

Marxism and Social Movements

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What Would a Marxist Theory of Social Movements Look Like?

Alf Gunvald Nilsen and Laurence Cox

A Marxist theory of social movements?¹

Theory is a tool that activists use when their movements are not moving: when, despite their best efforts, they find that decisions are being made at levels they cannot affect, that the institutions they try to use are not on their side, or that their mobilisations are contained and constrained, theory offers the hope of understanding, and challenging, this situation. But not all tools are equally fit for the job.

In some cases, movements are offered the worldly wisdom of accepting the limitations of a social order that is often willing to accept their presence in return for political cooptation. In other cases, they are met by a celebration of their current situation and thinking which is initially welcome but leaves no space for learning, development or change. Both approaches in effect ratify the status quo – the one celebrating

1. This chapter draws heavily on our joint work in this area, now stretching across over a decade. An initial outline of a Marxist theory of social movements can be found in Cox 1999a; see also Cox 1999b; and, in a somewhat different form, in Cox in this volume. This approach is reworked and elaborated in Cox and Nilsen 2005a; 2005b; Nilsen 2007a; Nilsen and Cox 2006; and Cox 2005 – between them representing a single joint project summarised in Nilsen 2009a, which this chapter develops. Empirically, we have applied this approach in greatest depth to India – in Nilsen 2006; 2007b; 2008; 2010; 2011; and in this volume – and to Ireland, in Mullan and Cox 2000; Cox 2006; 2007b; Cox and Curry 2010; and Cox and Ní Dhorchaigh 2011. Some of its political implications are expressed in Nilsen 2007b; Cox 2007a; 2010a; and 2010b. Finally, Geoghegan and Cox 2001; Barker and Cox 2002; Cox and Nilsen 2007; and Cox and Fominaya 2009, are related approaches, challenging mainstream social movements literature from the standpoint of activist knowledge production.

normality and acceptance, the other celebrating resistance but uninterested in the practicalities of change.

Part of the problem, we suggest, is that many of the theories on offer (including in movement contexts) are thoroughly academic *in origin*; their purpose is not to change the world but to explain, celebrate or condemn.² Because they are not geared to action, defeats follow – as leaderships focus on carving out a niche in the status quo, or the celebration of radical otherness runs into non-discursive forms of power. It is our own experience of these weaknesses which has led us to ask more from theory than a badge of academic identity or political status – to demand, in fact, that it help us think about what to do.³

In this chapter, we set out to illustrate how Marxism – born out of the experiences, debates, theories and conflicts of popular movements – can respond to this demand. We work towards a coherent theory of collective action that is (a) consistent with central Marxist propositions, (b) practically useful for movement practitioners and (c) does not start by assuming *a priori* that local, geographical or historical realities are fixed and untouched by human action – in other words, a theory that takes movements seriously as social forces that continue to change our world.

We propose a framework geared towards the open ended analysis of movement-processes in specific places. Its universalising assumptions are restricted to the most abstract micro-analyses of human action and to the most general macro-perspectives on social order. The framework we propose is processual: it encompasses everyday struggles as well as counter-hegemonic projects, and tries to make sense of the way in which activists can move from one towards the other through collective learning. Crucially, we do not see this expansion and development as a foregone conclusion, but as a potential: activist aspirations to transform society can *sometimes* be realised, and have contributed to major social changes. Finally, we broaden the definition of ‘social movement’ to include the collective action of dominant social groups: the structures that sub-altern groups mobilise around are the contestable outcomes of human practice, rather than absolute givens.

Theoretical starting points

Marxism sees the social world as a constant making and unmaking of social structures of human needs and capacities – structures that are constructed through

2. Barker and Cox 2002.

3. Other chapters in this book develop a critique of that brand of academic social movement theory which does not even attempt to be ‘movement relevant’ or engage in real dialogue with practitioners (see also Flacks 2004; Bevington and Dixon 2005).

the conflictual encounter between what we call social movements from above and social movements from below.

More abstractly, human beings articulate and seek to meet their needs by deploying their practical, bodily, semiotic, and intellectual capacities within historically evolving social formations: ‘the satisfaction of the first need . . . leads to new needs; and this production of new needs is the first historical act’.⁴ Because human beings must cooperate in order to satisfy their needs, this throws up social formations within which they can do so – but which also exert pressures on and set limits to the ways in which they do this. The outcome of this is a dominant structure of entrenched needs and capacities – a way of doing society – which privileges certain needs and capacities over others in ways that represent a relatively stable relationship of power between dominant and subaltern groups within that society.

