Sustainable activism

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Introduction

Sustainable activism as a radical concern

Human beings struggle to survive, not only physically as "bare life" but as beings with a "wealth of needs", in search of dignity and who want to be happy. Not in every society, but certainly in societies which are based on the economic exploitation of human labour in many forms, on unequal power relations grounded in the physical coercion and exercise of authority against weaker groups, and on cultural hierarchies which position many people as subaltern, the struggle to survive as a fully human subject is also a struggle against existing social relationships.

It is sometimes said that under these circumstances survival is itself a radical act. If this was *automatically* true, radical movements would be far stronger than they are: in practice, people often struggle to cope at the expense of those closest to them, or at the expense of other subaltern groups; they can enter into all sorts of clientelistic and collaborative relationships. They can direct their aggression not at those who are exploiting, oppressing or stigmatising them but into domestic violence, addictions, fundamentalist religion, racism, misogyny and many other attempts to cope, or to survive, at other people's expense. It is partly because these forms of (misplaced) struggle to survive are so widespread, and so "obvious" in our kinds of societies, that sustainable activism – not only seeing beyond these, but acting beyond these and doing so consistently – is an impressive and fragile achievement.

In this chapter I want to make a smaller claim: that *sustainable activism* is a radical achievement. To become, and remain, a member of a community or social movement whose struggle actively challenges dominant relations of power, economics and culture (in the sense used in this book) is radical in the sense of durable participation in the attempt to transform these relationships.

I want to go further and suggest that sustainable activism in this sense is far more radical than the simple production and consumption of radical *opinions*, whether on social media or in academic papers. Opinion politics can simply reproduce existing social relationships if it not carried out as part of the classic radical tasks of agitating (attempting to convince the unconvinced, which starts by communicating with them and not only within one's own opinion community); educating (discussing with others who are already engaged in struggle and attempting to develop their movements) and organizing (which should need no explanation). "Radical" has no meaning if it is not tied to *action* of some kind; and the attempt to *sustain* agency is of equal importance to attempts to *develop* and *widen* it.

What is sustainable activism?

From one point of view, sustainable activism can be defined simply as the attempt to become, and remain, effectively involved in collective political agency. Start from Geoff Eley's observation that democracy, in the sense of

> "free, universal, secret, adult and universal suffrage; the classic civil freedoms of speech, conscience, assembly, association, and the press; and freedom from arrest without trial … was achieved nowhere in the world during the nineteenth century and arrived in only four states before 1914 – New Zealand (1893), Australia (1903), Finland (1906), and Norway (1913)." (2002: 3)

Virtually no states *before* this period were democratic in anything remotely approaching this sense; and as activists know "the classic civil freedoms" turn out to be very conditional in countries like the present-day UK or US, let alone Mexico, Turkey or India. It is of course true that state power was shaped very differently in pre-capitalist societies, and we can identify moderate degrees of self-government on the part of, say, Russian peasant communities or various social groups in medieval India; however, these were typically structured by high degrees of traditional action and often included strong internal power relations tied to gender, ethnic and religious membership, age and marital status, economic position, and so on.

In other words, within the class societies that have dominated the world for the past several thousand years, it has been an exceptional situation when most people have had *any* significant say in the main decisions that affected them. Of course on the margins of these societies there have been significant stateless societies; some self-governing communities of pirates, deserters and the like; and some revolutionary situations. The struggle to become, and remain, a political agent in this context has thus historically been a huge challenge, if by agency we mean something more than clientelism, acts of violence on behalf of the powerful and wealthy, and so on. It is only within living memory that fascist dictatorships have been (provisionally) beaten; that most of the globe has ceased to be divided up among a handful of empires; or that (most) state socialisms have collapsed. Eley's very minimal definition of formal democracy is thus a rare flower.

Within these formally democratic contexts, however, political agency outside the narrow boundaries defined here – including much or most social movement activity – has routinely been treated as threatening (and has in some cases actually been so) to dominant power relations, the economic structures they defend and the cultural hierarchies erected around them. Active attempts to assert democratic participation, from the Chartists through to popular resistance against fracking, and from the struggle against domestic violence to the self-assertion of indigenous communities, consistently meets with a high degree of opposition in all three dimensions.

