



Pedagogy from and for Social Movements: A Conversation Between Theory and Practice

Laurence Cox

To cite this article: Laurence Cox (2019) Pedagogy from and for Social Movements: A Conversation Between Theory and Practice, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 30:1, 70-88, DOI: [10.1080/10455752.2017.1360373](https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1360373)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1360373>



Published online: 08 Aug 2017.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 367



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 1 [View citing articles](#)



Pedagogy from and for Social Movements: A Conversation Between Theory and Practice

Laurence Cox 

Department of Sociology, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Maynooth, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Much radical writing on academia is grounded in a mystified view of knowledge in which an ecosocialist pedagogy would be “theory from above.” This article argues for a different understanding of knowledge as materially situated in social and ecological relationships; oriented towards practice; developmental and contested from below, demystifying third-level education from the perspective of movement-generated knowledge. Concretely, this means starting from participants’ existing praxis and “learning from each other’s struggles”—using “frozen” movement theory and activist experience—to move towards a wider, more radical understanding. In Ireland such pedagogy is rooted in working-class community self-organising, rural environmental justice alliances, women’s and GLTBQ activism, and the anti-capitalist “movement of movements,” encapsulating Audre Lorde’s dictum, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” The article focusses in particular on a “Masters for activists.” The course supports movement participants to deepen and develop their activist practice but also to situate it within these wider and more radical understandings and emancipatory alliances. Taking movement praxis—rather than “contemplative” knowledge—as a starting point raises very different questions about theory and practice, forms and distribution of knowledge and the purpose and shape of learning.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 22 June 2016; Accepted 26 June 2017

KEYWORDS Social movements; Marxism; learning and knowledge production; popular education; ecosocialism

Thinking Radical Knowledge, Critically

At first sight the idea of an ecosocialist pedagogy is attractive. We are facing a major crisis, perhaps a terminal one, in which the choice between socialism and barbarism seems, if anything, too optimistic. Ecological destruction sharpened to the point of climate change and the horrors of capitalism sharpened to the point of crisis neoliberalism make the point very starkly; patriarchy and the racial world order are among other obvious dimensions of the

CONTACT Laurence Cox  laurence.cox@nuim.ie

© 2017 The Center for Political Ecology

problem, which calls for a far-reaching response. Is ecosocialist pedagogy that response?

My doubts as—a Marxist involved in ecological struggles and radical pedagogy—can be expressed by laying out one (perhaps slightly caricatured) “ideal type” of what ecosocialist pedagogy might mean in practice. In this ideal type university posts are secured on the basis of possessing a complex theory of social structure, which is ecosocialist in that it seeks to relate a theory of capitalism to a theory of nature in a way that is understood as politically radical. From this theory, a pedagogy is deduced and transmitted to (primarily) advanced undergraduates, taught postgraduates and PhD students. From there a social movement can be built to bring about the radical change needed to overthrow not only capitalism but class society itself, while creating a new and sustainable relationship between human beings and their natural context.

Of course, this perspective (and variants associated with other radical positions within academia) is rarely expressed so openly. It is not easy to hold consciously for anyone who remembers Marx’s third thesis on Feuerbach:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by human beings and that it is essential to educate the educator themselves. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*. (Marx [1845] 2000, 172, emphasis in original)¹

Stated baldly, then, such an “ecosocialist pedagogy” is a thoroughly idealist proposition, implying ideas as the motive force in social change; and it abstracts from the actual social relationships of academia: Where is the necessary army of ecosocialist pedagogues to come from? How can they transmit ideas for action within the realities of the neoliberal university? Why would it makes sense to begin with advanced university students when trying to change the world? As the Irish farmer said to the tourist seeking directions, “I wouldn’t start from here if I were you.”

Nonetheless the *practice* of many radicals within the university follows this kind of model far more closely than *theorising* on the subject might suggest; and the kinds of conversations which articulate practical consciousness suggest that it is rather closer to the common sense of many academic radicals than are the articulated views of a relatively small number of consciously radical *pedagogues*. Does this special issue, then, provide apologetic cover for a more conservative practical reality?

¹I have edited the translation to reflect the fact that Marx writes *Menschen*, “human beings,” not *Männer*, “men” as in this 1969 translation.

Theory from Above and Below

In a justly famous piece, Hal Draper contrasted the “socialism from above” of (then) Stalinists and social democrats—two forms of political organisation which have substantially collapsed in most of the world in the subsequent 50 years—with the practice of “socialism from below”:

What unites the many different forms of Socialism-from-Above is the conception that socialism (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) must be *handed down* to the grateful masses in one form or another, by a ruling elite which is not subject to their control in fact. The heart of Socialism-from-Below is its view that socialism can be realized only through the self-emancipation of activated masses in motion, reaching out for freedom with their own hands, mobilized “from below” in a struggle to take charge of their own destiny, as actors (not merely subjects) on the stage of history. “The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves”: this is the first sentence in the Rules written for the First International by Marx, and this is the First Principle of his lifework. (Draper 1966, 4, emphasis in original)

So, too, I want to suggest, we can think of “theory from above,” handed down to the (in practice rarely grateful!) masses by a theoretical elite who have captured the “commanding heights” of the intellectual system—and “theory from below” growing out of the process of popular self-emancipation, located elsewhere, in the dialogical processes of articulating the tacit knowledge of subaltern groups which constitute much social movement activity (Wainwright 1994).

