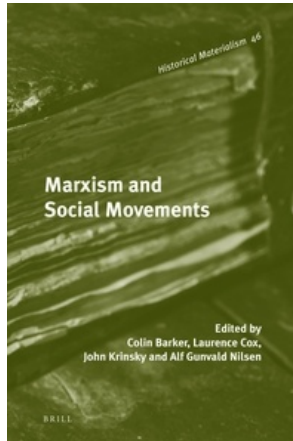


Review: Colin Barker, Lawrence Cox, John Krinsky and Alf Gunwald Nilsen (Eds), *Marxism and social movements*

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Colin Barker, Lawrence Cox, John Krinsky and Alf Gunwald Nilsen (Eds), *Marxism and social movements* Brill, 2013 £129

The Arab Spring, Occupy! and Indignados movements have raised again questions of strategy and lasting social change. To some, they are proof that direct action by the movement has pushed aside the relevance of class struggle. For others, the power of the spontaneous movement dispenses with the need for political parties and socialist ideas. This makes *Marxism and Social Movements* very timely.

The book brings together an impressive collection of political interpretations of social movements, both past and present. Its four editors are Colin Barker, a long standing member of the SWP (UK), Lawrence Cox an Irish academic and activist based in Maynooth, John Krinsky a political science professor at the City College of New York City and Alf Gunwald Nilsen, from Norway, who writes on agrarian movements in India. With chapters by the socialist writer from Canada, David McNally, China specialist Marc Belcher,

writer on British trade unions, Ralph Darlington and contributions by Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, who will be known to readers of this journal, and others besides, this book represents a very substantial volume for the left. It contains different positions on what constitutes a social movement and covers movements from below as well as well as reactionary ones like the US Christian right. It spans many different sorts of social movements: the Cochabamba and Chiapas movements, Cairo, black internationalism as seen through the eyes of CLR James, the Indian mutiny of 1857 and popular resistance today against displacement by dams along the Narmada Valley through Western India, Australia's Global Justice Movement, the fight over regeneration policy agendas in Scottish urban communities, and community development activism in Ireland. While many of the authors are academics, there is a clear intention to move beyond academic analysis and uncover the revolutionary potential of social movements. This distinguishes this collection of writings from other accounts of social movements which have often counterposed them to class struggle. This volume attempts to engage Marxism with questions of struggle and political consciousness and, in some cases, provides new tools of analysis for these important questions.

The subject of the book raises a dilemma. In one sense, as Colin Barker points out at the beginning, social movements are at the centre of Marxist politics. Against the popular misconception that Marx took class struggle mainly to be

those conflicts over wages and working conditions, Barker shows that Marx's concern with struggles against oppression whether based on nationality, ethnicity, or gender, 'were mutually interdependent parts of the social movement against capitalism as a totality' (p.53). Social movements can mount significant challenges to capitalism. In another sense, because social movements are much broader than the working class, and contain individuals and groups which are pulled in different political directions, they tend to form around single issues and often gravitate towards reformism. Unless these limited goals are overtaken, social movements can be rechanneled into existing political avenues and their demands shelved or pared down. Some of the contributors deal with this political tension, others fall short of resolving it.

Class consciousness

A central question in the dialogue between Marxism and social movements is what is meant by 'working class' and how political awareness takes shape within this group. The British Marxist historian, EP Thomson and his book *The Making of the English Working Class*, is one of the core reference points in the book because Thomson sees class consciousness as a many-sided phenomenon. Thompson describes the stirrings of working-class consciousness through unexpected channels - Methodism, utopianism or the Luddite movement formed in the face of skills being replaced by industrial production - and thereby unearths an indigenous English socialist tradition. His account offered a compelling alternative to the mechanical, economic model of class put forward by the Communist Party - a party which Thomson had left over the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Thompson's concern was with the specific historical and cultural threads that

are woven into a mass movement and how these produce a class which becomes conscious of its collective power, a class for itself. History as Thompson told it, rescued human experience from the moribund determinism of Stalinism, and made human agency the engine of change. This impulse is the starting point for some of the accounts here.

