

# Social movements

---

*Laurence Cox*

## Society in movement

The changing meanings of “social movement” sketch a history of the past quarter-millennium of popular struggles to change the world: how people have organized themselves and understood their activity. The term appeared in mid-nineteenth century Europe to grasp the French Revolution, the pan-European revolutions of 1848, and the rise of democratic, nationalist and socialist organizations. Contemporary elites were experiencing a disconcerting shift, mapped in the changing meanings of “society” away from the small world of those who counted, as in the capitalized usage of “Society”, when others (the vast majority) could be expected to “know their place” (Williams 1983). Earlier elites, then, could understand the human world purely in terms of political theory or economics. Our use of “society” to refer to *all* human beings and their interrelationships came into being as those others stepped out of “their place”, raising “the social question”.

“The social movement” represented the attempts of the vast majority to answer “the social question”; or the uprising of society against Society in a struggle for equality, democracy and the future (Cox 2013). This took many different forms: conspiratorial democrats, working-class socialists, Polish or Irish nationalism, resistance to imperial wars, freethought, opposition to slavery, women’s struggles for equality among others (Barker 2013). The movement of society against the status quo was not a single, or simple, thing: individuals and organizations involved themselves with many different issues as they arose in actual organising.

There was much to be gained by this, in a world where left and right both assumed that increased democracy would inevitably lead to social change. Before formal democracy, independent nation states and the end of empires, welfare states, legal equality for women, the abolition of slavery, religious freedom etc., it was reasonable to believe that transforming just one of these dimensions might entail far wider changes. However, in this same period – between the revolutions of 1848 and the defeat in most countries of the revolutionary wave of 1916-24 – most European elites shifted from trying to put “society” back in its box to strategies of securing popular consent for continued inequality, whether by selective concessions to individual groups or through mass popular mobilization on the right, a strategy pursued from Bonapartism via fascism to Christian Democracy and present-day racism (Cox 2018).

## Movement as political organization

Movement successes changed the practical meaning of “movement”, as the earlier situation – of sporadic waves of mass revolt, often clandestine organizations in a context of generalized illegality and tenuous links with individually sympathetic elite members – was replaced by one where even working-class struggles could sustain large trade unions, extensive mutual aid organizations, women’s and youth groups, national and local daily papers or mass political parties, typically organized hierarchically: the classic example being the German SPD.

It also became necessary to speak of multiple movements, as fascist movements grew, the alliance between liberal and working-class movements broke apart, and the latter split between communist and social-democratic forms. In the early twentieth century, these all took state power, and used it brutally against their opponents. So too, starting in Ireland, and after WWII across Asia and Africa, anti-colonial and nationalist movements took power, with varying relationships to peasant and working-class movements. The changed structure of popular action meant that “movement” was often a synonym for a party-affiliated constellation of organizations aiming at, or controlling, state power. Hence “movement” became a dirty word in post-war West Germany, associated with Nazism and orthodox communism (Raschke 1988); while one could tot up references to “ThiGMOO”, “this great movement of ours” at British Labour Party conferences (Byrne 1999).

## New social movements

By contrast with mid-twentieth century left, nationalist and fascist movements, the New Left from the mid-1960s on used “new social movements” to describe things as diverse as the US Civil Rights Movement, west European opposition to nuclear weapons, student activism culminating in 1968, the Prague Spring, the women’s and gay liberation movements, the counter-culture, squatting, anti-nuclear power or environmental movements. This usage spread to the majority world, particularly to Latin America and South Asia, in the 1970s and 1980s. Often, within a Marxist analysis, such movements were seen as “new” because they lacked the hierarchically-controlled architecture of mass organizations, the single party line – and sometimes any obvious link between participants’ material situation and the movements’ core issues.

Some Marxists in the US and UK – themselves nostalgic for “proper movements” more imagined than real – read this as a political or theoretical choice *between* movements. This drew on a (university-based, white, male) identity politics whose “workerist” view of popular movements excluded *actual* left histories of support for women’s struggles, anti-racism, resistance to militarism and cultural radicalism (Thompson 1976, Rowbotham and Weeks 1977). In these countries, with unions under particularly vicious and decisive assault from 1979-80 and far left parties typically micro-organizations, the use of “movement” for labour, socialism, anarchism, working-class community activism etc. fell out of favour.

