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Donna Chollett, Morris associate professor of anthropology, receives a 2011 Imagine Fund Award to investigate Latin American grassroots social movements

Summary: Chollett will analyze the relevance of grassroots social movements that fail to achieve their goals.

(May 16, 2011)-Donna Chollett, associate professor of anthropology and Latin American area studies coordinator, received a 2011 Imagine Fund award to debate the question “Are Social Movements Morally Noble? Challenging the Intrinsic Virtuosity of Grassroots Social Movements.” Her enduring interest in rural communities and sociocultural change in Latin America will take her back to her established research site in Puruarán, Michoacán, Mexico, this summer to learn why a worker-run sugar mill cooperative failed to live up to its potential for modeling democratic ideals and ensuring economic stability.

The study is set in the larger context of the upsurge, since the 1980s, of grassroots social movements in Latin America that sought ways to combat poverty and marginalization. “Social movement scholars often interpret these movements as morally noble models of democracy given their claims to social justice and human rights,” says Chollett. But she argues for “a more critical analysis that takes into consideration the contradictions that may be present in grassroots struggles” as indispensable to “a more nuanced understanding of the internal dynamics and submerged networks of daily life within these movements.” If much social science literature stresses social movements’ successes and their ability to define alternative modes of social life, she asks, then what is the relevance of social movements that fail to achieve their goals?

The illegal seizure of Puruarán’s sugar refinery by cane growers and mill workers after “neoliberal globalization” forced its closure in the late 1990s embodied this brand of “cultural politics,” Chollett explains. Demanding the mill’s expropriation from its owner and the government in the name of social justice and for the social good of the community, the movement’s leaders reopened it as a cooperative, worker-run factory. After thriving for 11 years, however, they declared the mill, the community’s primary source of income, bankrupt and shut it down in 2009.

Such “processes create a more disorderly account that reframes traditional conceptions regarding the intrinsic virtuosity of grassroots social movements,” Chollett maintains. To learn more about what led to the mill’s demise, she will reanalyze the movement’s initial success in holding off the devastation of neoliberal policies and ostensibly creating greater equity and social justice by preserving the community’s way of life. But she also seeks “to challenge prevalent notions about the morally noble character often attributed to social movements by scholars who fail to analyze the internal dynamics and disjunctions within these movements.”

Focusing her attention on the dynamics that contributed to failure, Chollett will pursue answers to two specific research questions. She will first try to determine why the “successful” social movement she previously researched failed and identify contributing factors. Secondly, she will examine ways the organizational structure of the social movement could have been improved to bring about lasting success. “The Imagine Award offers me a wonderful opportunity to investigate this issue and provide new theoretical insights on struggles for social justice,” says Chollett.

Chollett completed undergraduate and graduate work in anthropology and Latin American studies at Iowa State

University and holds a doctorate in anthropology from Michigan State University. She offers courses at Morris on social justice and human rights. Her research and teaching are intertwined and designed to activate students' ability "to examine their own place within a system of global inequality," she says. "Using case studies such as these, students become aware of the global interconnections of their world and how these impact people in different regions of the global economy culturally, socially, economically, and politically."

During the 2011–12 academic year, Chollett will be on sabbatical completing work on a book manuscript based on her research in Mexico titled *When the Mills Closed: Reclaiming Power from the Margins of the Global Order*.

Chollett is one of nineteen Morris professors who received all-University 2011 Imagine Fund Awards. The program is supported in part by the McKnight Arts and Humanities Endowment. The endowment's mission is to support, sustain, and enliven arts and humanities research and activities on the four University campuses.

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