

**Mastaneh Shah-Shuja**

**Zones of proletarian development**

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**Reviewed by Laurence Cox**

On one reading, Marxism is (or should be) centrally concerned with social movement(s): as the self-activity of working-class people, a source of alternative ways of seeing the world, and a powerful force for progressive social change. In a decade when a global cycle of resistance to neo-liberal economics and neo-conservative geopolitics has arguably been instrumental in disrupting elite strategies, a Marxist perspective on social movements is particularly welcome. If Mastaneh Shah-Shuja's *Zones of proletarian development* is ultimately a failure, the attempt is still worth making.

The book has attracted interest for its application of dialogical theorists such as Volosinov and Bakhtin with the work of Vygotsky and cultural-historical activity theory to the subject. In this it parallels work by Collins (2008) and by Krinsky and Barker (forthcoming), who argue that these approaches have much to offer Marxist theories of collective agency.

*Zones of proletarian development* uses a particular synthesis of these concepts to analyse the London May Day events of 1999 – 2003, Iranian football riots in 2002, the poll tax riot and the London anti-war protest of February 2003. In the process it develops a theory of how people develop in struggle, as well as practical prescriptions for organisation, drawing on Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' - the space within which dialectical learning takes place.

Two things get in the way. One is the substitution of abuse for analysis. Activists and theorists alike are routinely tried and found wanting in rigour or radicalism on the basis of adjectives rather than critique. Politically and theoretically this produces an ultra-sectarianism in which virtually everyone else is condemned; thus, for example, 'the overwhelming majority of Anarchists are as intellectually

vacuous, disgusting, dishonest and anti-working class as their Leninist counterparts' (p. 270).

The decisions involved seem arbitrary: if (on p. 41) 'the proletariat constitutes the overwhelming majority section of society (everywhere)', nevertheless on a monster demonstration such as the London anti-war protest of February 15 2003 it is 'difficult to know what proportion of the protestors were proletarians as opposed to petty bourgeois' (p. 199).

Thus authentic radicals and proletarians are a kind of silent majority, restricted to acts of carnival, riot and graffiti and needing an interpreter; almost everyone who holds any theoretical position or organises politically is dismissed as bourgeois if not worse.

This does not stop the author from using some extremely bourgeois authors when they suit her theory-building (or, one suspects, her PhD thesis). Again, this is arbitrary: for example, the leading writers on British riots (Bagguley and Hussain; e.g. 2008) are ignored. More generally, lip service is paid to the concept of social movement, but with little or no awareness of existing work.

A second problem is the belief that theoretical sophistication consists of the endless deployment of concepts, distinctions, levels and typologies, with the net result that individual concepts are rarely made to do any real work. Typically, they are used to provide a theoretical gloss to a particular event and then replaced in turn by a new set of concepts. EP Thompson's comments on this kind of theorising (1977) are apt (p. 189's diagram of 'Poll tax riot as activity system' is reminiscent of his parody).

This leads to an idealism expressed in statements such as 'one of the main reasons revolutionaries have failed to say much of significance in recent times is their inattentiveness to matters methodological' (p. 29) – not, for example, the twin effects of the rise of neoliberalism and the collapse of most of the historical left.

These two barriers will probably prevent most readers from finishing the book, which is a pity, because it does contain some genuine insights which could have

been usefully stated with less sound and fury and more concern for communication and cooperation.

Most notably, social movements *are* spaces of learning (as authors such as Eyerman and Jamison (1991) have long noted). In particular, working-class movements, which do not control the intellectual means of production, create radically different kinds of knowledge (see e.g. Wainwright 1994).

In this context, Shah-Shuja's use of Vygotsky has something to say (in essence, people learn collectively, through practice, in struggle). She is also correct to argue that radical organisation should try to ground itself in these processes rather than adopt 'the master's tools'. The discussion of 'knotworking' as a process of alliance and learning, for example, is potentially valuable.

Unfortunately, while it suits the argument at this point (pp. 90 – 91) to celebrate the coming together of single-issue campaigns, cooperation between multiple anti-globalisation groups and the emergence of grassroots media, elsewhere the same processes are roundly abused (e.g. p. 212, pp 259-60) with no apparent sense of contradiction.

Shah-Shuja rightly stresses the need for revolutionary organisations to link 'the dead labour of past generations embedded in tools, the immediate or everyday activities and needs of proletarians and the long-term goals and desires of the social movement' (p. 295). But an analysis that says this in the middle of one of the largest outpourings of bottom-up organisation for decades, only to dismiss virtually all such forms of organisation as the internalisation of bourgeois control, expresses a superiority complex which could usefully engage in more dialogue and less prescription.

Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain (2008) *Riotous citizens: ethnic conflict in multicultural Britain*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Chik Collins (2008) 'Discourse in cultural-historical perspective', in Bert van Oers, Ed Elbers, Willem Wardekker (eds.), *The transformation of learning: perspectives from activity theory*. Cambridge: CUP.

Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Social movements*. Cambridge: Polity.

John Krinsky and Colin Barker (forthcoming) 'Movement strategy as developmental learning', in Hank Johnston (ed.), *Culture, protest and social movements*. Farnham: Ashgate.

EP Thompson (1977) *The poverty of theory and other essays*. London: Merlin.

Hilary Wainwright (1994) *Arguments for a new left*. Oxford: Blackwell.

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