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WHAT COUNTS AS ACTIVISM?: THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUALS IN CREATING CHANGE

DEBORAH G. MARTIN, SUSAN HANSON, AND DANIELLE FONTAINE

GENDER, PLACE, AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Fifteen years ago, Naomi Abrahams (1992, 342) urged scholars of political action to pay greater attention to individuals in their daily lives by acknowledging a range of activities as political: those that do not "directly target change in the political economy" and are part of "every arena of social life." Abrahams's argument connects with other feminist scholarship that has broadened concepts of political action and activism by extending the "public sphere" to encompass household and social relations and by highlighting the role of work (often, but not always, waged labor) in stimulating people's awareness of social problems and motivation to address them (e.g., Mansbridge 1990; Naples 1992; Ryan 1992; Staeheli and Cope 1994; Staeheli and Clarke 2003).

In this essay, we further explore notions of women's activism by focusing on the crucial role played by *individuals embedded in communities* in shaping the social networks and relations necessary for social change; these networks and relations that foster change begin in informal and localized interactions and may evolve into more formalized, institutional social movements. We highlight and seek to better understand the potential links between geographical *embeddedness* and small acts of social networking or social change, actions that may not in themselves create direct political action but that foster the social relationships that may enable future political action or organizations (as in the civil rights movement [Morris 1984]).

As geographers, we see activism as an issue of geographic scale (as do, for example, Staeheli 1994; Miller 2000; and Martin and Holloway 2005): Some person or group recognizes a problem (at what scale?) and takes some action(s) to address it (at what scale?) in order to create change (at what scale?). Fundamentally, this notion of activism conceptualizes individuals in terms of their social relationships, with varying

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geographies (e.g., near, far, electronic). Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt (1995) have demonstrated how place-based social networks cut across, link together, and help to construct diverse realms of everyday life, including those within the home, the workplace, the neighborhood, and the community. How activism shapes those relationships affects whether and how it is perceived as a movement (with formalized goals, articulated grievances, and the like).

We open the category *activism* to consider actions and activities that, because of their limited geographic reach, normally are considered too insignificant to count as activism and yet do create progressive change in the lives of women, their families, and their communities. Lynn Staeheli and Meghan Cope (1994, 447) argue that political activity involves "the 'private' negotiations of the household, the 'personal' coalitions of the neighborhood, and the 'informal' networks within the community," while Abrahams (1992, 329–30) suggests that "political action is defined as a form of human behavior that involves the negotiation, alteration, or entrenchment of social values and resources." We draw on these observations to suggest a definition of activism as everyday actions by individuals that foster new social networks or power dynamics. In this sense, we see activism as a precursor to political action that transforms a community, develops a formal organization, or extends in scale to reach social networks beyond the initial embeddedness of the instigating activist. Our intention is not to identify every daily act as activist, but to theorize how small acts transform social relations in ways that have the potential to foster social change.

This essay originates in unanticipated insights that emerged from a study that one of us has been doing on gender and entrepreneurship. The research involved in-depth personal interviews with about two hundred business owners in each of two U.S. metro areas: Worcester, Massachusetts, and Colorado Springs, Colorado (Hanson 2003). Although the study was not aimed at understanding activism, the interviews included questions about the nature and location of business owners' volunteer activities; when asked explicitly about volunteering, women responded with information on involvement in organized groups such as schools, children's sports, Lions and Rotary Clubs, homeless shelters, and church organizations. But when women were talking about various aspects of running a business, they offered unprompted stories about how they were seeing needs in their communities and taking action to ameliorate

the problems they had identified. The positive effects of their actions, moreover, extended well beyond the scale of an individual business to encompass the larger community.

As feminist geographers, we focus analytically on place and embeddedness. Geographers and feminists share the desire to understand peoples' lived experience and everyday lives (Hanson 1992). Everyday life, however, is not abstract and disconnected from place, people, and context: It is always *embedded*. Pratt and Hanson (1994, 25) describe this embeddedness as geographies of "placement," in which "there is a stickiness to identity that is grounded in the fact that many women's lives are lived locally." Indeed, it is not just women's lives that are grounded or placed, but men's too. Understanding activism, therefore, requires some attention to its placement, its local context, and how it reaches within and possibly beyond that context to connect people and places. We argue that activism needs to be conceptualized and understood as an activity that emerges from the everyday lived context (place) in which people are embedded; activism entails an individual making particular kinds of new connections between people that alter power relations within existing social networks. Over time, these new kinds of linkages may—or may not—lead to new formal political networks or social movements. In our view, activism is, then, the first step in a potential chain of creating new networks and links between people, because it is these linkages that allow organized political activity to emerge (e.g., see Morris 1984 on the civil rights movement).