This contrast resembles Gramsci’s distinction between “traditional” and “organic” intellectuals—if we recall that his organic intellectuals are not only, or mostly, organic to the working class but are in (logically) greater and more systematic measure the organic intellectuals of new *dominant* classes:

The capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organizers of a new culture, of a new legal system etc. (Gramsci [1929–1935] 1999, 135)

Another way of putting this contrast is between *social movement* and *academic* intellectual relationships (Barker and Cox [2001] 2011): those shaped within the process of popular self-emancipation and those shaped within the process of academic credentialisation, appointment and reproduction. In this sense the idealist position sketched out above draws its real force not from a *theory* of ecosocialist pedagogy but from the dull compulsion of academic routine, common sense and necessity suggested by a labour process theory of knowledge (Young 1979). As Thompson puts it,

It takes a large effort to rid ourselves of these assumptions, because they lie at an inaccessible level within our own intellectual culture—indeed, they belong to the very institutions and disciplines with which we construct that culture ... (1993, xiii)

Movement Knowledge in the Academy

One aspect of the problem, then, is the social relations involved in different kinds of pedagogy; and the critique above would be shared by many who primarily identify with radical (Freirean, popular education, community education etc.) *pedagogy*: what is central is the sociology of knowledge “at the point of production,” to follow Young’s labour process metaphor. However, there is another aspect to the problem, which is *content*.

In the 1970s ecosocialists disagreed strongly with Stalinists and Social Democrats, who held that “technology is neutral and what matters are the relationships of production”—a position intended to justify nuclear power stations in the teeth of popular protest. Ecosocialists called for a radical sociology of knowledge (associated with developments ranging from alternative production in occupied factories to Indian “citizen science” and from feminist research on domestic violence to mobilising counter-expertise against environmental destruction). By analogy, a critical sociology of radical knowledge cannot simply ask about the relationships of production, the pedagogical aspect: they also need to ask about the “technology,” the substance of what is taught as ecosocialist.

In many parts of the world, the period after the world-revolutionary moment of 1968 (or what was hoped to be such) saw a wholesale transfer of social movement activists and theories into the academy.² Marxists and feminists, followed by black and queer studies, activists from the ecology movement (less straightforwardly) and radical educators now had to make their professional homes here. In their new contexts the production of theory was increasingly separated from the social movements within which it had originated. Or rather, such movements were not always available as points of reference, and when they were the efforts put into maintaining and deepening such relationships regularly conflicted with the efforts radical academics needed to make to assert themselves and their own bodies of theory within an often unwelcoming university.

I do not mean this as a personal attack on others in circumstances which I share, and which are not mostly of our own making; but it is important to acknowledge the reality, most powerfully visible in the case of Marxism. In the period when “socialism from above” was a powerful reality controlling many states in the then Fordist West, state-socialist East and national-developmental South, and major parties and trade unions elsewhere, a typical Marxist intellectual held a formal role within such a state, party or union, wrote for movement-linked periodicals and publishers and had to consider the relationship between their theoretical positions and the strategic choices made by movement actors.

²This was particularly true in the US and UK, which dominate present-day academic production and share a history of early and thorough neoliberal defeats of popular movements.

Today the primary contexts within which Marxist intellectual work takes place are much more likely to be universities and—for a lucky few—a kind of capitalist celebrity publishing. This is not to dismiss the continuing survival of movement-owned “means of intellectual production,” often kept alive against ferocious odds, or the personal commitment of many Marxists to dialogue with movements: it is to note that it is no longer *movements* that are the primary shaper of Marxist theoretical production as an everyday practice. The same is true for other radical, movement-derived forms of theorising.

The Elective Affinities of Theory from Above and Academic Knowledge Production

This historical experience has practical implications. Social movements arguably engage in three kinds of cognitive praxis (Eyerman and Jamison 1991), or educational moments (O’Sullivan 1999). Without fully subscribing to either analysis, this is sufficient to map out three key dimensions of theory: (1) cosmological/critique of existing structures; (2) organisational/resistance and (3) technological/the creation of new kinds of institution.

It is a common critique of socialism from above that—as the “1919 moment” of council-centred revolution faded across the global North—the creation of new kinds of institutions was increasingly relegated to the dimension of “utopia,” to the point that such socialisms had little if any dialogue with the new popular institutions created in 1968, either west or east of the Iron Curtain. So too the dimension of organising effective resistance became at best increasingly defensive or at worst (in 1968, Althusser’s PCF and the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia) actively repressed by socialisms which were now firmly opposed to popular uprisings in practice. Socialism from above, then, privileged above all else cosmology, the critique of existing (capitalist) structures.