Meanwhile, much Anglophone Marxism shifted to academic and publishing contexts which rewarded a focus on structure rather than agency, so that working-class struggles were now subordinated to discussions of political economy. Something similar happened on the development of academic feminism, black studies, postcolonialism, queer studies, ecological thought, peace studies etc. One practical result, in English, is that “social movement” increasingly *excludes* the main organizational components of popular activism between the 1880s and the 1960s. Political parties, trade unions, activist media, popular subcultures or politicized religion are rarely recognized as the sediment of popular struggle or seen in relationship to wider movements; they are typically studied in isolation from one another. Simultaneously, boundary-construction to shape new fields like “civil society” or “resistance” disperses understanding, and interest, further.

This specialization is paralleled by the increasingly niche world of radical publishing and communication, which, in neoliberalism, favours fragmentation and the elevation of one aspect of popular struggle over others, often as a marker of identity. As mass popular organizations declined

in the minority world, movements' own intellectual life became increasingly shaped by the logics of commercialism and celebrity, rewarding a politics of opinion based on attacking or ignoring other movements rather than building alliances.

There were also non-intellectual reasons for this. The events of 1968 – whether in Prague, Paris or Derry – showed the “last-instance” power of the superpower-backed state.<sup>1</sup> With urban guerrilla strategies increasingly self-defeating, movements came to define themselves in terms which *excluded* revolution – in stark contrast to previous history. In the majority world, the disappointments of national-developmentalism, and the subsequent transformation of independent nation-states into transmission belts for neoliberal policies, also undermined the credibility of older state-centric revolutionary discourses, a process encapsulated in the title *Change the World Without Taking Power* (Holloway 2002) and the impressive politics of the Zapatista revolution. The prestige of state socialist revolutions similarly declined among movement actors, long before 1989 in most countries.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a new wave of movement (semi-) institutionalization saw a further division between environmental, women's, GLTBQI, development, peace, anti-poverty, anti-racist and other NGOs, staffed by a small number of professionals dependent on elite support (for funding, media coverage, legal victories, access to policy-making, academic credibility etc.) and a new kind of “incivil society”, a tension intensified in majority world neoliberalism, where NGOs have increasingly taken on quasi-state roles (Sen 2007). The phrase “social movements”, however, often remained in use despite this radical shift in practical meaning.

## Movements and education

Education was a significant site of political struggle from an early point, as a location where top-down power intersected ordinary people's lives, asserting control of them *as* children, or *of* their children. Religion played a central role in constructing European education systems; universities bore the marks of this origin until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> and often the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, including religious requirements for entry, while schools, commonly controlled by religious bodies, concerned themselves closely with the moral lives of their pupils. Non-participation, or the construction of independent educational structures, was thus a frequent response. The children of the gentry, meanwhile, often had private tutors or went to fee-paying schools of various kinds: even where these latter were not religious, their purpose of shaping elite solidarity and forming “character” left them as eminently disciplinary institutions. As industrialising states developed compulsory education systems, these were politicized in different ways in different contexts.

In early nineteenth-century Ireland, for example, where the colonial Anglican church dominated, Catholic children typically attended independent “hedge schools” structured around directly supporting a local teacher (often, paradoxically, a radical) with money or in kind; the eventual outcome of reforms was a standardized education system in which virtually all schools were run by a church (Catholic, Anglican or non-conformist). Similarly, in colonial Sri Lanka, state-subsidized

---

<sup>1</sup> The Prague Spring was ended by Warsaw Pact tanks. At the height of May 1968, de Gaulle flew to the HQ of the French army on the Rhine to confirm military support if needed to put down his own uprising. Finally, the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland provoked a violent loyalist reaction which was followed by British military intervention and direct rule.

missionary schools used English-medium education and a “modern” curriculum to challenge the traditional temple schools of the Sinhala Buddhist majority. The missionary schools would themselves be challenged by the Buddhist Theosophical Society’s schools, combining English-language provision and a modern curriculum with a modernising Buddhist ethos and serving as an organising ground for the developing nationalist middle class (Cox and Sirisena 2016).