Behind Thomson's colourful tapestry, however, lay the assumption that the unity of interest between working peoples of all kinds was forged through what industrial capitalism was doing to them. Lawrence Cox in his two chapters in this collection, one written with Alf Gunwald Nilsen, openly recognises the political debt he owes to Thompson, but he skirts over Thompson's starting point of class and its roots in the mode of production. Cox redefines the social movement as, 'class in the active sense', because it is the sum of, 'how action is organised, conscious and coordinated' (p132); class as the exploitation of workers by capital falls by the wayside. Social movements from below he defines as, 'collective projects developed and pursued by subaltern groups, organising a range of locally generated skilled activities' and which aim to, 'challenge the constraints that a dominant structure of needs and capacities imposes upon the development of new needs and capacities' (p73). Political consciousness develops, it is claimed, via, 'local rationalities and militant particularisms' which embody the 'sedimented learning' of past struggles.

While the emphasis on political ideas changing through the experience of struggle is only right, there are obvious blind spots with an exclusive focus on this. History does not bear out the notion that social movements always become more and more politicised as the struggle develops, nor that the movement's store of political 'learning' grows incrementally. The char-

acteristic of social movements is precisely that they tend to flare up very quickly, are intense and militant for a while, and then die away just as quickly. One only has to think of the huge social movements like the worldwide anti-war movement of 2003 or the student movement in Britain in 2012, the Wisconsin or Oaklands Occupy movement in the US or, in Ireland, the Shell to Sea campaign or the more recent Household Tax Campaign, to see that movements have much more bumpy political rides than Cox implies. Indeed, the very transitory nature of social movements, which arises from their initial single issue focus, can lead to fragmentation after the militancy has subsided, and often leaves their participants, demoralised and even turned off politics altogether.

Cox and Nilsen appear to see localism itself as a driving social and political force and advocate, 'local rationalities and militant particularisms' as the most valuable aspect of these struggles. But sticking to localism can be a source of weakness which can divert the fight way from linking up with other struggles against the system. Indeed one of the striking characteristics of recent social movements is less their specific localism, than their ability to speak the same language as struggles many miles away across the globe. At the Madison occupation of the Wisconsin Capitol Building in February 2011, protesters carried Egyptian flags and copies of the famous Facebook photo of an Egyptian man holding a sign reading: 'Egypt Supports Wisconsin Workers: One World, One Pain'. This was because the spirit of Cairo was in the Occupy movement in the US. Protests about local issues triggered them both but the similar austerity and clamp-down meted out by capitalist governments brought the two struggles together.

An emphasis on activism and internal organisation alone, without wider ref-

erence to the other economic and political forces, also creates an obstacle to accurate assessments of the actual outcomes of the struggles. Romanticising localism can blind you to recognising the rhythm - highs and lows - of these movements. The local social movements in Ireland, to which Cox briefly refers are the various campaigns in working class areas around local issues and services. His only reference to the outcome of these community struggles is that they were in existence 'until recently' (p142). These campaigns, Cox is right in saying, spontaneously sprung up against the ravages of inner-city communities. The 'Spectacle of Defiance and Hope' group, a creative community resistance movement, based in inner city Dublin, for example, mobilised thousands in 2011 and 2012. Also large numbers became involved in actively trying to shape regeneration projects in their areas. But it is also true that without the struggle spreading to a linked up campaign against austerity, private and state interests were able to dictate to these communities. The result was the shocking spectacle of Public Private Partnership projects, like those of Dominic Street, St Michael's Estate and O'Devaney Gardens in Dublin, once the crash struck in 2010, being unceremoniously ditched as the builders went bankrupt. Chik Collins, in his chapter on community politics in Scotland, gives a much more straightforward yet subtle appraisal of community social movements. He shows how the poorest communities in Scotland were used as a kind of neoliberal test-ground to co-opt communities into policy agendas of 'partnerships', which couched in the language of participation, were in fact no more than an utter abandonment of these communities to further exploitation. In Ireland, many community activists would say the same thing.

But the real difficulty of believing that

social movements as such are simply the same as the working class struggle as such is that it neglects the whole area of workplace and trade union struggle (perhaps because they fall into a different academic discipline). It is true, to give only Irish and British examples, that Shell to Sea, the Bin Tax Campaign, the Irish Anti-War Movement, the Household Tax Campaign, CND, the Anti-Nazi League, the Poll Tax Campaign and Stop the War were all important moments in the overall class struggle but they were not more important than the 1913 Lockout, the Limerick Soviet, the General Strike of 1926, the big strike wave of the early seventies or the Miners' Strike of 1984-5. Moreover, workplace struggles located at the point of production where profits are made possess a potential economic and political power much less available to local and community based struggles. This is why mass strikes, as Rosa Luxemburg stressed, play such a major role in revolutions.