There was an elective affinity between this reduction of Marxism to the critique of political economy and the logic of the academy into which many ex-activists moved as Marxist parties became increasingly hard to sustain. It is not to underestimate the actual difficulties involved to say that it was and is, in 1977 or 2017, far more common to be (say) a Marxist sociologist of *class structure* than a Marxist sociologist of *revolution* or even a Marxist sociologist of *alternative institutions*. Structure, even understood critically, has a propositional form which makes it easy to analyse outside of actual relationships with movements. Conversely, in teaching the sociology of revolutions perhaps the hardest pedagogical challenge is helping students grasp the *first-person and collective* situation of what it means to be a practical actor in situations where the stakes are the highest, the learning curve is ferocious and the situation is constantly shifting.

Marx's observation that "The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*" (2005, emphasis in original) does not lend itself easily to lecture halls and exams. But beyond this, structure is *serious*, it has to do with economics, states, policy, formal institutions, culture and social theory of a kind which—however critical—can far more easily be defended and advanced within the right academic context. As the editors of a recent collection (Fillieule and Accornero 2016) note, one of the reasons why there are so few full-time social movement scholars in Europe—although movements have shaped and reshaped Europe, from democratic, nationalist and socialist movements via the struggle for welfare states or against fascism to feminism, gay liberation, ecological struggles and today's anti-capitalist and anti-austerity movements—is that the study of popular *agency* (organisation/resistance in the terms above) struggles to make headway within universities which have no problem employing specialists in the analysis of *structure*, be they Marxist, feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial, ecological or queer theorists.³

This is not a complaint or a plea for the neoliberal university to employ more social movement scholars (we would have to wonder why it would do so, or why a conservative version of social movement studies is so much more acceptable in US academia today than are its European counterparts; Flesher Fominaya and Cox 2013); it is an observation that the theoretical expressions of socialism from above—a focus on structure rather than popular agency in either its resistant or creative modes—found an elective affinity with the university into which they largely moved during the neoliberal period; and that the experience which I have sketched out here in relation to Marxism was shared *mutatis mutandis* by other forms of critical theory.

A False Leap

We then have a problem. Theories of structure (for example, those relating capitalism and ecological crisis) can survive in both forms of top-down environment (socialism from above and conventional academia). We might say, following Marx, that this gives them a "contemplative" form, one not structurally linked to praxis. Alternatively, and more strongly, we might say that they are linked to a different kind of praxis—the logics of top-down knowledge production—but typically not explicitly self-reflexive about this. (It is not that no such theorists have written on this, but that most do not. In this sense such theories are becoming part of "traditional" intellectual

³As Judith Watson observes (personal communication), this pedagogical focus on constraining structures contrasts with academic management's focus on "enabling change" in top-down ways.

activity, which understands itself as *supra partes*, above the fray, a natural historical development.) Partly as a result of this history and the focus on structure/cosmology which it prioritises, we regularly arrive at (say) a notion of ecosocialism centred around the relationship between two forms of analysis *of structure*. This is not unique to ecosocialism: the same could be said for some kinds of ecofeminism, socialist feminism, race and class studies, and so on. The theoretical link is routinely made at the level of *structural analysis*, combining one dimension of structure (capitalism, gender, race, ecology, etc.) with another. This is not always true but it is certainly the normal mode of procedure, following the idealist logic sketched out above.

This approach is clearly one-sided: it separates out a contemplative relationship to structural analysis as the privileged basis for a radical analysis of structure. My criticism, however, goes beyond this: it is that an unwarranted jump is then made from this structural analysis to a theory (or pedagogy) which is supposed to generate or enable combined *movements*. If, in the top-down analysis, the root of working-class struggle and the driving force of socialism are really contained in the structural critique of political economy, then surely by combining these with a structural critique of human relationships to nature we can arrive at an ecosocialist movement, through university-based pedagogy?

I am not convinced. In what follows I will argue for a model of “theory from below” contrasting with this “theory from above” approach; and that if we are to arrive at a theory which is capable of becoming “a material force” that “seizes the masses” (Marx [1843–1844] 1977, 77) this needs not only to arise from those masses but to be a theory of their own self-emancipation, that is a theory of *popular agency*. We cannot, through theory or pedagogy, convert our interrelationship of two structural issues into the interrelationship of two dimensions of popular agency; just as we have known since Gramsci that the problems of politics cannot be reduced to the problems of economics.⁴

The brief sketch above is intended to indicate some of the elements of a critical sociology of radical knowledge that enables reflection on a different kind of radical pedagogy (see also Kapoor and Choudry 2010; Hall et al. 2012). This starts not from an attempt to combine theories of structure but from *political* relationships between actually existing ecological and class-oriented movements (and others). It is therefore centrally concerned with the analysis of agency and the attempt to relate these two kinds of movements, and thus constitutes a pedagogy “from and for movements.” For similar reasons it is not grounded in an abstract theory of pedagogy isolated

⁴This was brought home to the members of the Second and Third Internationals in the most brutal way, by the rise of fascism out of economic crisis. The point of Gramsci’s politics was precisely that socialism was not inevitable—but neither was fascism: it was important to understand the process of collective agency, and not only in its positive aspects.

from wider political struggles but in empirical research and analysis of movements' own learning and knowledge production⁵.

The next section explores some of the characteristics of such theory from below, focussing on alliances between movements rather than on relationships between theories. It does this in the context of Irish experiences over the last three decades, grounded in particular in relationships between environmental justice movements and class-based forms of “socialism from below,” but also in their relationship to other movements, notably feminism. The third section explores a specific element of this movement in the attempt to articulate and practice such movement-based pedagogies within the university in the form of a taught MA course from and for activists, and articulates some of the principles deriving from this.