State repression (formal and informal) is familiar to anyone involved in radical movements; recent decades in western Europe in particular have seen a decline in the use of *lethal* violence against protestors and prisoners (Cox 2014), but sublethal violence, intimidation and surveillance have been refined in new ways. The economic price paid, whether in terms of dismissal or unemployment, the financial costs of prioritising movement activities or the simple costs of maintaining movements, can be very high. Those who identify with existing cultural routines and "normality" may also take opportunities to attack those who question them, in forms ranging from violence to exclusion.

Since most people – particularly those in communities in struggle and many of those motivated to take part in radical movements – lack the economic, power and cultural privilege to deflect such attacks painlessly, their ability to keep going and sustain their activism is regularly put in question. These costs are often targetted not only at activists but also at their families, towards whom they may have all sorts of different (financial, care, parenting etc.) responsibilities; and they undermine activists' ability to sustain their networks and support one another. In some contexts, all of this can lead activists to a more or less conscious strategy of putting those who

are seen as having least to lose, those who can most easily absorb such costs or those who are believed least likely to be attacked in the most visible positions (most dramatically in international solidarity contexts where Northern volunteers cannot be targetted in the ways that are routine for local activists). There is something to be said for each strategy, but also familiar downsides in terms of the internal politics of class, gender, ethnicity and so on.

While the phrase itself is only used in some traditions, sustainable activism in the sense used here is a major concern for most movements and communities in struggle. Newcomers have to be enabled to overcome these hurdles; existing participants have to be supported; networks and communities have to be defended; knowledge and connections have to be protected and extended; movement presence in different areas of society has to be fought for; and learning and generational transmission has to be worked on. These can be thought about in terms of legal support and prisoner solidarity, economic networking or creating alternative ways of making a living, challenging various forms of discrimination and hate speech, celebrating movement struggles in ways that make the hardships of the present meaningful, informal support to families under pressure, international solidarity and many other ways.

Movements that do not work on making activism sustainable (whatever language they use) will not last. They will run out of participants, fold under pressure or turn into something more compatible with dominant social relationships – a publication, a lifestyle, an academic niche, a small business. This does not always mean that they think about sustainability consciously: they may have arrived at viable solutions some time back and have found a way of transmitting those across generations. Nonetheless, the work still needs to be done.

… and prefiguration?

Many radical movements and communities engage in a greater or lesser degree of prefiguration. In a historical perspective, who we are, how we act now and the world we hope to see are always likely to be closely linked in the absence of powerful political, cultural or economic structures that support compartmentalisation. It is a back-handed tribute to the relative success of social movements at creating new kinds of state, or inserting themselves within effective ones, that prefiguration has become a stronger demand in recent decades and scepticism towards instrumental strategies has grown.

The experience of winning universal suffrage and welfare states, legal battles for citizenship or against discrimination, national independence and ethno-religious states, conflicts over language and consumption and the like are widely experienced as ambiguous successes in terms of popular power. In most cases, the populations that benefit from these – and that often inherited them as the gains of previous struggles – do value these gains, at least for themselves (and even despite the platforms of parties they may vote for). *But* the credibility of the armed vanguard, the radical lawyer, the political party, the NGO, the religious crusade or the campaign to change cultural symbolism is eroded as much by its external success as by its opponents.

When there were few if any of these experiences to look back on, it could be reasonably believed (for example) that getting the vote, changing how people spoke, writing new laws, winning national independence, enshrining religious values in the constitution, educating people and so on would change *everything*. We now know from long historical experience that it is not that easy; these struggles win something, but not as much as is promised, and often more for leaders than for grassroots activists, let alone the wider constituency they mobilise.

In this sense, the belief that the future will justify all the sacrifices of the present has become harder to sustain credibly, at least within social movements from below[1]. Communities and movements fighting for more *equal* economic, political and cultural relationships are now more likely to want to see some link between how we organise now and the alternatives we are struggling for. Sustainable activism, then, in the sense of movements and communities which do not treat their participants as ultimately expendable, has become a more explicit focus in internally democratic movements than in forms of organisation modelled on military or religious structures.

Sustainable activism in different movement contexts[2]

Activist sustainability means very different things in different contexts, because the dimensions which are difficult to achieve vary hugely. In previous work I have identified three aspects of this difference: social inequality and the situation of different movements' core participants; institutionalisation and how different movements interface with the structures of everyday life; and how movement cultures sit within the wider society.