In the following section we integrate our understanding of activism with some of the literature on social movements, to situate activism as a potential precursor to formal movements. We then analyze a series of examples drawn from our research and personal experiences in the United States and South Africa that illustrate the ways in which individuals can create change in their communities. In the final section we consider what should and should not count as activism and begin to develop a feminist theory of activism, one grounded in the actions of individuals in communities—place and nonplace based.

UNDERSTANDING ACTIVISM

By suggesting that activism is embedded local behavior that transforms social networks (and therefore power dynamics), we are building on other feminist scholarship (such as Mansbridge 1990; Abrahams 1992;

Naples 1992; Staeheli and Cope 1994; Staeheli and Clarke 2003) in order to move, explicitly and theoretically, "down" the political action hierarchy to conceptualize the nascent stages of political action and movement formation. We argue, therefore, that attention to embedded activism has important links to broader theories about social movements and contentious politics, which focus on coordinated and sustained collective behavior with the clear agenda of social change (often over large geographic areas), operating outside the state and frequently in opposition to it (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Traugott 1978; Tilly 1984).

Feminists and especially feminist geographers have emphasized the insights to be gained by making connections between people's everyday lives in small-scale spaces, such as homes and workplaces, and larger-scale processes of social change, such as reducing violence against women. What joins the small-scale and larger-scale processes is feminists' attention to power relations. One way of looking at political action and power is to examine instances of everyday resistance that can effect social change (as in Scott 1985 and Abu-Lughod 1990). Another aspect of activism, we argue, is less about resistance than about building relationships among people that foster change in a community. As the examples we describe in the following section illustrate, resistance to power is not necessarily the main purpose of creating change in one's community, nor does the concept of resistance adequately capture the full scope of the outcomes of activism. Reworking social networks can reconfigure existing power relations and thereby transform everyday life, even where such actions do not challenge the overall political-economic structure.

Charles Pattie, Patrick Seyd, and Paul Whiteley (2003) develop a model of civic engagement that does recognize the acts of individuals as a form of activism but only as such individual acts are linked overtly to political activities aimed at changing larger social structures. They identify three dimensions of civic engagement, the first of which, *individualistic activism*, comprises individual acts such as donating money to an organization, buying or boycotting goods for political reasons, signing a petition, or voting. The other two types are *contact activism*, which involves contacting someone in authority, and *collective activism*, which entails participating in a group effort such as a demonstration. These authors' concept of individualistic activism sees people as embedded within political organizations or social movements while overlooking their embeddedness in

informal social networks in communities. Our view of activism focuses on the acts of individuals as emerging out of people's interconnectedness with others in their communities; such connections may eventually lead to the creation of formal social movements or political activities, with their own distinctive networks of action.

In the following section, we seek to expand ideas about what counts as activism by examining specific examples of how individuals have created positive change throughout a community without necessarily joining a group. Instead of examining individual activism as it links to traditional political involvement (as in Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley 2003) or as a way of contributing to community volunteer groups (as in Staeheli 2004), we are interested in gaining insight into how people are redefining what creating change is all about, by examining the ways that they foster new social networks and relations in their communities.

WHAT COUNTS AS ACTIVISM? INDIVIDUALS CHANGING COMMUNITIES

One's embeddedness in a particular job, household/family, or community can lead one to recognize a problem, learn about community needs, and find a way to make life better through new or reconfigured social linkages (Staeheli 2004). In each of our examples, significant community-level change originated in a woman's everyday experience of her community—in some cases especially her workplace—and resulted from a woman's then reaching out to improve the lives of proximate others. Our examples are by necessity brief; they provide multiple "illustrations in a variety of contexts of the ways that activism draws from the process of individual women making new connections or altering their social relationships. Although embedded in vastly different contexts, the women in these examples all drew on their familiarity with circumstances within their immediate locality to identify an issue needing change and to devise a strategy for change that would work in that place.