It should be clear that the circumstances of Irish movements and those of this particular MA cannot be easily reproduced, and my purpose is not to present some new model to follow. Rather, it is to encourage critical reflection on the social relations within which our own learning and knowledge production—and hence also pedagogy—take place. Perhaps at the risk of over-accentuating the contrasts, it also highlights something of the different choices involved. My goal is to encourage a stronger political reflection on the relationship between knowledge and social movements, and more explicit discussion of our own purposes in our own radical pedagogical contexts.

Theory from Below

What, then, might “theory from below” look like in this sort of context? I do not want to counterpose an entirely agency-centred form of movement-based theory to an entirely structurally based form of academic theory. As noted above, structuralist theories in academia predominate primarily because of academic logics, and struggle within academia can hold other kinds of spaces open (although this is not helped when structural analysis is identified with radical analysis *tout court*). Furthermore, social movement theorising proceeds along multiple dimensions: if it did not include cosmological critiques of structure, it is unlikely that academic Marxism or feminism could have come into being; and in periods of close relationship between movements and states much the same elective affinity prioritises structuralist forms of movement theorising. In present-day Ireland, for example, NGOs

⁵I have learned a lot from colleagues who are formally trained in radical education and refer to relevant literature as appropriate. However, my own interests lie in the analysis of learning and knowledge production processes *within movements* (e.g. Conway 2006). Research here typically has a somewhat different focus, paying more attention to the social conditions of learning (the nature of particular struggles, the role of knowledge within the movement etc.) at the expense of the specifics of classroom techniques and normative educational theories. There are of course substantial overlaps (e.g. Mayo 1999), but my interest here (as suits an *ecosocialist* pedagogy) is in the *collective* practice of pedagogy or self-education and the social relationships within which this takes place.

with close links to power and an orientation towards seeking state funding and insider roles tend not to mention the dirty realities of agency but rather emphasise the structural horrors which they claim to be able to avert without upsetting the powerful. At other times the technological moment, or the creation of alternative institutions for a new kind of society, may predominate (consider, for example, the Chartist land schemes: Thompson 1984, ch. 12).

However, no social movement worth the name has ever been able to operate without a theory of its own agency, however distorted: to understand oneself as part of a developing collective agent is central to the process of popular self-emancipation, and a prerequisite for winning against determined opposition. The dimension of praxis—in the sense of a close relationship between theory and (radical, collective, popular) action—is therefore particularly important.

Two other general things can be said about theory from below. Firstly, it is necessarily *situated*, articulating the “local rationalities” (Cox and Nilsen 2014) of particular social positions and struggles, even if it then develops in order to grasp relationships between those situations and others. This contrasts not only with bird’s-eye views of theory from above but also with a politics of pure opinion rooted in academic privilege whose one-upmanship is grounded in the demand that other people’s positions encompass one’s own—rather than in a starting position of practical solidarity that seeks to *construct* links between different situated processes of struggle and reflection, without denying or ignoring conflict and inequalities.

Secondly, theory from below is *developmental*: popular agents do not and cannot *start* from totality (or the imagined versions thereof that theory from above seeks to possess) but rather they can reach towards it systematically, as the attempt to change one issue reveals other issues and relationships and we realise that our liberation is bound up in one another’s.⁶

Post-colonial Environmental Justice Struggles

To discuss theory from below, therefore, we are necessarily exploring specific “social movement landscapes” (Cox 2016), that is, the characteristic patterns of movement development, alliances and oppositions which shape who talks to whom about what in a given city, country or global region, and which thus structure the development of movements’ theoretical discourses, both in their more articulated public forms and their more everyday, “good sense” forms. We are also necessarily considering history, since the development of movements and alliances, their defeats and victories, and the formation of new

⁶For a recent Marxist analysis along these lines see De Smet (2015).

kinds of alliance shape not only what is thought within movements, but also what is taught or caught in their formal training and informal socialisation processes.

To combine Foucault and Gramsci for a moment, we need a genealogy of “good sense” tied to a concrete analysis of particular historical conjunctures. This is of course not different from the *real* situation of academic theory from above. The difficulty is that claims for academic status, and the shape of theory from above more generally, are more typically threatened by a genuinely critical sociology of knowledge which situates one’s own form of theorising in time, place and social situation—one of the more acute contradictions regularly faced by academic Marxism, given the tradition’s emphasis on this particular point.

A post-colonial sociology of movement knowledge in Ireland is yet to be written, but Tovey’s (1992) useful opposition between “official” and “populist” environmentalism presents useful starting points and has been taken up in different forms by several authors (Leonard 2008; Allen and Jones [1990] 2009). Briefly, elite forms of environmentalism, proceeding from a technocratic notion of knowledge and allied to state actors, have used officially acceptable forms of action to advance particular goals which could be mainstreamed within the policy first of a national-developmental and subsequently of a neoliberal state. Conversely, we have a long history of popular (often but not only rural) forms of environmental justice struggles which have sought to resist developments threatening their own forms of life and to wrest control of the development process to what they often present as the real meaning of national independence, perverted by the actually existing state (for other postcolonial contexts see Nilsen 2016).