Structures like this are not static, however. Contention between dominant and subaltern social groups leads to constant processes of change. At times, the overarching social framework can remain intact even while the dominant structure of entrenched needs and capacities is modified. At other times, all elements of an arrangement can be contested without the ‘frontlines’ changing substantially for decades. At still other times, systemic convulsions bring about a complete rupture of such structures and the social formation that has crystallised around them, giving rise to something new and altogether different. Social movements play a central role in these processes: by mobilising to defend or carve out a space to meet their specific needs within an existing social formation (for instance, liberal feminism); by developing new meanings, values, practices and relationships around emergent structures of radical needs and capacities that cannot be fully realised within existing structures (for instance, radical feminism); or by attempting to ally with other agents in the hope of creating new kinds of society (for instance, socialist feminism).

Social movements: a definition

Social movements are often thought of in field-specific terms, as a particular form of extra-parliamentary political activity, characterised by certain specific institutional and organisational features.⁵ In contrast, we propose a wider definition of social movements as a process in which a specific social group develops a collective project of skilled activities centred on a rationality – a particular way

4. Marx and Engels 1975b, p. 42.

5. See Tilly 2004.

of making sense of and relating to the social world – that tries to change or maintain a dominant structure of entrenched needs and capacities, in part or whole.

The starting point is everyday practices developed in response to specific needs, problems and places, materially grounded in concrete situations, and hence a specific group; but to become a movement, participants need to connect with other such practices by articulating something more abstract, a ‘local rationality’ that can be recognised by potential allies. Significantly, such processes unfold in conflict with the collective projects of other groups within a given social formation.

This kind of praxis is both the subject and the object of social movements. It is their subject, in that movement activity is nothing more or less than the conscious deployment of human capacities to meet human needs – albeit in complex ways, as when we reflect on what alliances will make it possible for us to resist attempts to privatise basic services. It is also their object, in that movements try to change or maintain the structures that organise human activity and/or the direction in which those structures develop. This, in turn, means that we see social structures and social formations as the sediment of movement struggles, and as a kind of truce line continually probed for weaknesses and repudiated as soon as this seems worthwhile – by social movements from above and social movements from below.

Social movements from above

‘From castles and palaces and churches to prisons and workhouses and schools; from weapons of war to a controlled press’ wrote Raymond Williams, ‘any ruling class, in variable ways though always materially, produces a social and political order’.⁶ This productive activity is the essence of the ‘social movement from above’, which we define as the development of a collective project by dominant groups, consisting of skilled activities centred on a rationality that seek to maintain or modify a dominant structure of entrenched needs and capacities, in ways that aim to reproduce and/or extend the hegemonic position of dominant groups within a given social formation.

The skilled activities that make up such projects span a wide spectrum, from industrial organisation models to counterinsurgency operations and neoliberal crisis management.⁷ The projects of social movements from above involve rationalities expressed in ideological offensives – such as moral campaigns against ‘sloth and indolence’ in the era of primitive accumulation, or Thatcher’s

6. Williams 1977, p. 93.

7. See Hoogvelt 2001; Pilger 2003; Klein 2007.

anti-collectivist populism – for which élites seek to gain popular consent.⁸ The organisations involved are immensely varied – ranging from Freemasonry in the eighteenth century, via New Right parties and conservative think tanks in the 1980s, to transnational institutions such as the WTO and the World Bank/IMF in the present.⁹ The aim of these organisations is essentially to construct unity between dominant social groups – a unity that cannot be taken for granted, and which sometimes unravels.

From both activist and analytical points of view, there are two advantages of reading politics in this way. Firstly, showing the coherence and purposive direction of such projects is important to activists, who otherwise have to learn painfully and in the first person the limits of élite tolerance for needs that contradict such projects. This explains an important dimension of movement-variability, in terms of how far particular movement goals can easily be accommodated within these terms. Secondly, showing the socially constructed nature of these projects is important, politically and intellectually, in understanding that they can be challenged and, on occasion, defeated. Without this, we are left facing social structure as an unchangeable Thing and universalising power relations that are, in fact, specific to a given place at a given time.

Social movements from above create and pursue their projects for the construction, reproduction, and extension of hegemony on the basis of the superior access of dominant social groups to economic, political and cultural power-resources. This makes such movements qualitatively different from movements from below. Therefore, we shall discuss each element in more detail.

A directive role in economic organisation

Movements from above draw upon and try to maintain or expand the directive role of dominant groups in economic organisation. Exploitation is not a self-perpetuating feature of society; it ‘will tend to evoke resistance, if only in such molecular forms as sabotage and ca’ canny’.¹⁰ For accumulation to proceed smoothly, and for the power relations that are the foundation of accumulation to be sustained, such resistance must be repressed or accommodated in some way.¹¹

While even routine exploitation must be actively and consciously reproduced, new forms of exploitation particularly need to be actively created through projects seeking to advance a new ‘mode in which surplus labour [can be] extracted