Women Business Owners Changing Their Communities

The first set of examples is drawn from the entrepreneurship study mentioned earlier. The first case entails a woman in her mid-forties who runs a retail store, selling relatively high-end American handcrafted artworks. Her store is located on a main street in the center of a suburb of Colorado Springs. This woman had observed that teenagers in her town

had nowhere to go, no place to hang out, and as a result were out on the streets. In her words:

> There's a lot of . . . teenage kids—I guess latchkey kids—wandering around the street, and I always make them feel very welcome. Other people think they shoplift, but I kind of welcome most of them in because they're craving attention and it's wonderful. You probably don't want to know about this because it's not business related, but I think an important part of my business is to be a listening ear and a strong shoulder. Latchkey kids, adolescent kids, and some teenagers . . . come in and talk, they show me their stuff, they'll bring me school projects.

By offering a space to kids and teens who were otherwise "wandering," this woman gave them a place simply to be, a place to belong and feel welcomed where they are usually shunned as potential shoplifters. In doing so, she creates an alternative space of trust and embeddedness for them and a new set of social relations for herself with them. This woman's activism, therefore, fosters reconfigured social and power relations. We can also speculate that her activism enabled some kids to have greater success in school, a social transformation that our data cannot measure but that we can suggest as a further possible social impact.

When asked specifically if she was involved in any volunteer activities, this woman replied, "No, not right now. [Pause] Oh, yes, I'm on the board of the Chamber of Commerce." But when we pursued this question a bit further, she elaborated: "I don't have the time I used to have [for volunteer work, before starting the business], so I try to build it into what I do, and I think that by taking all these various kids under my wing, that's my way of volunteering." This exchange, together with her aside that "you probably don't want to know about this because it's not business related," raises the methodological question of how researchers can learn about such informal forms of activism. When asked explicitly about forms of community or political involvement (as in Staeheli 2004), people invariably fixate on their contributions to formal, organized groups. We became aware of the forms of activism that we are focusing on here quite by accident as they bubbled up, unbidden, in the interviews.

The contribution that this woman makes as "a listening ear and a

strong shoulder," reshapes social networks and challenges existing power dynamics among youth and business owners. It is replicated many times over among the women business owners we talked with. A woman who owns a children's clothing consignment shop in a low-income Worcester suburb told us: "I see so many women with problems here. They kind of come-in-and-cry-on-my-shoulder kind of thing. I try to give 'em advice. . . . Well, they're so young, and I'm like an old mother. I'm forty, and I see a lot of younger . . . like twenty, twenty-five . . . when I see 'em come in and they have like idiots for husbands and they don't know what to do. I'm happy to tell them . . . it's like a big sister kind of thing." Another woman, who runs a store selling secondhand household goods, said, "You'd be surprised at the number of people that come into my store, not to buy anything—but just to talk, just to have a place to go, just to look around." As this woman's husband is a local pastor, she is well aware of the importance of the informal therapy she ends up providing, quite unintentionally. These specific cases are but a few of many instances we learned about in which women business owners are playing the role of informal counselors and their businesses are known to be places where people from the community can go to "hang out." While creating a social space might be a traditional by-product of a business, it also creates a crucial building-block of community: by bringing people together in social relations who were not previously interacting, these business owners are providing a basis for future interactions and potential political action.

The second type of woman entrepreneur who has created significant change in her community is seen in the owner of a Worcester diner. Knowing full well that most diner owners are men, this woman, who had a tenth-grade education and would definitely not consider herself a feminist, explained that diners are places where male customers think they can mistreat women, be they customers, cooks, or wait staff. Furthermore, she explained that one key aspect of diners is the role they play as community social centers, especially for single people:

> If you sit down in a diner, right? And there's a person next to you, whether it be a man or a woman, you might end up in a conversation. Whereas if you went to [a regular restaurant] and got a table for one, who you gonna talk to, the lamp? That's what diners are for. They're based like towards single people,

> people who don't want to be alone. They come in. You can come into my diner any time during the day and sit down and you'll be in a conversation within ten minutes of coming here. So that's why . . . people go to diners.