In this perspective, the practical social meaning of “ecosocialism” in Ireland has been found in the encounter between the grassroots environmental struggles of the disadvantaged, which are often (but not always) place-based⁷ and class-based forms of organising. The struggles in question run from the 1970s to the present, from Ireland’s almost uniquely successful resistance to nuclear power via opposition to rural chemical plants, struggles over incinerators, resistance to Shell’s pipeline in Mayo, and today’s anti-fracking. Their theoretical reflections stretch back to the 1980s and 1990s, with Goodwillie’s (1988) “Colours in the Rainbow” and the journal *An Caorthann*, both associated with the attempt to ground an ecosocialist analysis in an alliance between movements along the lines of the early West German Green Party.

Comparable relationships exist between the practice of working-class women’s community activism, the decades-long left support for feminism

⁷For example, resistance to nuclear power was not led by local actors, given the far wider geographical threat and the longer history of radioactive pollution from the Windscale/Sellafield plant across the Irish Sea.

and gay/lesbian liberation around legal rights (around contraception, decriminalisation, divorce, abortion and gay marriage) and socialist feminist or queer-left conversations. Some individuals and organisations might be said to embody these relationships between struggles around gender and sexuality and those around class. They often set the tone of discussion and action when (as around abortion rights) the state is hostile. Conversely, when (as recently around marriage equality) the state takes on what was once a movement demand as part of its modernising project, these awkward voices, resisting the narrowing of movement agendas and insisting on radical connections, are often pushed to the margins.

Such relationships are not permanent achievements. At the level of movements they are partial and intermittent but repeatedly remade, with alternations between periods of fragmentation (at times because of defeat, at times because of co-option) and periods where different groups “join the dots” in similar ways and work towards a bigger picture (Cox and Nilsen 2014).

Developing Alliances and Pedagogies

A particular moment of conscious, movement-based attempts to develop these alliances between movements and theories was represented by the cycle of struggles which in Ireland included Zapatista solidarity in the second half of the 1990s, the anti-capitalist “movement of movements” and anti-war movement in the early 2000s, resistance to the previously mentioned Shell pipeline and the development of anti-austerity struggles from the later 2000s, notably in the massive and radical popular opposition to water charges (where connections both to fracking and to the TTIP trade treaty have been widely made).

Here two sets of popular pedagogical practices have been particularly important. One was the development of a radical form of working-class community organising in the 1970s and 1980s, drawing from returned development workers and solidarity activists inspired by Freirean or liberation theology practices (e.g. Hope and Timmel 1984; Horton and Freire 1990), but equally from the defection of members of state-centric socialist, republican and feminist organisations to the practice of bottom-up local activism. This thread has been central in urban resistance to incinerators or, more recently, to water charges. It has intertwined with the much smaller but immensely determined role of the anarchist tradition,⁸ which was key to the formation of Irish Zapatista solidarity activism, the Grassroots Gatherings which linked a wide range of anti-capitalist struggles (Finnegan and Cox 2007), and alliance politics around opposition to Shell.⁹

⁸In particular, the anarchist Workers’ Solidarity Movement, whose website constitutes the single best resource for studying contemporary radical movements in Ireland: <http://www.wsm.ie/collections>.

In many ways the tension between the two is a productive one: the insistence in working-class women's community education on "starting where people are" and grounding itself in their lived experience has at times meant a self-limiting refusal of challenging forms of cultural radicalism. Conversely, Irish anarchism can have its vanguardist tendencies. Yet more important than either apparent theoretical sin is the shared *political* virtue of openness to new struggles and the willingness to make connections across issues, a practice of solidarity and generosity of spirit which has led to consistently new conversations and questions.

Theory from below, then, around environmental justice struggles such as that against Shell, but also more generally, is most strongly rooted in the practice of alliance-formation, or (in an older Marxist language) of "popular fronts from below." In other words, it entails the development of real alliances between ordinary participants in different movements rather than the top-down construction of "platforms" with "one of everything." The experience of shared action—for different reasons but in a common context around a common issue—is anything but straightforward (Ó Donnabháin 2014) but provides a material touchstone for the development of theory and pedagogy which has to *work*, in the sense of enabling a deepening of alliances and an inclusion of new actors. In the following section, I discuss an attempt to formalise some of the practices derived from these experiences within a context situated precariously between movements and academia.

Movement Pedagogy and an Activist MA?

Here I want to discuss briefly the experience of attempting to develop such agency-oriented theories from below across multiple movements in the context of the MA in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism at the National University of Ireland Maynooth.¹⁰ Between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s virtually all Irish movements¹¹ engaged heavily in "partnership," a combination of state funding and co-optation that induced a particularist competition between issues and organisations in order to maximise access to funding and policy-making. In the economic crash the state increasingly attacked these same arrangements. Academic activists influenced by the two movement pedagogies mentioned above founded the course to support activists (re)thinking their own practice in this fundamentally changed situation.

The course is a practitioner Masters, structurally similar to courses in professional fields from architecture to nursing in that it is organised around a

⁹On the wider pedagogical background see Marcos 2002 and Conway 2011.