Social inequality

What dimensions of personal sustainability matter most to different participants in different times, places and social contexts? This is above all a question of social inequality and of how individuals are located within their local social order.

Everyday survival

This covers the issues that people need to cover in order simply to keep going in terms of their everyday social situation. It includes people's health, physical and mental energy and vulnerabilities; how much they are physically and socially dependent on other people, along with their caring and workplace responsibilities to other people. More generally it includes how far their living and working situation, family and personal networks support participation in movements or make it difficult to maintain. For most people most of the time these are fundamental – and by definition nobody can *sustainably* ignore them. But depending on who one is, different issues will stand out as problematic.

Movement-relevant resources

By this I mean the things that people need to manage in order to be able practically to engage in movement activity. People have to manage time and money pressures and the other ways in which class, gender, race and so on make it easier or harder to engage in movement activities. Access to the different means of communication, transport, practical organisation and so on is unevenly distributed in unequal societies, while in different contexts there are also different expectations around public activities, and the cognitive and political tools involved may be more or less easily available. It is certainly possible to create new kinds of movement participation and contest the social order in creative ways that work better for people in

[1] One of the defining features of social movements from above (Cox and Nilsen 2014) is the way in which they draw on existing cultural hierarchies, forms of power and economic arrangements. The distinction between instrumental leaders and useful idiots is often alive and well in these movements.
[2] This section draws on the discussion in Cox (2009).

different situations; or put another way, people will always work with what they have. At the same time, "they do not do so just as they please", but in a world not of their own making where participation in politics is very uneven and often very limited. Hence movements often have to strike a difficult balance, consciously or otherwise, between enabling participation (for example through education and training programmes) and having an immediate impact on wider power relations (with people who are already familiar with the activities involved).

Emotional sustainability

People can have their everyday life more or less under control and have the resources they need to engage in social movements, without doing so – or without being able to handle doing so emotionally. In some political traditions and supportive movement cultures, as well as some class, ethnic or religious cultures there are established, socially-supported ways of being in the world that make it relatively easy on a personal level to "be an activist". There are of course many different ways into the skills and supports for emotional self-management, handling one's own mental health and dealing with violence and conflict. At its most basic, few people find conflict entirely easy, and a stable emotional relationship to conflict is an important aspect of activist sustainability.

Movements and everyday life

Different movements interface with everyday life and social routines in different ways. Put another way, someone's movement participation can be primarily a job, an identity, a part of their everyday culture or a dimension of their working life; and these different situations affect individual activists but also shape movements insofar as most movements have a centre of gravity in one or other of these (perhaps a characteristic of a truly powerful movement is its presence across multiple dimensions). Each of these brings up different issues in relation to activist sustainability:

Workplace-based movements

Peasant and labour struggles are naturally workplace-based, while other types of activism (e.g. sabotage during the European resistance to fascism) can also be centred here. In workplaces, the key issues for sustainability obviously include conflict with managers and landowners, relations with other workers (e.g. solidarity vs scabbing), workplace "custom and practice", whether people value the job they do or see it simply as a means to earn money, and so on. Even something as simple as knowing how to picket and respond to pickets can be an unfamiliar source of stress, or routinised and well-understood all round.

Community-based movements

Some movements naturally tend to organise within people's residential or social communities – working-class community organising, GLBTQI activism and many ethnic or religious movements, for example. Some of the particular sustainability challenges here come from the situation of the community as a whole (coping with poverty, oppression, cultural stigma and so on), while others come from *other* forms of organising within the community (e.g. religious, gang, business etc.)

Professional or full-time activism

In some kinds of movement situation (parties, unions, media, NGOs and so on) many or most activists are employed *by* movement organisations. The challenge is then how to make sure that the stress involved in keeping the organisational show on the road (shaping conflicts into particular institutional routines) and dealing with everything else that arrives in the door of

highly-visible organisations does not take over from the wider motivations for action. When activism is professionalised, workplace issues and tensions take on a very particular character, and there can be strong tendencies towards internal (self-)exploitation.

"Leisure" activism

Finally, some kinds of movements take place outside where most of their participants work and live, in the social space otherwise occupied by leisure activities. Obviously enough, this sort of activism sits awkwardly in relation to everything else (and potentially everyone else) that might matter in participants' lives, so that isolation, guilt and burnout can become particular problems for people active in this way.