She added that when she had observed men abusing women in her diner, she had made it clear to the men that she would not tolerate such behavior. As a result, she has created a woman-friendly place where women, especially single women, can come to socialize without fear of being mistreated by the male customers:

> One thing I find is being a woman owner, a diner is typical of men. You find a lot of . . . harassment, and that part I don't like. Even though you own it, they associate diners, a lot of men, with less respect to women . . . and that's where you have to keep them in line, keep yourself above their remarks. There's a lot of discrimination as far as a woman in the diner business being the owner. Because most of them are owned by men. And half of my customers are women now, and only because I'm a woman owner. Prior to that, it was mostly men. . . .
>
> I turned that [harassment] around. Half my customers had never walked in here, but I did turn that around because I'm a woman owner. And now I can get all the women in town to come here. And they like to socialize too with people.

Echoing the previous example, this diner owner, when asked if she participated in any volunteer activities, said, "I give enough here! Christ! I'm like a doctor, lawyer, psychiatrist, nursemaid, matchmaker." At the same time, however, she clearly worked to transform the social networks and power relations in her business, a transformation that directly affected her customers and through them the larger community.

A final example from the entrepreneurship study provides another illustration of how recognition of need is rooted in everyday life, which—for these women business owners—revolves around the embeddedness of their businesses within the community. A woman who had launched and heads a successful computer-based multimedia publishing firm in Worcester said no when asked if she was involved in any volunteer activities. Later, however, she mentioned that she was just then in

the process of trying to start a nonprofit company that would provide computer training for low-income people living in public housing:

> I wrote out a proposal for a nonprofit company that places computer technical-training centers into urban housing projects to promote entrepreneurial skills on computers to disenfranchised people. . . . I hate the projects so I want to get rid of them, and the only way to do that is to go in and do as much help there as you can. I don't think you should just take 'em down and scatter the people, and the thing is about these centers that would be different is that it would be for adults and it would not be just children. It would be for anyone. Because with a computer if you can grab kids at age eleven, twelve, who are interested, they're going to keep going and they'll be successful. And you can train people at any age if they want to learn about it, so it's not like a student drop-in center and it's not like to get housewives . . . it's just opportunity.

This woman had already started a free Web site for nonprofits in Worcester, using her expertise to help nonprofit organizations have a presence on the Internet.[1] Before starting her own high-technology business, she had been deeply involved in electoral politics in the small town she lived in outside Worcester; in her discussion with us, she made it clear that she sees running a business as another way of creating positive change in the community, an alternative to politics (serving on the select board of the town). Asked about volunteerism, this woman clearly does not see herself as part of any type of movement, yet at the same time, she connects her business expertise to broader activities she undertakes in her community. Through these applications of her business know-how, she provides resources, opportunities for new social networks, and, ultimately, opportunities for social change.

WOMEN ACADEMICS CHANGING THEIR COMMUNITIES

Women in academe also draw from work experiences to address social relations, which in turn can foster change in their work and social communities. A woman faculty member at an institution of higher education, after having her first child and seeing that other women in her institution were also new to balancing work and family, decided to start a Listserv.[2]

The purpose of the Listserv was to link up women across the university who had young children (the group never actually defined "young" children, but most women who first joined the list had babies, toddlers, or children in elementary school). Initially the woman just invited her friends, who in turn invited other friends fitting the category of "women faculty with young children." The Listserv has continued to grow by word of mouth within the institution.

Initially, the Listserv was oriented to helping members negotiate the work-family balance, with an emphasis on family: advice for new moms, ranging from breastfeeding to finding a good-quality day care (since the institution did not provide adequate options on campus), disciplining toddlers, and the like. Yet even in its nascent stages, women discussed being called upon to act beyond their desk chairs and nurseries. In one early post, the founder of the list posted a message that included the following call to activism: "[W]e need to do our first group outreach project for [member A, who] has been terribly ill most of the month. . . . [A]'s mom has been here, but she is leaving soon. . . . Here is what they need. . . . I'd like to line up people to be at her house the whole afternoon/early evening." Several members answered this call to help care for A, who remains grateful to the list and to the specific members who came.

In many ways, the list has grown in this community-activism spirit, but if that were all it had achieved, it might not differ in concept from a traditional neighborhood or faith-based community. This Listserv activism is different in that it has also fostered change in the women's workplace. For example, senior members who have served on university committees have come to the list asking for feedback and advice, and some of their efforts, prodded and encouraged by the group, have helped to create a formal tenure-clock stoppage policy.

