented mixed messages about the value of lecturing versus group process. Along with classroom practices that tend to share voice, the leaders also organized the seminars in terms of practices that affirmed the necessity and value of being lectured to, deferring to experts’ knowledge, and thinking of what they were offering as discrete packages of knowledge, which could be passed around and carried back to the local settings in which these activists were working, rather than generalized skills for eliciting and using local knowledge more effectively.

If one thinks of a culture of conversation as transmitting the set of
skills that help participants to work nonhierarchically to build political will and inform political judgment, it seems evident that a well-functioning civil society requires such an investment in developing individual actors’ voices, and that social movements in particular are both the means and the outcome of this process. However, these seminars tended to be quite limited by how little of the culture of conversation the women brought with them to the setting and, to a certain extent, by the power relationship between the experts and local participants that contributed to sustaining the culture of lecture.

Nonetheless, the participants themselves were often most enthusiastic about what the seminars had offered them as ways to run a meeting in a more participatory way and to network with others nonhierarchically. A good part of the “bicycle” of a functioning civil society, they seemed to feel, was emerging in these skills. The activists were highly attuned to learning the specific skills of organizing, whether how to run a meeting or how to constructively listen to each other, as well as how to construct more formal coalitions. If social movement theory assumes that all that has to be done for organizations is raise funds or get politically noticed, it may be taking for granted the actual way that organizations function internally to empower their members, give them a sense of ownership of a social problem, and encourage them to develop the skills in a culture of conversation necessary to sustain an activist identity to work in a social movement over the long run (Shemtov 1999; Polletta 2002).

This engagement, arising from the active participation in talking about and acting in response to a social situation of injustice, can develop both emotional and cognitive skills. Robnett calls passing on engagement through a participatory process of goal setting at the local level “bridge-building leadership” and sees this work as something that women in the American civil rights movement did frequently and well (2000). In another article, we have called this the “housework of politics” because, like housework, it is naturalized as being “women’s work” and scarcely recognized as being work at all, and when it is noticed, it is not valued as much as it deserves (Sperling et al. 2001). Yet constructing a culture of conversation is an important part of what keeps democracy alive at the grass roots, and it is recognized as critical by activists, such as those we worked with in Russia.

Without having such an infrastructure for empowering participants to take ownership of a problem, talk is more difficult and less valuable for building a social movement. This is not to say that social movements in long-standing democracies escape the pitfalls of power hierarchies and the way such hierarchies disrupt the culture of conversation. Yet, social move-

tment scholars who are more accustomed to studying mobilizing practices in long-term democracies—where the culture of conversation has not been additionally stifled by generations of top-down, authoritarian leadership that actively instilled fear of speaking out—may not notice the importance of this cultural resource as much as the activists in Russia did. Building communicative skills and enabling a democratic process create a basis for civil society on which social movement organizers rely, no less than on resources, when mobilizing people to act.

The Material Infrastructure of Mobilization

In addition to communicative skills, activists need material resources if they are to build a movement. Especially when a society, like Russia in the early 1990s, is in the midst of massive social dislocations, the time, space, computers, travel money, food during meetings, and other necessities for holding a seminar can scarcely be taken for granted. Funds from outside Russia, in the form of grants, were critical to making the seminars happen. Bringing financial and logistical support to the Russian women’s movement in the form of computers and stipends to activists as research assistants was no small part of our own assessment of how our research project could help contribute to the movement.

In this case, the notion of who “owned” specific parts of the women’s movement was contested in various ways. The tendency of groups to split into ever smaller organizations with their own formal leadership, producing a huge number of very tiny groups, was inadvertently encouraged, for example, by the process by which Western funders allocated money, often providing a minimal stipend only to a single leader of an organization. Since affiliation as “the” local branch of a transnational organization like the International Association of University Women could be a route for potential future access to trips or funds, local groups battled over the naming rights to be recognized as affiliated. The legal ownership or physical custody of equipment like a computer or an operational phone line was a valuable asset not only for an organization but also for the individual who had it. Thus there were significant jealousies and pitched arguments over issues of organizational structure and names as well as officeholding and membership rules, some of which were actively played out in the context of the seminars, and for access to the very meager resources available from our project.

Even less obviously high-stakes issues could be bones of contention when it came to control over material resources. The grants to run and to study the seminars brought power to the individuals who held them. Being the grant “owner” conferred a great deal of decision-making authority in
setting the rules for what could or should happen, and the potential for getting future grants was a source of negotiating power within the movement. Within the seminars, this was apparent in terms of the occasional conflicts of authority between the American seminar leader and the research grant holders, but it was also manifested in the power differentials between those who were paying the bills and those whose active participation was producing the movement. Sometimes, the authenticity of apparently earnest participation seemed questionable because it might also have been generated by the desire to get something out of the grants. Sometimes the grant holders were able to set rules and ask for forms of participation (like filling out questionnaires) that activists went along with without any commitment to the process. Without the external funding, the unquestionably valuable and much appreciated opportunities of the seminars for networking and acquiring social support and organizational skills could never have happened; with outside funding, the dynamics of interaction were inevitably skewed toward appeasing the powerful and trying to win more material support.