8. See Perelman 2000; Hall 1983.

9. See Van der Pijl 1995; Robinson 2004.

10. Callinicos 1988, p. 51.

11. See Braverman 1974; Burawoy 1982.

from the actual producer¹² – whether this takes the form of a transition from feudal serfdom and commoning to capitalist wage-labour, or a shift from Fordist factory production to precarious service sector employment. Behind what looks like ‘the silent compulsion of economic relations’¹³ lies conscious collective agency and the organisation of alliances around particular projects to impose, maintain, extend or restore particular economic rationalities in the form of what Jessop calls ‘accumulation strategies’.¹⁴

Thus, rather than conceiving of agency as a sort of froth on the surface of capital, it can be argued, for example, that the churning of struggles between movements from above and movements from below during the ‘long nineteenth century’¹⁵ had, by the end of the Second World War, created favourable conditions for accumulation strategies that centred on ‘re-embedding’ the economy in a régime of state regulation and intervention. In the global North, this took the form of Keynesian welfare state compromises; in the South, it assumed the form of national-developmental alliances.¹⁶ The specific manifestations of these accumulation strategies varied greatly, in large part due to the specific struggles that characterised specific locales.¹⁷

When the alliances which underpinned these accumulation strategies unravelled, this was, in turn, intrinsically related to popular struggles to advance excluded needs and capacities, prompting an offensive from key members of the dominant alliance who no longer found their interests best served by continued loyalty to the previous strategies.¹⁸ This conflictual unravelling and the subsequent turn to neoliberalism occurred in different ways and degrees, and with different – not always successful – outcomes in different parts of the world, depending on popular resistance.¹⁹

Differential access to the state

Under normal circumstances, dominant social groups enjoy privileged access to ‘the political power that is pre-eminently ascribed to the state’.²⁰ This expresses the fact that the formation of the state as a system of political control and domination went hand-in-hand with the division of society into a contradictory and

12. Marx, cited in De Ste. Croix 1981, p. 51.

13. Marx 1976a, p. 899.

14. Jessop 1990.

15. Hobsbawm 1988a; 1988b; 1989.

16. See Lash and Urry 1987; Harvey 1990; Kiely 2009; Silver and Slater 1999; Motta and Nilsen 2011.

17. See Esping-Andersen 1990; Kohli 2004.

18. See Wainwright 1994; Lash and Urry 1987.

19. Harvey 2005.

20. Poulantzas 1978, p. 147.

conflictual relation between ‘the class which performs the sum of social labour and the class or classes which perform no labour but nonetheless appropriate the social surplus’.²¹ The state is geared towards administering the functioning and reproduction of fundamental structures of class power, and – as activists tend to discover – it is, therefore, also inherently constituted in such a way as to have ‘unequal and asymmetrical effects on the ability of social groups to realize their interests through political action’.²²

In capitalist societies, performing this task entails guaranteeing the right to private property in the means of production and labour power, underwriting the enforcement of contracts, providing protection for the mechanisms of accumulation, eliminating barriers to the mobility of capital and labour, and stabilising monetary régimes. This is done by intervening in the accumulation process, by providing necessary public goods and infrastructures, by mediating in conflicts between capital and labour, and – as witnessed in the recent spate of bailouts after the 2008 financial collapse – by managing crises in the capitalist economy.²³ Beyond this, the capitalist state is also central to reproducing those social and cultural institutions that are important in shaping and sustaining accumulation – notably gendered divisions of labour, the patriarchal family, and racial hierarchies.²⁴

However, like the matrix of power that it regulates and reproduces, the state and the form that it assumes in a specific place and time is a ‘condensation of a relationship of forces defined precisely by struggle’.²⁵ The structures of political representation and state intervention are subject to change as an outcome of movement struggles, not least because of the importance of alliance, consent, and legitimacy in the construction of hegemony. For example, in the global North, the removals of qualifications on the right to vote based on property, gender and race were key achievements of the workers’ movement, the women’s movement, and the Civil Rights movement. In the global South, national sovereignty and the national-developmental state were the outcomes of protracted struggles for national liberation from colonial rule. In Western countries, the transition from the ‘night watchman state’ of the nineteenth and early twentieth century to the post-war Keynesian welfare state was the result of labour struggles from the 1890s to the 1940s.²⁶

These changes were, in large part, the result of widespread collective agency from below; but they also stopped short of revolutionary transformation, in that

21. Smith 1990, p. 41.

22. Jessop 1982, p. 224.

23. D. Harvey 2001, pp. 274–5.

24. Kotz, McDonough and Reich 1994.

25. Poulantzas 1978, p. 147.

26. Cox 1987.

most were concessions granted by dominant groups seeking to negotiate new truce lines in the face of popular movements. The state remains, therefore, a congealment of a wider matrix of power-laden social relations, which ‘can never be equally accessible to all forces and equally available for all purposes’.²⁷ This becomes particularly evident when social movements from above take the political initiative; not for nothing are the supposedly anti-state neoliberal projects of the 1980s identified with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan’s terms in office.²⁸