¹⁰Aspects of this experience are also discussed in Cox (2014a, 2015) from other perspectives.

¹¹Including labour, women's, GLTBQ, environmental, anti-racist and community development; the only significant exceptions are the anti-war and republican movements.

field of social practice rather than an academic discipline. Thus, its goal could not be academic career progression (a very minority choice for participants), but neither, given the crisis of partnership and hence the decimation of funded employment opportunities, could it be straightforward job training.¹² Instead, the underlying organisational question of the course is to help existing movement participants (whether professionals or not) work out in practice what the future shape of Irish movements will be.

In line with the positions sketched out earlier, the course starts from an affirmation of participants' own (partial, limited) understanding and skills as movement activists and popular educators as representing the real state of knowledge of movements – rather than, as is typically attempted in Ireland, starting from an academic overview of “the structures,” “the problems” or “the policy framework.” The core module—“Community of praxis”—is structured as a collectively organised space in which students articulate their own practice and learn from each other's, but also reflect critically on the course as a whole (though, as might be expected, participants engage actively and critically in all aspects of the course, as well as participating politically in conflicts within and beyond the university).¹³

Popular agency, then, is central; but the point is not simply to celebrate this (although articulating existing understandings and practices clearly is an important starting point for their development). From a popular education perspective, if we “start where people are”—in this case as already politically mobilised subjects—the goal is not to leave them there but to support them in deepening and radicalising their political practice. This is not primarily achieved via a perspective which “transcends” theirs, derived from traditional intellectual activity, but rather via the articulation of the perspectives “immanent” in their movements and communities, reflection on where problems and limits are encountered and where they come from, and encounters with other movements facing different aspects of what are nonetheless interlinked forms of exploitation, oppression and cultural hierarchies. The goal is then to articulate the “good sense” grounded in subordinate experiences further, as against hegemonic “common sense” (Gramsci 1999).

A “movement of movements” perspective tackles this same challenge from the other end, starting by bringing together people active in different movements on the shared ground of struggles for change, working from this to “naming that system” not as detached analysis but as a process of alliance-

¹²The course is run over two consecutive days to allow for work and caring responsibilities. Participants include employees (often on a part-time or contract basis) in movement organisations, activists who are either unemployed or hold a “day job” unconnected to their activism, and those in continuing education. Some participants improve their employment situation in movement contexts as a result of the course, but this is not its primary focus.

¹³See Cox (2014b, 335–337) for discussion of how one student project found itself at the centre of national controversy over policing and gender.

building,¹⁴ and beyond this expanding one's own sense of one's own position and struggle not only through its articulation but also through "learning from each other's struggles."

These two movement pedagogies are present in the room both in the teaching staff's political history and intellectual training in popular education or the movement of movements, and in students who have either come from these movements or been influenced by them in their own organising practice. There is necessarily a strong and persistent zone of turbulence in the encounter between the two, and a different kind of conversation as students from movement traditions more influenced by social partnership or leftist vanguardism engage with these more democratic forms of structuring.

Part of the strength of both community activist and "movement of movements" pedagogies here is their openness to multiple starting points in terms of personal experience, social situation and organising practice, so that *alliance formation*, or what in earlier generations might have been understood as part of a "popular front from below," is a central pedagogical process. As against the practice of "popular fronts from above" (alliances constructed by organisational leaderships around shared platforms, mutually agreed slogans etc.), this is about overcoming the particularisms and niche subcultures reinforced by neoliberalism even within movements, through spending long periods of time working together with people who are not "easy allies" and coming to understand their language and practices, and beneath these again the experiences and needs that drive them.

The goal, then, within the small space of a year-long course that nevertheless brings together some of the most reflective activists from very different movements, is to contribute to the development of popular collective agency and the self-understanding of its participants in this light. It is important to stress that this is understood in terms of supporting the development of existing movements, not of substituting the university for organising: while some participants engage closely with the course for years afterwards, and close interpersonal connections are often made, this is not the case for everyone, as might be expected given the great diversity of age and movement experience and differing levels of existing movement commitments. What matters is rather what Barker (2014) calls "expansive learning," the ability to understand one's own existing activity in ways that contribute to new forms of collaboration, whether direct (personal and organisational) or indirect (at the level of relationships between movements and communities).

In terms of course content, the central elements are the reflective articulation of one's own activist practice and discussion of others' practice. This is backed up by the study of movements' history of ambiguous success

¹⁴The term "neoliberalism," for example, has been generalised in popular usage in many countries because it makes effective links between different movements and communities.

(questioning assumptions about the road to social change); of popular education practice (as a training in the principles of bottom-up pedagogy and organising); of the complexities of equality and of feminist theory and practice (this last changed from elective to core because of its visibly transformative effect on many participants' self-understanding).

As different movements and communities in struggle are made present in the room, the wider "state of movements" or "movement landscape" becomes an explicit object of reflection, as do some key "moments" (whether the anti-Shell struggle, the Occupy encampments of 2011–2012, the fight for abortion rights or the movement against water charges) that intersect with this landscape and cut across movements. The broadening of alliances produces a need to deepen reflection on one's own understanding, while collective reflection on practice generates a wider understanding of collective popular agency. This is, of course, part of an older "ABC of organising" as understood by generations on the left (Cox 2010).