Local identities, it is true, form an important aspect of class, and one which, Marx saw as crucial in different ways to the general struggle. He wrote at length about political divisions sown by anti-Irish racism or by slavery, or other ideas from the past which acted as a brake on revolutionary consciousness like, 'a nightmare on the brains of the living'. But, for all his discussion of uneven political consciousness within the working class, the kernel of Marx's historical materialism was that the origins of class lie in the social relations of production, ie in the capitalist system itself. The nature of exploitation of workers in the capitalist mode of production means that workers have no choice but to sell their labour power to live, and this gives class an objective, material reality. To describe the existence of a dominated class purely in subjective terms, as the political collective of a social movement, misses

not only the material basis of exploitation but also the historical dimension to social agency, a point which Marx stressed strongly to the utopian socialists of his day. 'It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat regards as its aim', Marx wrote in *The Holy Family*, 'It is a question of what the proletariat is and which, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do'. Marx understood that unless struggle and resistance is understood as rooted in capitalism and the tendencies within it which make socialist change possible, radical politics could too easily become simply a moral plea for a better world.

Social movements are shaped indirectly by the effects of capitalism but have a dynamic different to that of the daily exploitation of the working class. The 'needs and capacities' and 'the experience of deprivation and oppression' experienced by 'social movements from below', as Cox and Nilsen describe them, highlight the oppression of people under capitalism. But this experience does not, on its own, necessarily bind people together in collective identification nor, without wider links to where the chains of capitalism are forged, drive the process of social change. This is something that social movement theorists cannot simply ignore, especially now when many of those social movements find themselves at a crossroads.

Against reductionism

Making the case for the material basis for class, does not mean that Marxists are crudely reductionist. The book deals superbly with this question in Paul Blackledge's chapter, which makes a lucid argument in favour of a rounded Marxist view of how ideas, culture and language inform and interact with material conditions. He explains how many of those who advocate

the autonomy of social movements make their claim on the basis that Marxists miss the cultural dimensions to political awareness and reduce everything to class. The defining characteristic of New Social Movements theory in the 1980s, he shows, was the overriding importance given to language and culture for the production of solidarity within movements. Many previously Marxist historians such as Gareth Steadman Jones took up this trend, repudiating materialism and effectively, in the words of one, ‘dissolving reality into language’.

Blackledge argues that this ‘cultural turn’ led new social movementists away from the reality of class struggle but it also ignored the rich Marxist tradition on culture and language. Drawing on the insights of the British Marxist historians, such as Christopher Hill as well as Thompson, but also on Marxist language and cultural writers, such as Volosinov and Bakhtin, Blackledge argues that descriptions of human experience need not be caught between the two extremes of either crude materialism or cultural idealism.

Blackledge revisits the Marxist notion of base and superstructure which new social movement theorists reject as too reductionist. He weaves a subtle understanding of how the base and superstructure interconnect. He argues that Marx had a layered concept of reality in which purposeful human agency is framed by, but not mechanically reducible to, the social relations of production. Rather than understanding base and superstructure as two activities, they are one. Language is an example of how the two are part of a social totality. He draws on Volosinov and his description of language being one of the key links between the basis’ and the superstructure. The relationship between social being and consciousness is lived out in ways in which class conflicts are fought

out both as actual struggles and as conflicts over meaning in language. This gives rise to what Volosinov called the multi-accentuality of language.

Blackledge gives a neat example of how the economic base is not simply a given, any more than the superstructure of language and culture is mechanically reflective. In the Atlantic trade, in the early eighteenth century, the slave ships, at the core of this cruel economy, became both the engine of capitalism and the setting of resistance. He refers to Marcus Rediker’s *The Slave Ship*, which describes the social movements of slaves against the system of capitalist slavery, but refuses to make one determined by the other. The social base of the slave trade was the pre-existing context but whether the slaves rebelled or not depended on purposeful action, language, culture. One could not happen without the other.

Blackledge’s core argument is that ‘New Social Movement theory’, in reaction to the crude economism of some officially labelled ‘Marxist’ accounts, converted a concern with language and culture into a principle, in which cultural experience drowned out recognising any common material base to the struggles. His chapter serves to redress this by presenting a model of Marxist culture and language which both recognises the specificity of distinct movements while relating them not to rigid conceptions of class structure but to dynamic social relations rooted in the mode of production.