However, the dynamics of vying for access to funds and competing for recognition are hardly unique to transnational organizing nor limited to social movements that are relying on funding from cross-national sources. Similarly, possessiveness over a movement organization, fragmentation into smaller groups that are more closely tied to individual leaders, and unwillingness to pass along an office by an orderly means of succession are not only found in social movements in poor countries that rely on donors in affluent ones, but can be an expression of the sense of ownership that movement "entrepreneurs" feel in relation to an organization anywhere in which their labor and emotion has been invested. And questions of donor control and the possibility of distortion in the organizations' priorities or strategies arise in many contexts other than that of transnational support for feminist groups. Yet to consider the way that movement members interact with each other and construct their organizations without acknowledging the powerful role that material resources play in shaping these dynamics would be naive. Activists in the Russian women's movement and the specific groups involved in these seminars are working in and through a material infrastructure that is deeply affected by the inequalities of control over international, national, and interpersonal economic assets, however much they may wish to be nonhierarchical and participatory in form and style.

Conclusions

Our experiences in studying the seminars conducted for women's movement activists in Russia led us to think more about the many ways that hierarchies operate to separate academics and activists to the detriment of both—and at the cost of failing to construct a more effective and vital communicative culture in politics. Some of this is a matter of academic privilege, which too often goes unnoticed relative to other forms of social and political advantage.

For example, academic theories, such as Molyneux's distinction between strategic and pragmatic gender interests, have tended to privilege the academic as the expert knower in the situation, to emphasize purely cognitive types of insights, and to assume that the direction of movement growth is toward a more abstract strategic theory of the academic type. Although individuals may enter a movement setting with an identity as both academic and activist, the structure of interaction in the movement context is likely to place each person in a role that privileges the disengaged academic or the committed activist aspect of their identity, separating their cognitive and emotional selves.

The material and cultural infrastructure of a movement can work to heighten or reduce these and other forms of privilege in practice. To the extent that the movement has a culture of lecture rather than a culture of conversation as its characteristic style of transmitting information, the line between the academic and the activist is going to be sharpened along with the privilege inherent in being the one seen as having expertise (whether experientially based or academically based) from which to lecture others. And when material advantages are disproportionately distributed among participants, struggles over who is in control of what aspects of the organization are accentuated, whether that is between those with the activist grants and those with the academic ones, or between the donors and the recipients.

A particular insight that we derived from studying these Russian women's movement seminars is that there is a real body of skills that goes into running a social movement organization, particularly doing so in the more engaging manner that develops a sense of ownership and commitment in the participants and enables them to find a political voice in which to express themselves. These skills involve participants both cognitively and emotionally. We have called these organizational skills necessary to construct a democratic process a culture of conversation, and suggest that social movement scholars take such skills for granted—the invisible infrastructure of democratic political cultures that make civil society function—in part because they are often naturalized and devalued as "women's work." They are at the grass roots of political organizing and stand in contrast to the high-profile speech making, theory writing, and office holding that men in movements tend to monopolize and that are called leadership.
Such "women's work" at the grass roots, whether done by women or lower-status men, is vital in weaving the fabric of civil society. The activists studied realized this and expressed it as needing to build the fabric of the "dress" in Russia before they could sensibly put on the "buttons" of particular movement projects. Constructing such fabric, through building a culture of conversation that incorporates previously excluded groups and individuals, is a much more radical and important step in a post-totalitarian society than it might appear at first glance. Social movement analysts should pay attention to those who build the culture of conversation that allows civil societies to develop, as well as to those who monopolize more conventional forms of leadership. Looking more closely at the local work done by grassroots activists is important because this work is vital for movement success.

Developing a culture of conversation might be good not only for building a movement in general, but also for blurring the lines between academic and activist that we found so pronounced and hard to navigate in Russia. By taking expertise away from the front of the room and developing more strategies to empower every participant to recognize their own expertise and develop their personal ownership of the issue, these learning strategies might make talk more valuable in a variety of activist/movement settings, be they conferences or strategy meetings or more hybrid forms like the seminars we studied. Rather than beginning from the assumption that epistemologically privileged academic theory can provide the "answers" for the movement, the culture of conversation encouraged in grassroots organizing practice starts with the idea that participants will have to define their own needs and form their own answers.

Constructing a culture of conversation in the face of so many hierarchies—international differences in control over income and wealth, gendered disparities in the value given to certain kinds of work, cultural advantages given to academic forms of expertise over those acquired in practice, with interpersonal differences in material resources and skills compounding all of these in ways that are structured by gender, class, and age—will never be easy work. But we think that blurring the lines that divide theory and practice, activists and academics, and the front of the room from the rest will contribute to making this culture of conversation more widespread and vital, and so to enriching the nature of democracy in the United States no less than in Russia.

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Building the Movement for Education Equity

Cassie Schwener

"Eighth grade is not enough! We are not so big and tough," chanted fifty middle school students as they marched during the Manhattan kickoff of New York City councilman Robert Jackson's 150-mile trek to the Albany courthouse where his decade-old lawsuit for fair public school funding finally came to a dramatic conclusion in June 2003.

Councilman Jackson's claim against the state of New York, charging that New York City school children did not receive the "sound basic education" required by the state constitution, would eventually be upheld by the state's highest court in Albany. But education advocates understood that a lawsuit was only one element of a necessary strategy to build a broad social movement to fight for fiscal fairness for New York's students.

Many involved in the litigation believed that the lawsuit would, first and foremost, generate media attention spotlighting the crisis and resulting inequities. A simultaneous goal was to spark a social movement. In this goal, as with the first, Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) and its allies proved successful. Movement actors knew that the court case was a key lever of political opportunity, but without a simultaneous grassroots movement the case would not have the power to force the legislature's hand. It was important to win in the courts, but also important to show politicians that CFE and its allies had won over the public as well.

As author of this article I have multiple perspectives. My academic training is in social movement theory; in addition I have specialized in media analysis and concepts of frame analysis. But I am also a participant-observer in this movement. For the past seven years, I have been a program