In Britain, meanwhile, working-class radicals resisted upper-class attempts to provide “useful knowledge” to their children (in the sense of training them directly in technical skills and workplace discipline) with struggles for “really useful knowledge”, understanding that would help challenge the power of the employers politically and validate a wider perspective on what human beings were, and could be.

These religious and class dimensions combined in the 1871 Paris Commune, which saw schools, including girls’ schools, being expropriated from Catholic religious orders and run on free and egalitarian lines: this programme would win out a decade after the Commune’s defeat. More radically, the execution of educationalist Francesc Ferrer following Barcelona’s 1909 working-class uprising led to the formation of anarchist and secular “Modern Schools” on the model he had pioneered, notably in the US (Avrich 1980).

From the later 19<sup>th</sup> century on, however, the combination of the costs involved in running mass education and its increasing political significance in an age of rising working-class self-assertion meant that a combination of state, religious and private schools dominated. The anarchist school movement represented an extraordinary achievement in terms of self-organization, as did the various forms of radical working-class adult education (self-organized, supported by sympathetic elites or within trade union and political party contexts).

The Steiner-Waldorf school movement, which in very different ways challenged the instrumentalist view of education as a means to discipline and train future workers, began in 1919 with a model school that brought together *all* the children of the Waldorf cigar factory in Stuttgart – workers’, clerks’ and managers’ children alike – in a co-educational context shaped by German Romanticism to initiate a movement which remains active to this day as probably the single largest alternative / independent education movement on the planet.

## **1968 and the challenge to educational power**

Despite these marginal challenges, however, the new dispensation was remarkably successful in many different political contexts in imposing its definition of the meanings and purposes of education: moral character (whether framed in religious terms or not but always with a strong gender component); the making of citizens (through using the dominant national language and an official curriculum around national literature, history etc.); social selection; and more or less visibly employment-related training. Consistent with this, most conflicts around education for several decades were dominated by issues of religious power and distributive issues, or at the most radical (as in colonial Burma) the formation of an alternative national elite that sought to replace the existing power structure.

The educational struggles now symbolized by the date 1968 were of a very different kind (Mohandesi et al. 2018). As already noted, the state as an agent of positive change was less credible;

those destined for white-collar jobs on graduation were no longer enthused by the prospect; and cultural change had eroded the viability of older, moralising discourses (recall that the uprising in the secular French system was sparked off in part over the issue of student sexuality).

Along with these conflicts came an increasing critique of what Paulo Freire would later call “banking education”, a top-down, teacher-dominated system geared to the transmission, memorization and repetition of supposedly neutral knowledge. Students turned the critical eyes of their own disciplines (particularly in the social sciences and humanities) on the actual social relations of education, while also drawing on newer forms of anti-authoritarian Marxism, radical democracy and anarchism – soon to be joined by the developing discourses of feminism, Black studies, post-colonialism, queer studies and other perspectives.

Although these struggles came towards the end of the “thirty glorious years” (1945-1975) of expanding university, other educational and welfare-state provision, they succeeded in substantially challenging power relations within the university, introducing new pedagogic approaches, democratising many everyday interactions – and unleashing radical impulses into children’s and adult education, social care and youth work, children’s publishing and media, and many other areas of life.

These impulses were increasingly contained or even the object of culture-war offensives from the right in later decades, as well as being more quietly defeated by neoliberal cuts, an increasing focus on testing students and evaluating faculty, and a grimmer economic outlook which privileged instrumental approaches to education and employer interests. However the legacy of radical thought within education remains significant, and if student movements are once again primarily organized around distributive concerns, they are more likely to do so as part of a wider critique of society.

## Education and social movements

Post-Fordism saw two important shifts from the later 1970s: a major shift in employment structures which undermined the traditional organizations of the working class, while as noted statist (social-democratic, communist, nationalist) political parties were also in decline. The loss of these and other traditional bases for radical organization – such as independent newspapers – coincided with the institutionalization of non-elite forms of third-level education, in terms both of employment situation and student recruitment, to make the latter an obvious, not always conscious, site for the formation of new kinds of movement thinking. Along with IT workers, academics today have a *relative* control over their working time and ability to switch employer that parallels those of the classic nineteenth-century radical trades such as cobblers and twentieth-century trades such as printers: not necessarily as the sources of mass recruitment but as forms of employment that enable a greater degree of political activism of various kinds. Some activists also found that traditional skills of public speaking, activist writing and basic organization helped them in the academic workplace.