Politics and social movements

This book, while being a rich compilation of the story of social movements, has less to say about how Marxists should politically relate to social movements. Implicit in some of the accounts is that leadership per se is counterproductive. Chris Hes-

keth's account of the Social Movements in Oaxaca and Chiapas in Mexico, takes as its central theme Harvey's notion of geographical spaces as 'alternative spaces for political contestation'. But this leaves many questions unanswered. When these spaces receive official autonomous status, as Chiapas did ten years ago, but the Mexican state remains untouched, what then? Survival under siege and constant repression led to the communities in Chiapas suffering severe hardship, inter-communal strife, and austerity in the name of survival which has forced many to emigrate. Is this a desirable end?

Also, advocating no leadership does not mean that political decisions are not made, as Heike Schaumberg's more critical account of the Argentinian uprising of 2001 shows. 'Horizontalism' or the aim of direct democracy with no leaders, and the disorganisation' tactic, she shows, worked for a while alongside the spontaneous outburst of struggle and direct action. In the longer term, though, 'disorganisation' was blamed by activists for the disintegration of the *Interbarriales* popular assemblies movement. In practice the UTD, the unemployed workers' union, despite its commitment to the disorganisation tactic, had its own informal structure of leadership with decisions made by only a handful of people. She also points out that the fragmentation and sectarianism of the Argentine left meant they were powerless to intervene effectively.

Even as direct, horizontal 'unmediated processes' are elevated to articles of faith, the question of what alternative the direct democracy is fighting for still remains. David McNally in his survey of class formation across the movements in Bolivia, Mexico, Tunisia and Egypt gives an interesting account of how mass resistance and working class formation are interdependent, showing how the movements are

not reduced to class but nevertheless decisively shaped by class dynamics. However, noting the changing patterns of working class formations and the unity in diversity at the height of the struggles, is one thing, how to take these struggles further is another, and McNally seems to have nothing to say on this. Questions of strategy and tactics cannot be left out particularly when we see a hiatus in the movements in Bolivia and in Mexico, as we do now. Do not lessons need to be drawn as the new regimes regroup to defend Andean capitalism? In the case of Egypt, celebration of what has gone before is no longer adequate as stark political choices around the Muslim Brotherhood and repression confront activists and socialists. It is not good enough to merely celebrate spontaneous forms of organisation, or hope that the social movements will simply rise again in the future, for what is required is political analysis. Debate is needed about what future the movements envisage and whether it can be built without taking power from the small capitalist class that controls the means of production and distribution. These questions also raise the need for revolutionary socialist organisations which many in the social movements have rejected. Yet the book barely touches on this issue. Strangely, although the volume starts with the aim of linking the ideas of Marx with those of the social movement, the key idea of Marx, that of social revolution and transfer of one power from one class to another, is scarcely touched upon.

Social movements are not new. Movementism as a political credo has been around since the late 1970s. In Italy, France, Sweden, Portugal and Spain after a decade of huge struggles and upheavals, the 'crisis of militancy' which was experienced then was, in no small measure, a result of how the Marxist left saw and related to the social movements that had

mushroomed in that decade. They were to usher in a new sort of politics, one which said that the working class was no longer the main agent of social change, and to claim that it would be reductionist and economic. The 'autonomous' movements could take on the mantle of social change, be a broader and more diverse substitute for the working class. This move led in directions not envisaged at the beginning - towards reformist politics, as with many in the feminist movement, or as in France and Italy towards an exclusive emphasis on elections; only for activists to find that both of these led to greater disillusion. This happened because left-wing organisations at the time tended to defer to the spontaneity of the movement.

There is no doubt that Marxists and socialists need to be at the heart of the movements today. The movements' clashes with

the state bring wider layers of people to see the need for revolutionary change. Everyone, socialists and activists, can learn the experience of struggle from these movements. But, while unreservedly committed to the struggle of the movements, Marxists and socialists need also to argue within them for militant confrontation with the government, for linking up with other struggles and involving organised workers, and against the channelling of the movement towards reformist parties. That argument is not made clearly in *Marxism and Social Movements* which leaves one wondering, at the end of a richly informative volume, where to go from here.

And one last point: the price of £129 puts the book out of reach of more or less everyone except academics with access to university libraries - a pity.