The Listserv community has also assisted junior faculty members in navigating the tenure process. In one case, a junior member of the list was approved for tenure by her department, but her department chair was personally opposed to her case and was recused from writing the required letter of support to the college tenure committee. The junior member was given no guidance in how a departmental letter of support would be written. She found a senior colleague to write the letter but was concerned about the strength of her case under the circumstances. She wrote to the Listserv detailing the problem, and offers of support

flooded in from other members. Most substantive were the offers from senior members of the list, one of whom helped draft a letter and another of whom connected the junior member with a non-Listserv female faculty member in the junior member's own college unit, who could give the best (most discipline-specific) advice. This non-Listserv member helped to write the case for the junior member's tenure file. Ultimately, the case was successful, with the member receiving tenure without further difficulties. The support and particularly the networks of the Listserv, however, were invaluable. As the now-tenured member reports, "so the advice of the network itself was good, but the links to outer network folks were actually very important also. Thank heavens for the new *and* old girl networks!"

While this case could be seen as typical academic mentoring, such a viewpoint fails to acknowledge how the network created by the Listserv itself, mobilized for action in the workplace, was what enabled the subsequent mentoring. The Listserv demonstrates how everyday, ordinary desires for connection and support among a group of female faculty with children, coupled with new technologies, led to a support network that fostered new forms of activism. Although the Listserv functions as a basis for friendships and a form of "neighborliness," it goes beyond these forms of support to create new workplace power networks and thereby provide a social and professional resource for its members.

WOMEN CHANGING COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

In the examples of everyday forms of activism in the United States we have emphasized how the individual begins to reshape, and reconfigure power within, social networks; the following examples from South Africa also point to the transforming role of social networks, but in the cases described here the nascent changes we described in the United States have grown into larger, more formal, more developed, and more far-reaching networks of change.

HIV/AIDS is a tangible reality of daily life in South Africa. Hundreds of thousands of individuals across the country, but especially in poverty-stricken areas, either are infected with HIV or are living with full-blown AIDS. Many "ordinary" individuals, especially women, are now working to create positive changes in the lives of people who have HIV/AIDS or have been affected by the disease, (e.g., by losing parents to it).[3] We briefly describe three such women; in each case their move to

activism stems directly from their firsthand observation of great need in their home communities and began with the woman initiating change in the networks in which she was already embedded.

Since 1980, Connie Mbowane, principal of a primary school located in a very poor area of Gauteng province, has been working to improve the lives of children. She has held several school sessions a day in her single building by juggling the hours that learners and teachers from the different institutions could spend there. To help her take care of as many as one thousand hungry children each day in a single school building and with most of her students' parents unemployed, Ms. Mbowane mobilized the unemployed men and women in the community to establish a vegetable garden. As part of her "Botho ke Botle" (Humanity Is Beauty) plan, this garden not only feeds the children but also yields financial returns for the school and community. Moreover, Ms. Mbowane encourages those living in the community and suffering with HIV/AIDS to work in the garden and to grow and eat their organic vegetables to improve their diet.

In 2002, at the age of sixty-eight, Sister Abigail Ntleko began to address in a coordinated way the devastation that HIV/AIDS had brought to her low-income, inaccessible rural community in KwaZulu-Natal: orphans with no known family, abandoned children, the need to care for large numbers of terminally ill people. Through her Clouds of Hope Community Project, members of the local community provide food and housing for thirty-two children, ranging from newborn babies to eighteen-year-olds; transportation for the children of school-going age to and from the local schools; counselling to the community; transportation to the local hospital so that people with AIDS can receive their medication; and guidance on how to care for the terminally ill.[4] In just a few years, Sister Abigail has improved the lives of thousands of individuals, including people living in her immediate community, individuals living in other parts of KwaZulu-Natal, and indeed people from all over South Africa.

Linzi Thomas, the founder and director of the MyLife Project, is working to meet the needs of South African street children, many of them orphaned by AIDS. Through mentors who help the youth to discover their passion and nurture their talents, Ms. Thomas not only enables these children to learn skills they can use to find employment; she is also helping them to heal from the effects of HIV/AIDS through

telling their stories. She has created strong local, national, and international networks within the film, music, tourism, catering, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) sectors to reintegrate the youth into civil society and to bring the plight of the street children to the attention of local and international communities.