The universal—or at least the wider—perspective is necessarily found "in the particular," and the final part of the course consists in a research project oriented towards deepening collective practice within one's own movement, often framed in terms of participatory action research around issues that matter to other movement participants and presented in a format which is accessible and meaningful in the contexts it is fed back into. In this way, course participants carry their learning from engaging in a wider "movement of movements" context back into the learning and strategising of their own movements. Thus, rather than generating a contemplative theory of structure that is fundamentally (or even structurally) disembedded from social practice, an "ecosocialist" (and ecofeminist etc.) pedagogy emerges from the bottom up—not with a bird's-eye view that mimicks elite positioning, but as a still-partial, still-situated, developing sense of practice and analysis-for-action.

Taking movement praxis as the starting point, we encounter very different questions about theory and practice, the forms and distribution of knowledge and the purpose and shape of learning. In fact (and by contrast with many purely structural theories), these questions turn out to be central to participants' self-understanding in terms of their praxis as activists, their activities as learners and the nature of their research projects in particular—as well of course as to how those projects are received within their own movements.¹⁵ In this sense the existing learning and knowledge production activities of social movements are both articulated and developed as the guiding principle of a radical pedagogy actively geared to social transformation.

¹⁵An archive of projects is under development.

Conclusion

In the 21st century, if “socialism from above” has largely ceased to exist in its classic forms, there is still a substantial strain of technocratic “doing good by stealth” present in, for example, European social democratic parties. There are of course also nominally Communist parties in or close to power in China, some Indian states or South Africa, by now routinely allied to the interests of capital accumulation. Within academia, the ghosts of the past still walk in nostalgic invocations of the Third International or in the attempt to position social analysis as a handmaiden to benevolent technocracy.

What, then, would socialism—or ecosocialism—from below mean? Not, presumably, a “cookbook for the future” or, worse, what Scott (1998) has called “seeing like a state,” but rather a developing form of popular *practice* which brings together movements of the dispossessed and disadvantaged articulating claims for social justice in struggles around issues of ecological survival. Ecosocialist *pedagogy*, in this perspective, is fundamental to the processes of constructing movements for environmental justice, which (whether or not they use this language) are among some of the most visible conflicts in today’s world. We can identify some elements in the remarkable resistance of First Nations, Native Americans and indigenous groups to tar sands extraction, pipelines and other extractivist projects across the Americas; the practice of building coalitions centred on indigenous populations and bringing together the assertion of indigenous power, discourses of social justice and ecological resistance is a radical form of movement pedagogy.

So too, in Ireland, the process of networking and developing the massive community-based direct action around access to water simultaneously involves a huge upswelling of popular self-education and making intellectual and practical connections to issues of democracy, the European Union, TTIP or struggles against water privatisation elsewhere. This is ecosocialist pedagogy as process: attempting to construct substantive alliances around these multiple groups and issues, on the basis of conversations in struggle between different movements working towards alliance. In this sense ecosocialist pedagogy constitutes not an achieved goal but a step in the right direction of bringing together different forms of popular agency and their associated learning and knowledge production processes. We can bring a similar kind of analysis to, for example, socialist feminism from below.

On a global scale the most important of these learning processes in terms of the scale and range of the movements involved has probably been the anti-capitalist “movement of movements” in its various phases. This has included responding to the Zapatista call for global resistance to neoliberalism on diverse bases, constructing the World Social Forums, morphing into opposition to the “war on terror” in the Middle East, feeding into the dialectic

between movements and radical states in Latin America and now feeding into resistance to austerity in Europe.

In this perspective, the incomplete nature of these “movements of movements” (Sen forthcoming) underlines the way in which an ecosocialist pedagogy from below reflects the incompleteness and limited successes of movement struggles *this side of systemic transformation*. This is a process of attempting to build an alternative popular hegemony, which might be able not just to create an organic crisis for the current hegemonic alliance but also to construct a new world in its place. The project and process are eminently pedagogical, but it is a pedagogy from below, grounded in movements’ own developing self-understanding as collective agents, their sharpening perspective on the opponents they face, their creation of new kinds of alliances and their deepening grasp of the stakes at play in what Touraine (1981) calls the struggle over historicity, the direction of societies’ self-construction.

Ecosocialism from below, then, is constructed not in the process of writing a monograph, however radical, but in the attempts of movements to articulate their ecological and social critiques as political practice, to extend their alliances and to overturn existing social relationships. If the red-green hopes of 1970s and 1980s discussions, or the struggle for a transformed state in the Latin America of the 2000s, have not borne the fruit that was hoped for, this too is *part of the pedagogy*. After all, our movements—and the issues they struggle around—are not going to go away. We then have no real choice *but* to try to learn from defeats without abandoning the field of practice entirely.