These different situations represent different forms of institutionalisation (or lack of it). Institutionalisation, together with routinisation and social normalisation, has effects on many other aspects of sustainability. The sort of work involved, the routine risks and conflicts encountered, the most common emotional and mental health challenges, and what individuals (or other activists) are good at dealing with and responding to and what is unsupported vary hugely between these different kinds of setting.

Movement activism in the wider society

The history of different movements, and the state of struggle in different societies at different times, means that participants can find themselves more or less at odds with the world around them. *As activists*, they may be more or less supported in the rest of their lives, facing ongoing conflict with family and friends, workmates and neighbours, school or religious community. In fact their own activist biography is likely to be shaped by how the movement "sits" within the wider society:

Long-standing movement cultures

In some cases, movements have not only lasted for generations but they are widely-represented within a wider culture and large sections of the community can be expected to get involved at times. Some activists may be more or less literally born into movement families, while for others there are well-understood and easily-managed ways of joining movements, learning and finding mutual support. Either way, such situations are particularly likely to offer viable emotional repertoires (not to mention community rituals, biographies and so on) that support movement participation. Some ethno-nationalist or radical left cultures may approximate this, such as republicanism in some parts of Northern Ireland or the Italian left for much of the postwar period.

Supportive classes or cultures

A slightly weaker case is where most people in a given class or culture are not themselves politically active but there is nonetheless general support for those who do get involved in movements, so that it is a fairly well-understood, and moderately unproblematic, role to adopt. This has been the case for some radical religious groups like the Quakers, some US black communities and some parts of the European working class in the 20th century.

Moments of generational transformation

The big waves of movement mobilisation, such as that at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, bring what can feel like a whole generation of young people into movements, marking a break from their parents as well as from pre-existing institutions, even those nominally in the same movement. For this first generation, their participation involves a far more radical shift in

relation to who they have been brought up to be, something which may not be so evident in later generations. Examples might include feminist and GLBTQI activists in this period, who often had to rediscover their movements' prehistory because of the *lack* of available connections at the time. Over time, these situations tend to become easier to live with, if only because of the large numbers of other people struggling with – and discussing – the same kinds of tension.

Newly formed, or fundamentally marginal, movements

Lastly, where movement participation involves a break not only with one's family and wider cultures but also with one's peers, producing a sustainable movement culture essentially amounts to the challenge of producing a new counter-culture. Such movements can struggle to institutionalise themselves and become subcultural in the sense of largely consisting of young adults, meaning that they have failed to solve the problem of how to live with movement participation in later life. Along with this, the intensity of the cultural tensions is often hard to sustain emotionally. Much animal rights activism seems to follow this pattern, with older (let alone second-generation) activism being rare. In other cases, such as Deaf or trans activism, the nature of the issue itself may make a breach with one's culture of origin particularly likely but entail a much longer-term involvement, and often the construction of activist personas and narratives within the movement geared to this kind of transformation.

It is obviously hugely important in terms of the sustainability of activism whether it is a family expectation, one respected (or at least familiar) choice among others, a breach with older generations or a standing reproach to one's whole culture. This dimension overlaps with wider issues of "habitus", in Bourdieu's (1977) terminology. What sorts of emotional repertoires and expectations go along with activism in different local, classed, or ethnic cultures? What kinds of activist roles and personas are recognised? Is political participation understood by others as a statement of morality, of personality, or of career? How do people live with particular kinds of situations (martyrdom, unemployment, fame, family conflict)?

Reflections

These different dimensions are obviously interconnected in any practical situation: the social situation that movement participants find themselves in shapes the kinds of organisation they prioritise, while the longer history of movement success or failure (or at least institutionalisation) shapes how other people within their social world relate to them. However these dimensions vary so widely as between different movements that most general statements about activist sustainability fall quite far of the mark.