Moulding everyday routines and common sense

The supremacy of a social group, Gramsci noted, will manifest itself in two ways: ‘the function of hegemony which the dominant group exercises throughout society and . . . that of “direct domination” or command exercised through the State’.²⁹ When social movements from above mobilise to mould everyday routines and common sense, they are operating on the former terrain, seeking to secure ‘[t]he “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group’.³⁰

Gaining the consent of subaltern groups comes in part from winning acceptance for ideologies of dominance in which the hegemonic projects of social movements from above ‘are conceived of, and presented, as being the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the “national” energies’, and underpinned by ‘the belief about everything that exists, that it is “natural”, that it should exist’.³¹ As such, national-developmental states portray mega-projects that dispossess marginal peasants of their land and livelihoods as serving the universal progress of the nation towards modernity, while neoliberal states portray union busting, wage freezes, and cutbacks in public spending as necessary means by which to attract global capital, which is, in turn, in the interest of all.

However, at a more fundamental level, hegemony entails ‘in effect a saturation of the whole process of living . . . of the whole substance of lived identities and relationships’.³² This is Gramsci’s ‘directive’ intellectual activity: social movements from above shape everyday routines and common sense in a way that enables them to manage the task of providing effective directions and orientations to the life-activity of different social groups, meet *some* of their diverse needs and provide a language with which they can express their thoughts.

27. Jessop 1990, p. 250.

28. Harvey 2005.

29. Gramsci 1998, p. 57.

30. Gramsci 1998, p. 12.

31. Gramsci 1998, pp. 182, 157.

32. Williams 1977, p. 110.

However, hegemony ‘does not just passively exist as a form of dominance’.³³ Gramsci pointed out that the ‘common sense’ that guides the life-activity of subaltern groups is a form of ‘contradictory consciousness’, fusing ideologies of dominance and hegemonic ways of being in the world with the practical and often tacit subaltern experience of the existent state of affairs as problematic, and the subaltern skills and responses developed in response to this experience.³⁴

Thus, hegemony is vulnerable to resistance, and resistance often draws on subaltern appropriations and inversions of ideologies of dominance. Social movements opposing large dams in India portray dispossession as evidence of the state’s betrayal of the postcolonial development project; anti-austerity protests point out the contradiction between neoliberal market ideology and state bailouts of the banking sector. When we study how movements from above use their leading position to mould everyday routines and common sense, we see this ‘not as a finished and monolithic ideological formation but as a problematic, contested, political process of struggle’.³⁵

Strategies of social movements from above: defensive/offensive

If movements from above can mobilise these economic, political and cultural resources when they try to expand or maintain the position of dominant groups, they do so in interaction movements from below, and this ‘field of force’³⁶ has consequences for their strategies, which we broadly categorise as defensive or offensive strategies.

Defensive strategies tend to be deployed in the context of substantial challenges from below, and can involve either accommodation or repression. A defensive strategy focused on accommodation typically revolves around granting concessions to the claims and demands of movements from below with the aim of appeasing and defusing a force that might otherwise threaten the existing social formation. A key example would be the mid-twentieth-century reforms implemented in much of Western Europe in response to workers’ movements. As this example suggests, such strategies often involve playing on existing differences within movements from below: alliances with social democrats against more radical Left actors, or coopting leaderships into positions of relative power while demobilising the movement.

Defensive strategies centred on repression involve violent coercion and the suspension of civil rights, such as the state-terrorism unleashed by authoritarian

33. Williams 1977, p. 112.

34. Gramsci 1998, p. 333.

35. Roseberry 1995, p. 77.

36. Thompson 1978a, p. 151.

régimes in Latin America against radical popular movements in the 1970s and 1980s as part of the implementation of neoliberal economic policies, 'anti-terrorist' legislation allowing for the generalised surveillance of everyday life, or the criminalisation of counter-cultures seen as potential sources of large-scale protest, as in the UK's 1994 Criminal Justice Act.³⁷

Hegemony is, of course, always 'consent armoured by coercion'.³⁸ Thus the defensive strategies of movements from above always involve *some* accommodation and *some* repression, while varying in emphasis. Successful repressive strategies rely on a substantial coalition willing to support them, established by offering concessions to more moderate movements from below. Conversely, accommodative strategies are often accompanied by the criminalisation of more radical movements. Thus in constructing the historic bloc that underpinned Western Europe's postwar class compromise, more moderate unions and skilled workers were typically incorporated into corporatist arrangements with the state and capital, while more militant unions and unskilled workers were often excluded and subject to repression.³⁹

Offensive strategies from above typically involve attacks on the truce lines left by movement struggles of the past, undermining and reversing the victories and concessions won by movements from below. Thus they are aimed either at attaining hegemony for newly dominant social groups, or at restoring the power of already-dominant groups, and are typically deployed at times of crisis and breakdown of all or part of a social formation.