DISCUSSION: TOWARD A FEMINIST THEORY OF ACTIVISM

The South African vignettes describe instances in which an individual has moved further along the political-action hierarchy by mobilizing others in her social network to address a problem within the community; in this sense these vignettes may seem to illustrate more obviously traditional forms of activism. But each of these cases also illustrates common themes across all our examples: women, attentive to and aware of social relations and dynamics within their communities, seek in small—and sometimes larger—ways to transform these power relations. In doing so, they draw on their local embeddedness and reshape social networks. Rather than viewing these activisms as merely small social engagements, we argue, following Staeheli and Cope (1994), that we ought not to view the local and embedded as nonpolitical. As our examples suggest, the notion of feminist activism that we seek to uncover is one that often starts from small, local-scale, and immediate daily personal connections, often those made through the workplace. Activism always involves creating change, but creating change can mean simply intervening when and where one happens to be. Helping at-risk youth, changing the norms of gendered behaviors, providing economic opportunity for unemployed people, creating new power networks within an academic institution—all these activist moves in our examples grew out of women literally seeing and hearing and feeling the needs around them. These needs—and others like them, such as children's literacy, hospice care, or shelter for the homeless—are not exportable; they remain inexorably local and must be addressed by people in a community. The scale and scope of the activism that arises to meet these needs may, or may not, remain local and may, or may not, entail organized group activity.

Clearly, the challenge of our notion of activism is how to distinguish it from everyday activities that are part of any social life. Not every activity that creates positive change in a community can be considered activism. In an attempt to formalize our ideas about what should count as feminist activism, we suggest the following criteria: feminist activism

(1) brings into sharp relief *embedded individuals*; (2) emphasizes the range of social relations and networks, including those that are small, informal, and localized as well as those that are larger, formal, and institutionalized, that embedded individuals create or change to foster positive social change; and (3) must be visible beyond the individual but can remain invisible to those outside the network. Taken as a whole, our examples illustrate these points.

Note that this feminist activism has a potential scale effect far beyond its immediate network, reaching broader societal structures. The changes that we have described here as resulting from some previously unrecognized forms of activism are able to take root precisely because individuals are embedded within social networks that span various geographic scales as well as differences among women.

The social networks of the women who have initiated the activisms we describe provide a new lens on the topic of identity in activism. Social movement theories, particularly those of new social movements (NSM), have highlighted the importance of lifestyles and community identity as a necessary basis for participation within a movement and in shaping movement goals (Habermas 1981; Melucci 1989; Touraine 1992). We see identity as important in feminist activism as well, but our conceptualizations of it are somewhat different from the predominant social categorizations (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, language, and sexuality) implicit in meanings of "identity" in NSM theories. Instead, identity is evident in our conceptualization of activism as women's place-based identity, in which a woman's social location and connections with others in a community not only leads her to recognize needs within the community but also enables her to know how to address them and how to assess the effectiveness of her actions.[5]

The identities that women use in these examples of feminist activism are based in their intimate knowledge of their own place-based communities. The changes they have initiated through their activism have improved the quality of life for women, their children, and their communities. Recognizing these often-invisible forms of activism in embeddedness and social relations provides an analytical framework for better understanding the social basis of political action, and to recognize otherwise-overlooked actions that create social change.

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NOTES

1. When we talked with this woman in 1998, the Internet and Web sites were still relatively novel.

2. Details about the Listserv have been modified or generalized to protect its anonymity and that of its members.

3. In recognition of South African women and the difference they are making in the lives of inhabitants of South Africa, Shoprite Checkers and SABC 2 have run the annual "Shoprite Checkers/SABC 2 Women of the Year Award" since 1996 http://www.sawoman.co.za.

4. Only since 2004 has the Clouds of Hope Community Project started to accept individuals from an international charity organization—the Scottish charity Project Trust—to work for periods of between three and twelve months.

5. Although Routledge (1993), Hasson (1997), and Martin (2003) also emphasize place as a basis of movement identity or of defining an agenda, all do so in terms of formal state-engaged movements.

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