Understandably, most activist writing (and most research geared to an individual movement) focusses on the aspects of sustainability that are most challenging for participants (or would-be participants) in that particular movement, and treats these as defining sustainability in general, without seeing the dimensions which are relatively unproblematic for its members (or more exactly which can handled by existing routines, whether these belong to the wider culture or to the movement). Of course, as the discussion of how activism relates to the wider society suggests, different movements also operate with a greater or lesser degree of cultural radicalism, and a greater or lesser acceptance of conventional kinds of interpersonal and collective relationships. These things in turn impact greatly on activist sustainability, when everyday culture is intolerable on a personal level (a GLTBQI person in a homophobic culture, for example) or when activists' emotional stability depends on "not rocking the boat" in their own social world.

These point to a wider problem: in a world shaped by oppression, exploitation and stigmatisation activists' personal lives can be very squeezed for many reasons, and they often have to make movements work for themselves to some extent, even if only in the sense that much of their human contact, friendships or relationships happen there. In other cases a movement may be thoroughly interwoven with everyday care and reproduction; it might offer employment possibilities (or indeed lead to being blacklisted). The challenge, in other words, is how to make the movement live and work in people's lives but without this means becoming an end in itself.

Much academic and activist analysis takes for granted the ways in which participation in a given movement sits easily within the existing world – professionalisation, cultural conservatism, in-group behaviour, reliance on dominant forms of power internally – and highlights only the elements which are problematic for group members. It is important, particularly from a radical perspective in which we do not take the simple existence of movements as an end in itself, to remain wary of this and ask about the wider picture – while recognising that for movements to survive at all, they may not be able to afford to resist and transform *all* social relations at once. This is particularly true when their participants are poor, relatively powerless, culturally stigmatised, physically vulnerable or otherwise struggling to cope with everyday life, let alone movements. Conversely, it is no critique of the most demanding approaches to activism to say that they may be more accessible to those who have the resources to engage in them. We do know from history, and some present-day examples like Chiapas or Rojava, that this is not an absolute, and movements of the most oppressed can at times be the most radical on these dimensions too – when they are truly mass movements.

Our common activist heritage

The first part of this chapter presented activist sustainability as an important dimension both of surviving as a decent human being in an unjust society, and especially of the ongoing struggle for meaningful democratic participation. The second section showed just how much is involved in these achievements, but also argued that – depending on movement participants' social situations, how movements are institutionalised and how participation sits within the wider culture – activists will experience different patterns of what threatens sustainability, so that there is no easy checklist of "sustainability issues" that works across all movements and all times and places.

However since any given movement experiences a concrete set of problems in relation to activist sustainability, activists develop situation-specific ways of thinking about these problems, as well as strategies to resolve these particular issues. Without any pretence of exhaustiveness, I want to explore a few relatively common approaches. I relate each to one or more concrete movements, not because any individual approach is the sole property of the movements mentioned (or because everyone in the movement in question subscribes to that approach) but simply because no strategy for activist sustainability really makes sense *outside* of a concrete movement context.

Still, in the wider picture each of these approaches represents important aspects of human flourishing (or, more darkly, how these are attacked in our societies). Radical movements, then, should treat all of these as our common heritage, as well as thinking about what is specific to other people's struggles as well as (a harder challenge) to our own.

Challenging the system

Movements and ideologies which focus on the bigger picture – Marxists and anarchists, feminists and GLTBQI activists, anti-colonial and radical black liberation approaches etc. – often point to the extent to which it is structural features of contemporary society that get in the way of activist sustainability. This is a centrally important point – the very reasons we struggle are also among the things which make the struggle hard – and it can be easily missed in approaches which place all the responsibility for sustainability on movements' own internal organisations and require added efforts from activists.

At the same time, this approach is sometimes used to dismiss concerns with sustainability as mere self-indulgence, with the added implication that they express a sheltered life or the luxury of privilege. This is a familiar sound from the leaderships of organisations structured around a very high activist turnover – recruiting, using and losing participants "for the greater good of the organisation" – and are therefore threatened by any attention given to the actual experience of membership. It is also familiar from advocates of a macho, "just do it" approach to movements, for whom these are implicitly feminine or weak concerns that get in the way of "real" (high-octane) activism. This position is of course in turn the privilege of those who are not struggling with the effects of trauma, for example.

There is also a more privileged and at times more liberal version of this refusal to look inwards: as various forms of feminism, Marxism, gay studies, Black studies etc. have entered the academy or the media, they have often become individualised and professionalised. In their own lives their advocates have relatively high rewards compared to most of those on whose behalf they speak, but often lack the time and energy to respond to the needs of other participants other than financially. The logic of both media and academic activism, too, is often towards a relentless emphasis on structure and the avoidance of serious discussion of, or engagement with, popular agency and its discontents.