An example of the former would be the bourgeois revolutions involved in the rise of capitalism in England, France and the USA. These revolutions, and the movements from above which formed themselves in these processes, represented 'the development of a group in society with an independent economic base, which attacks obstacles to a democratic version of capitalism that have been inherited from the past'.⁴⁰ Neoliberalism is, of course, the most recent example of an offensive movement from above seeking to restore and extend the hegemony of already-dominant social groups. Its prime achievement has been restoring the class power of capital by fundamentally undermining the social restrictions and regulations imposed on capitalist accumulation as a result of working-class struggles in the first half of the twentieth century.⁴¹

In yet other cases, social movements from above may show the dynamics of a 'passive revolution', where an alliance between existing and new dominant

37. See Klein 2007; Mattelart 2010; McKay 1996.

38. Gramsci 1998, p. 276.

39. Cox 1987.

40. Moore 1991, p. xxi.

41. Harvey 2005.

groups via the state enables the introduction of a new form of capitalism without directly dislodging existing dominant groups and the social relations on which their hegemony has been constructed.⁴² Such dynamics were characteristic, for example, of the articulation of India's postcolonial development project, and of neoliberal restructuring in Mexico and Chile.⁴³

It should be clear from the complexity and scope of these examples that we are suggesting categories which are useful for empirical research and practical strategy, rather than watertight conceptual compartments. Such categories help us see neoliberalism as process and project rather than eternal reality; to contrast the very different possibilities and limits of resistance in different places; and to think about how and where we can extend our alliances, raise the costs of the neoliberal assault and detach its allies. This is where mobilisation to transcend and construct something more valuable than 'the house that neoliberalism built' begins. This brings us to social movements from below.

Social movements from below

Social movements from below can be defined as collective projects developed and pursued by subaltern groups, organising a range of locally-generated skilled activities around a rationality that seeks to either challenge the constraints that a dominant structure of needs and capacities imposes upon the development of new needs and capacities, or to defend aspects of an existing, negotiated structure which accommodate their specific needs and capacities.

We start from Piven and Cloward's simple but incisive observation that subaltern groups 'experience deprivation and oppression within a concrete setting, not as the end result of large and abstract processes . . . it is the daily experience of people that shapes their grievances, establishes the measure of their demands, and points out the targets of their anger'.⁴⁴ However, these experiences are not simply isolated instances of wrongdoing or frustration. Rather, they are 'clues to underlying structures and relationships which are not observable other than through the particular phenomena or events that they produce'.⁴⁵

These structures and relationships can be made explicit when movement participants combine and extend their 'fragmented knowledge' in ways that enable them to develop 'a better understanding of the social mechanisms at work, so as to direct their efforts in order that their intentions might be more

42. Gramsci 1998.

43. Kaviraj 1997; Morton 2007a; Motta 2008.

44. Piven and Cloward 1977, pp. 20–1.

45. Wainwright 1994, p. 7.

efficiently fulfilled'.⁴⁶ This, in turn, means that the grievances, demands and targets may expand: from oppositional collective action bound by scope, aims and cultural 'language' to a specific, situated and local experience, towards mutual recognition across difference in wider-ranging and more radical projects for change.

We shall refer to the realisation of this potential as a movement-process, and propose the concepts of local rationality, militant particularism, campaigns and social movement projects as tools to make sense of different aspects of movement processes. The idea of a process centred on widening and deepening the scope of collective action from below is often criticised, in academic contexts, as being linear or teleological in nature. This is not our thinking: the unfolding of movement-processes is not a predetermined necessity. However, over the past two centuries, social movements from below have repeatedly proven themselves capable of developing in such a way. We are trying, therefore, to develop concepts that can grasp this contingent potential for subaltern groups to develop their skilled activity collectively, and that can help activists think what to do, in the sense of being aware of what may be possible and what it might look like.

Local rationalities and militant particularisms

The 'common sense' that underpins people's everyday activity, Gramsci suggested, is an amalgamation of elements originating in the hegemonic projects of social movements from above and the contradictory logic of 'good sense' – those aspects of subaltern consciousness that indicate that 'the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world'.⁴⁷ We term this second form of practical consciousness a *local rationality*, the articulation of this conception in ways that can be generalised beyond their starting point; in movement contexts, this means the ways of being, doing and thinking that people develop as attempts to oppose the everyday routines and received wisdoms that define the hegemonic elements of common sense.

Local rationalities are not an essential characteristic of the social being of subaltern groups, or a form of insurrectionary otherness hermetically sealed off from the hegemonic projects of social movements from above. Rather, local rationalities are forged in and through historically constituted relations between social groups which are differentially endowed in terms of 'the extent of their control of social relations and... the scope of their transformative powers'.⁴⁸ Embedded in unequal power relations, people do their best to develop their needs and

46. Wainwright 1994, p. 108; Kilgore 1999; Barker and Cox 2002.

47. Gramsci 1998, pp. 327–8, 333.

48. Sewell 1992, p. 20.

capacities. In so doing, some of their activities may fall into line with the proposals and propositions of the established orders; others do not.