During the COP21 climate change summit in Paris the French government declared a state of emergency, banning all demonstrations in Paris and leading to a crackdown on ecological and anti-capitalist activists. Immediately afterwards, my university’s research cluster on “Social Justice, Participation and Human Rights” proposed hosting a webstreaming of sessions at the official conference in conjunction with the French embassy, apparently with no sense of irony. From an ecosocialist perspective, the point is not only to recognise attempts at asserting “participation and human rights” in the teeth of the CRS,¹⁶ but also to realise that the very limited steps forward made at COP21—and for that matter the process itself—would not have happened without the past four decades of ecological struggles around the world; and to find ways of supporting those struggles to develop, make connections and think their way forwards.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to colleagues and students on the MA for the shared learning drawn on here; to Ariel Salleh for disagreements which fed into this paper; to Sutapa

¹⁶French riot police.

Chattopadhyay for taking the initiative for this special issue; and to Salvatore Engel-di Mauro and two anonymous referees for CNS.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Laurence Cox  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8464-0464>

References

- Allen, Robert, and Tara Jones. (1990) 2009. *Guests of the Nation*. London: Earthscan.
- Barker, Colin. 2014. "Expansive Learning Under Fire." Paper to CRADLE workshop, Helsinki.
- Barker, Colin, and Laurence Cox. (2001) 2011. *What Have the Romans Ever Done for Us?* Helsinki: Into.
- Conway, Janet. 2006. *Praxis and Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Conway, Janet. 2011. "Activist Knowledges on the Anti-globalization Terrain." *Interface* 3 (2): 33–64.
- Cox, Laurence. 2010. "The Interests of the Movement as a Whole." *Interface* 2 (1): 298–308.
- Cox, Laurence, and Nilsen, Alf. 2014. *We Make Our Own History*. London: Pluto.
- Cox, Laurence. 2014a. "Movements Making Knowledge." *Sociology* 48 (5): 954–971.
- Cox, Laurence. 2014b. "A Masters for Activists." *Interface* 6 (1): 335–341.
- Cox, Laurence. 2015. "Scholarship and Activism." *Studies in Social Justice* 9 (1): 34–53.
- Cox, Laurence. 2016. "The Southern Question and the Irish Question." In *Solidarity Without Borders*, edited by Martin Bak Jørgensen and Óscar Garcia Agustín, 113–191. London: Pluto.
- De Smet, Brecht. 2015. *A Dialectical Pedagogy of Revolt*. Leiden: Brill.
- Draper, Hal. 1966. *The Two Souls of Socialism*. Berkeley, CA: Independent Socialist Committee.
- Eyerman, Ron, and Andrew Jamison. 1991. *Social Movements*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Fillieule, Olivier, and Guya Accornero, eds. 2016. *Social Movement Studies in Europe*. New York: Berghahn.
- Finnegan, Fergal, and Laurence Cox. 2007. "The Grassroots Gatherings as Popular Education." Plenary Talk to 4th International Popular Education Network Conference, Maynooth.
- Flesher Fominaya, Cristina, and Laurence Cox, eds. 2013. *Understanding European Movements*. London: Routledge.
- Goodwillie, John. 1988. *Colours in the Rainbow*. Dublin: Self-published.
- Gramsci, Antonio. (1929–1935) 1999. *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, edited by Quintin Hoare. London: ElecBook (CD-ROM).
- Hall, Budd, Darlene Clover, Jim Crowther, and Eurig Scandrett, eds. 2012. *Learning and Education for a Better World*. Rotterdam: Sense.
- Hope, Anne, and Sally Timmel. 1984. *Training for Transformation*. 3 vols. Gweru: Mambo.

- Horton, Myles, and Paulo Freire. 1990. *We Make the Road by Walking*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Kapoor, Dip, and Aziz Choudry. 2010. *Learning from the Ground Up*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Leonard, Liam. 2008. *The Environmental Movement in Ireland*. New York: Springer.
- Marcos, Subcomandante. 2002. *Our Word Is Our Weapon*. New York: Seven Stories.
- Marx, Karl. (1843–1844) 1977. *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"* edited by Joseph O'Malley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marx, Karl. (1845) 2000. "Theses on Feuerbach." In *Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan, 171–173. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mayo, Peter. 1999. *Gramsci, Freire and Adult Education*. London: Palgrave.
- Nilsen, Alf Gunvald. 2016. "Power, Resistance and Development in the Global South." *International Journal of Politics Culture and Society* 29 (3): 269–287.
- Ó Donnabháin, St. John. 2014. "Ideological Diversity and Alliance Building in Social Movements." Unpublished MA Thesis in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism, National University of Ireland, Maynooth.
- O'Sullivan, Ed. 1999. *Transformative Learning*. London: Zed.
- Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sen, Jai, ed. Forthcoming. *The Movements of Movements*. 2 vols. Delhi/Oakland: OpenWord/PM Press.
- Thompson, Dorothy. 1984. *The Chartists*. London: Temple Smith.
- Thompson, E. P. 1993. *Witness Against the Beast*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Touraine, Alain. 1981. *The Voice and the Eye*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tovey, Hilary. 1992. "Environmentalism in Ireland." In *Ireland and Poland: Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Patrick Clancy, Mary Kelly, Jerzy Wiatr, and Ryszard Zoltaniecki, 275–287. Dublin: UCD Press.
- Wainwright, Hilary. 1994. *Arguments for a New Left*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Young, Robert M. 1979. "How Societies Constitute Their Knowledge." <http://human-nature.com/rmyoung/papers/hsc1.html>.