Of course there are also honourable exceptions in all of these camps. However, a serious recognition of just how deep-seated and damaging are the structures we are up against should logically also entail thinking seriously about the challenges of developing and sustaining movements for the long haul under these circumstances, not refusing to think about the problem. Structural constraints will indeed constantly erode our individual and collective capacity, and it is indeed an illusion to think that we can achieve ideal movement-internal relationships this side of a massive change in social power; however, we will not get there if we do not pay attention to supporting each other (Blackwell and Seabrook, 1988).

Conversely, what those with a shorter historical memory often forget is *just how transformative* large-scale collective action is, including in terms of sustainability (Barker, 1999). Oppressed people who become political agents find themselves recovering a sense of pride and dignity, of power and voice in the wider society; they transform themselves and each other in the process of making another world and find a sense of real possibility absent in previously trapped lives (Wainwright, 1994). What can be hard to achieve in a small group over years can sometimes be achieved in mass struggle in "weeks where decades happen" (Lenin).

Survival-oriented solidarity

In disadvantaged communities there is often no real dividing line between the everyday forms of mutual aid that people rely on to get through the week or to get through hard times, and activist solidarity (Bernal et al., 2008). This underpins one of the strengths of mobilisation in such contexts: people are mobilised in families, in streets or neighbourhoods, in workplaces, in

churches, in ethnic groups – the same social relationships that they are tied into for everyday survival. Conversely, these relationships tend to be what determines movement involvement, and powerful forms of internal clientelism can develop under patriarchal or "notable" leadership, prioritising the interests of the latter. When internal power relationships are less hierarchical and more participative, such community-based struggles can be both radical and very hard to defeat, precisely because of the centrality of sustainability to their organising relationships.

In these situations, activist sustainability consists first and foremost of everyday survival: person-to-person or collectively organised financial help for individuals, sharing food and goods, "caring labour" in all its many forms, listening and emotional support, advocacy to help people deal with powerful institutions, and practical support around life crises such as sickness, bereavement, unwanted pregnancy, unemployment, eviction, imprisonment, and so on. Well-organised community activism often goes beyond this to organise training and education that supports people to become political subjects, from literacy and voter registration to media training and assistance in setting up formally-registered organisations. As Nilsen (2010) has noted, these strategies are often successful at lower levels of the political system (becoming citizens) and ineffective at higher levels (substantive change in power relationships). They often follow a logic of brokerage whereby community members are encouraged to engage with formal institutions along approved lines – lines which have worked for professional activists and upwardly-mobile activist families, but which are less effective at resolving large-scale structural inequality.

However to note the potential pitfalls around this form of sustainability in no way changes the historical fact that very large numbers of people – majorities in many societies – find themselves forced to depend on self-organised mechanisms of mutual aid. The real question, then, is not whether this is a good thing but how best to organise it. Nor is it any surprise that activism in such contexts is geared around an extension of these relationships – "activist mothering" in Nancy Naples' (1998) neat phrase, whereby the black and Latina community activists she studied on the US East Coast extended their own care work both to the wider community and more specifically to the younger women activists they mentored.

Coping with criminalisation

The legal and prison system are explicitly designed as repressive apparatuses, intended to punish those who challenge the state, including those who resist what they see as unjust laws. In earlier periods liberals, democrats, nationalists, suffragettes, anarchists and socialists all found themselves at the sharp end of the same monarchical, authoritarian or colonial regimes; in parliamentary democracies at least this experience had been comfortably relegated to origin myths by the first four of these, until the recent authoritarian turn in majority world countries from Turkey to India.

For today's radicals, however, the experience of state repression remains a live one, whether challenging the institutions of neoliberalism, resisting wars, fighting for animal rights, resisting biopolitical attacks on women's and GLTBQI bodies, challenging police killings or defending the earth. Many of our best people still find themselves going through the courts and prisons. This process is hugely challenging for the individuals targetted, in many different ways, and movements which regularly encounter legal repression usually develop more or less effective legal and prisoner support structures, designed to support the individual through what is intended as an isolating and dehumanising experience (e.g. www.abcf.net).