In some cases, they articulate local rationalities to defend previously negotiated spaces which accommodate subaltern needs and capacities within a dominant structure of entrenched needs and capacities. In other cases, local rationalities are articulated as attempts to transgress constraints imposed on the development of new needs and capacities among subaltern groups. In the first case, local rationalities are typically shaped in defensive ways, opposing attempts from above at reordering extant structures in order to extend the power base of dominant groups. For example, eighteenth-century food riots were famously mediated through local rationalities centred on the idea of a 'moral economy' regulating relations between dominant and subaltern groups.⁴⁹

In the second case, local rationalities typically take a more offensive form, as subaltern groups try to carve out greater space for the satisfaction, deployment and development of emergent radical needs and capacities. For example, the urban counter-cultural movement-networks analysed by Cox sought to develop spaces for autonomous self development against the constraints of labour market and family structures.⁵⁰

Moreover, local rationalities can be more or less developed and articulated in the collective skilled activity of subaltern social groups as against those forms of rationality that characterise the hegemonic projects of movements from above. In highly repressive contexts, local rationalities may exist for long periods as what Scott calls 'hidden transcripts' – a 'critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant' and concealed under a veil of feigned compliance and deference.⁵¹ In other cases, such rationalities may exist much more openly and thoroughly as a cultural fabric saturating the outlook and activity of subaltern groups in overt and entrenched 'cultures of resistance'.⁵²

If local rationalities are increasingly articulated, this can lead to direct confrontations with and defiance of social movements from above. For example, Fantasia has analysed one such process animating collective action among iron-foundry workers in New Jersey. In this case, intra-group affinities between workers energised a series of direct confrontations with plant management over specific workplace grievances. Eventually, this took the form of an informal network among those workers oriented towards radical union activism, which in turn enabled workers to carry out militant wildcat strikes that gained important

49. Thompson 1991.

50. See Cox 1999a.

51. Scott 1990, p. xii.

52. Peluso 1992.

concessions from the factory owners.⁵³ Such moments are, of course, the starting point of most struggles. As participants come to discover that those above them are not on their side, they start to voice publicly what has previously been said only in private or not at all, and act in their own name and on their own behalf. Feminist consciousness raising is another well-known example of this process.

Drawing on Williams⁵⁴ and Harvey,⁵⁵ we term such struggles *militant particularisms*. This refers to forms of struggle that emerge when a subaltern group deploys specific skills and knowledges in open confrontation with a dominant group in a particular place at a particular time, in a particular conflict over a particular issue. The term highlights the way in which ‘politics is always embedded in “ways of life” and “structures of feeling” peculiar to places and communities’.⁵⁶ This embeddedness is reflected in the issues that are struggled over and the practices, skills, idioms and imaginaries deployed in such confrontations.

This is local rationality with the emphasis very much still on the local; but articulated so as to form a clear and identifiable ‘us’ in opposition to ‘them’, and – more importantly – ‘their’ attempts to make ‘us’ act as they would like and think in ways that suit them. It is spoken and acted publicly, and in ways that enable the bridging of (some of) the million and one different potential internal conflicts and tensions within the struggle. Of course this process may not be sustained, and militant particularisms are often major achievements, subject to disintegration or attacks from above using clientelistic relationships, ‘divide and conquer’ or the cooptation of leaders.

From militant particularisms to campaigns

When they survive all this, however, the practices, skills, idioms and imaginaries of which militant particularisms are made up can be generalised further – a further articulation of local rationality – and, in this way, they can transcend the particular place and time of their emergence and be used across a spectrum of specific situations and singular struggles.

This happens when activists involved in a militant particularist struggle in one given location make connections with other activists engaged in similar struggles elsewhere. Through making such connections, activists typically discover and create common ground: common denominators are discovered in the apparently disparate conflicts in which they are engaged; common enemies are named; common strategies and collective identities are developed across social and spatial boundaries.

53. Fantasia 1988.

54. Williams 1989.

55. Harvey 1996; 2000.

56. Harvey 2000, p. 55.

These practical activities of mutual learning and development of self-understanding, communication, cooperation and organisation between militant particularisms bring about a widening and deepening of the scope of collective action; as such, they constitute another stage of the process in which movements from below ‘shift gears’ and ‘transcend particularities’. This act of “translation” from the concrete to the abstract’ is already present, of course, as individuals hitherto divided by family, neighbourhood, loyalty, gender, and so on come to work together in a single militant particularism; the formation of campaigns takes this a stage further, beyond the internal radicalisation of the lifeworld to the connection, and further radicalisation, of multiple lifeworlds.⁵⁷

The organisation of militant particularisms across social and spatial boundaries involves something more than putting potatoes in a sack. It entails the creation of a form of movement activity that we shall refer to as *campaigns*, defined as the organisation of a range of local responses to specific situations in ways that connect people across those situations, around a generalised challenge to the dominant forces which construct those situations.