The downside, as in earlier artistic subcultures, is the tendency for processes of radical opinion-formation, agitation within the small confines of the university and critical analysis to far outstrip actual organising and connections with the wider social world. Moreover, the connections to that wider world which are most readily available are those of publishing and speaking celebrity, in other words a form of capitalist marketplace which in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century increasingly

privileges a pure politics of opinion as a way to establish oneself within a specific niche market defined by particular identity markers (including white men from working-class backgrounds).

This is not a problem in itself – movements always have to find their origins within the social world as it actually is if they are to develop – but it can be a problem if these issues are not recognized and in-group polemics around minor differences in language (characteristic of the university environment) are seen as constituting “real politics” at the expense of practical engagement with wider social needs and struggles. This is just as true for organising in working-class contexts as it is for organising around race, gender, sexuality or disability: actual organising work involves listening to people for long enough to hear the needs and embryonic solutions they are articulating. In this sense, educationally-based radicals have a particular responsibility to always try to make links beyond the boundaries of the institution and to avoid allowing the “small differences” naturally valued by both adolescents and intellectuals to become essentialized to the point of preventing effective alliance formation.

## Reclaiming social movement

One important antidote to allowing popular movements to be remade in the image of the university is to pay particular attention to movements’ own learning processes. As we have seen, much academic theorising is “frozen” movement thought: the challenge is then to “reclaim, recycle and reuse” these for today’s movements (Cox and Nilsen 2014). This is also true for the *forms* of thought and learning: if an older generation of radical pedagogy transcribes the practices of 1968, of Freire or of feminist consciousness-raising into the classroom, it is time again to pay attention to the new shapes which social movement learning, teaching and theorising are taking (Cox 2014). Rather than uncritically transcribe what have become institutional logics into our wider politics, in other words, dialogue between these older sediments of movement practice in educational politics and the new impulses of radical education outside the institution can help to find appropriate organising languages to enable new alliances to be formed.

This has certainly been the case in the global movement of movements against neoliberalism, not least in Latin American struggles over the past 24 years, in the Occupy and indignado moments of 2011, the revolutionary crises in the Arab world or Rojava today. Despite the hard lessons of the past quarter-millennium of popular self-organization, long histories of institutionalization and incorporation, neoliberal fragmentation and political niche markets, new struggles keep springing up; movements keep making alliances across differences and reach towards a general transformation of society. Society is still in movement, and understanding this still matters (Cox 2018).

The phrase “social movements” still has real potential: in understanding that society is *made* and *contested*, not given, and in seeing what past struggles have achieved and how much is going on today (from micro-level resistance to moments of revolution). The plural is important: there are no automatic alliances (and few automatic conflicts). Struggles around class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality or ability can be connected as movements from below; and we need each other if we want to win.

## References

- Avrich, P. (1980) *The Modern School Movement*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Barker, C. (2013) "Class struggle and social movements". 41-61 in C. Barker et al. (eds.), *Marxism and social movements*. Leiden: Brill.
- Byrne, E. (1999) *ThiGMOO*. London: Earthlight.
- Cox, L. (2013) "Eppur si muove." 125-146 in Colin Barker et al. (eds.), *Marxism and Social Movements*. Leiden: Brill.
- Cox, L. (2014) "Movements making knowledge." *Sociology* 48/5: 954 – 971.
- Cox, L. (2018) *Why Social Movements Matter*. London: Rowman and Littlefield International.
- Cox, L. and Nilsen, A. (2014) *We Make Our Own History*. London: Pluto.
- Cox, L. and Sirisena, M. (2016) "Early western lay Buddhists in colonial Asia", *Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions* 3: 108 – 139.
- Holloway, J. (2002) *Change the World without Taking Power*. London: Pluto.
- Mohandesi, S., Risager, B. and Cox, L. (eds.) (2018) *Voices of 1968*. London: Pluto.
- Raschke, J. (1988) *Soziale Bewegungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.
- Rowbotham, S. and Weeks, J. (1977) *Socialism and the New Life*. London: Pluto.
- Sen, J. (2007) "The power of civility". *Development Dialogue* (October): 51-67.
- Thompson, E.P. (1976) *William Morris*. London: Merlin (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).