For example, the massive popular campaign against dam-building in the Narmada Valley in central India emerged as grassroots groups in peasant communities across the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh started to coordinate their efforts to secure compensation for the loss of land that these communities would suffer as a result of the submergence caused by the dam-projects. Faced with recalcitrant state authorities, their demands were radicalised towards opposition to the Narmada dams at a pan-state level, spearheaded by the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*. In turn, the campaign was embedded in national and transnational movement networks that articulated a generic politics of opposition to large dams, and championed the exploration of alternative methods of water-management.⁵⁸

Towards social-movement projects

If the development of campaigns involves transcending the boundaries of militant particularisms through translation between local struggles, the construction of collective identities that cut across socio-spatial divides, and the widening of activist perceptions of the limits of the possible, they are still a limited form of collective action in that they do not take aim at the social totality as an object to be transformed; and, of course, many campaigns do stop here.

However, if activists pursue the activity of connecting different localised struggles and, indeed, seemingly different struggles; if they ask critical questions

57. Harvey 2000, p. 242.

58. Nilsen 2010.

about the structures that create the problems they address and frustrate their campaigns – and if the movement's goals or actors are not ones that can easily be accommodated or repressed – they can come to an understanding of the systemic dimensions of the specific field they are working in. From this awareness, activists can start to move beyond the field-specific nature of the campaign, towards a form of movement activity that sees the social whole as the object of challenge or transformation.

This has powerful effects on a movement-process, is hard to achieve and is often bitterly contested – both internally, and by more powerful, wealthier and culturally dominant opponents. Attempting to argue that a process of industrial struggle can and should go further, and become a socialist movement or demand a welfare state; pushing a women's movement beyond the demand for legislative equality towards the attempt to restructure society on a non-patriarchal basis; turning a movement against nuclear power plants into a movement for a different kind of economy; turning a student movement into a revolutionary movement – even where the organisation remains nominally the same, its structures and practices, ideas and strategies, allies and repertoires will have to change dramatically.

We propose the term *social movement project* for these forms of collective agency, defined as (a) challenges to the social totality which that (b) aim to control the self-production of society and (c) have or are developing the potential for the kind of hegemony – leading the skilled activity of different social groups – that would make (b) and hence (a) possible. At the heart of these challenges, there lie emergent structures of radical needs and capacities, and the transformative potential of a movement project lies in the goal of realising these structures.

The anti-capitalist movement is a good example of a social movement project. Erupting with full force in the late 1990s, generating a dramatic anti-war movement in the early 2000s, finding new life in anti-austerity struggles from Iceland to Greece in the late 2000s and now underpinning much of the Occupy! movement, it is the outcome of a long process of collaboration and communication between campaigns and the militant particularist struggles organised through these campaigns, going back to the early 1990s.⁵⁹ In this process, 'particular struggles came to be understood in terms of a more general set of interconnections between problems and movements worldwide'.⁶⁰ Slogans such as 'Another World is Possible', 'Peoples of Europe rise up' or 'We are the 99 percent' highlight this sense of a shared (if complex) 'we' and insist that ways of socially organising needs and capacities outside the logics of neoliberal capitalism are within reach.

59. See Wilkin 2000; Broad and Heckscher 2003.

60. Gill 2000, p. 138.

This marks a clear rupture *vis-à-vis* the initial forms of protest against neoliberal restructuring, which were essentially defensive in character: strike waves in the global North that sought to restore Keynesian rights and entitlements and IMF riots in the global South that sought to restore the social wage guaranteed in the developmentalist pact between the state and the popular classes.⁶¹ It also marks a rupture *vis-à-vis* many of the single-issue campaigns of the 1990s, which primarily sought to curtail the scope of the project of neoliberal restructuring.⁶²

As activists in the anti-capitalist movement can testify, the trajectories of social movement projects are open-ended. They depend on contingencies such as the forging of more and stronger connections with localised struggles – and thus the capacity for hegemony – as well as its capacity for resilience in the face of opposition from movements from above. However, a social movement project that has developed significant momentum can reasonably be expected to result in the development of a *potentially* revolutionary situation.

Social movements and struggles over historicity

Movements from above and below struggle over historicity⁶³ – that is, they engage and encounter each other in struggles over the direction and form of the development of the social organisation of human needs and capacities. Such struggles occur when movements from below have returned ‘up’ the sequence, from opposing hegemonic routines in localised struggles to opposing the structures from which those routines emerge, and, ultimately, to opposing the movements from above that installed those structures or led the construction of the truce lines within which those structures are entrenched. This process of movement development gives rise to what Gramsci called an ‘organic crisis’:

In every country the process is different, although the content is the same. And the content is the crisis of the ruling class’s hegemony, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of the broad masses... or because huge masses... have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution. A ‘crisis of authority’ is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the state.⁶⁴

61. Walton and Seddon 1994.

62. Broad and Hecksher 2003.

63. Touraine 1981.

64. Gramsci 1998, p. 210.

It is not – or rarely – the case that revolutionary movements from below independently launch a war of manoeuvre against a beleaguered, passive, decaying order which is capable of little more than a defensive response to the challenge from below (although there are moments, such as 1789 and 1917, when a ruling order is just this feeble). As Hall⁶⁵ notes, such defensive responses from dominant groups are insufficient in an organic crisis, where “the lower classes” *do not want* to live in the old way and the “upper classes” *cannot carry on in the old way*.⁶⁶ In this context, the restoration of hegemony requires a ‘formative’ effort – in the terms suggested above, an offensive movement strategy from above. Thatcherism represented one such response in the context of the collapse of Keynesianism, to the double pressure of movements from below and economic crisis.⁶⁷

Thus, organic crises and their trajectory are typically shaped not simply by movements from below, but also by offensive movements from above, led by fractions of dominant groups taking aim at social structures marked by the past victories of movements from below and which constrain dominant groups. They typically seek to disaggregate movements from below and construct new alliances around a distinct movement-project of their own.

At the heart of such a scenario lies the suspension of those ‘truce lines’ handed down from past rounds of movement struggles, and thus also the eruption of the antagonisms and contradictions that they held in check. New terrains of struggle open up, in which movements from above and below vie for command over the direction of imminent systemic changes, or seek to prevent these changes from happening in the first place.

To give two examples, as briefly as possible: if, as Lash and Urry and Wainwright propose,⁶⁸ Keynesianism was undermined not simply by a generalised financial and legitimisation crisis,⁶⁹ but also by the rise of labour struggles, movements against private patriarchy and the uprising of oppressed ethnic groups from Alabama to Belfast – then the crisis was ultimately resolved by the previously marginal New Right welding together elite defectors from the old alliance around the economic project of neoliberalism and popular groups willing to be organised in terms of a new kind of right-wing populism.⁷⁰

While organic crises are, by definition, radically contingent, it is clear that, as particular movements come to gain hegemony through partial or total victories, the space of contention will be narrowed down through a dynamic of

65. Hall 1983.

66. Lenin 1920, p. 54.

67. Hall 1983.

68. Lash and Urry 1987; Wainwright 1994.

69. Offe 1985a.

70. Harvey 2005; Overbeek 1990.

'path-dependency', where developing social changes take a direction that closes off or crowds out other possibilities.

As a provisional guideline, we might suggest that movement projects from below that reach some kind of provisional hegemony are able to produce a revolutionary situation (naturally, the outcome is contingent); movement projects from below that are 'disarmed' through accommodative responses from above tend to lead to significant reformist change, while the basic structures of the society 'return to normalcy', at least for a time; and a successful offensive social movement from above leads to significant modifications in favour of dominant social groups, reversing restraints on their power.

What factors make it likely that a situation of organic crisis will have an outcome in line with the ambitions and aspirations of social movements from below? The first and foremost factor is that subaltern struggles need to be *developed* from militant particularism to campaigns, and from campaigns to movement project – and in ways that are in line with local rationalities from below. Constructing a movement in this way entails continuing the project of articulating local rationalities from the specific and local to the specific and national or transnational, and, ultimately, to target the system as a whole in the name of an alternative way of 'doing society'. It is clear that, short of revolutionary situations, such 'counter-hegemony' can only be limited, incipient, and partial.

Nevertheless, in situations where (as at present) the old order is unable to come up with a plan B, despite its manifest incapacity to fulfil the promises on which the consent of its allies and passive supporters lie – in relation to economic crisis, geopolitical rule or, indeed, rising tides – it is in the development of popular consensus around a radically different approach that societies can change direction. In some ways, the only real question is whether this consensus will be shaped from below, or from above by some horrendous new populism or fascism whose contours are not yet visible.

If we want to remain true to the local rationalities that motivate our particular and general struggles against the social order we are in, our job is thus to find ways of agreeing a direction more consistent with these rationalities – a 'social movement project' that can gain sufficient consent to win out when it matters. In this situation, what Marxism brings is the sedimented learning of earlier periods when militant particularisms developed into movement projects that shook the Earth, dethroned kings, sent empires packing and forced the construction of welfare states – and the awareness that the present order is not written in stone, but is a precarious truce line, capable not only of neoliberal restoration but also of the creation of a new kind of world.