But the costs of repression are not only felt by the individual: in movements where the police only stand limited chances of actually securing convictions on substantial charges they can raise the costs of activism substantially by campaigns of low-level harassment (arrest without charge, repeated trials on minor offences or constant deferral of trial dates) as well as through surveillance (sowing distrust and forcing activists to spend time on counter-measures). All of this is felt by the targets' family and friends, and in some contexts their neighbours or workmates can be mobilised against them.

This is more or less consciously theorised in different contexts: often, movements build successful counter-narratives which valorise the victims of repression and use visible cases of injustice as a source of outrage, mobilisation and radicalisation. When handled well, this can force the state to back off; when handled badly, it can lock movements into an emotional dynamic of intensifying conflict which simultaneously isolates them from the wider population, and provide police and security forces with a permanently-available justification for increased funding and sharpened legislation. This was one of the main internal criticisms of European and North American urban guerrilla movements in the 1970s and 1980s, reviving an older left critique of conspiratorial organisation (e.g. Alpert, 1981), and has led to a shifting of strategies among successful activists (Barry and Dordevic, 2007).

Direct action and coping with trauma

Partly because of this, many radical movements have repositioned their activism on a terrain which limits the scope for state repression within normal legislation and enables them to seek support from a much wider population. This is the case, for example, for much ecological direct action and more radical traditions within alterglobalisation and anti-austerity activism in the global North. The state in turn has often (not always) readjusted its focus, with an increased attention in particular to forms of non-lethal violence and intimidation in the physical confrontations that often characterise these forms of activism (such as summit protests or protest encampments). It is hard for activists to effectively prevent, or even gain retrospective satisfaction for, beatings, pepper-sprayings, sexual assault, kettlings, spying of various kinds, even in extreme cases such as the UK undercover policemen who had long-term relationships and in some cases children with activists – and hard for legal successes in these areas to prevent repeat performances, except where the police and security services have also suffered a substantial loss of public legitimacy in the process.

Consequently – and because these movements have recruited widely, often among young people with no previous background in movements – activists have had to work hard at recognising, learning about and responding to trauma in particular (Jones, 2003). Often interacting with the many other forms of psychological damage inflicted by oppressive social relationships (Wineman, 2003), trauma and PTSD can have sharp and sudden effects on activists' capacity to engage in movements, or to do so productively and in ways that are not damaging to others. Activist trauma support groups, networks and resources have thus become an important feature of many movement contexts (see the resources at https://www.activist-trauma.net/).

Psychological

At a less extreme scale, burnout and other mental health issues such as depression, isolation, addiction etc. are widely experienced in some social movement contexts, as in our societies more generally (Rettig, 2005). In the nature of things, radical movements involve a huge

personal effort against very powerful opponents, with limited chances of success and often few immediate rewards. This situation is not a happy one psychologically unless it is managed effectively, for example with a supportive movement culture which notices real effects on the world, develops enjoyable relationships between participants and a strongly positive sense of the value of the movement and its activity, and it is unsurprising that participation takes its toll (Cox, 2011).

By their nature, too, movements appear to some people suffering with mental health issues as a place where they may be able to make friends, have an effect on the world and express the things that are important to them – or, in less constructive ways, "act out" their mental health issues, from aggression through paranoia to personal aggrandisement. Most movements do not seek to police their boundaries tightly, and for obvious reasons activists rarely want to exclude people for behaving in ways different from the mainstream norm. However, this does not mean that movement participants are necessarily always equipped to recognise and respond to mental health issues.

Thus as far back as the 1970s women's and GLTBQI movements have worked on various aspects of mental health, both in a problem-solving approach, aiming to rework existing forms of therapy and counselling for participants, and in a constructive approach, aiming to create new ways of living well, group rituals and alternative identities (Ernst and Goodison, 1993). Here the "consciousness-raising" approach, Paolo Freire's reworking of the normally transformative effects of the collective self-expression of subaltern groups into a form of adult education, became radicalised and generalised: movement participation became simultaneously a space for rethinking one's self in relation to others. This model has been highly influential in subsequent movements, in a wide variety of different forms, and has been adopted far beyond activist contexts.

Prefigurative approaches

Ecological and radical-spiritual activism too often seeks to remake activist subjects within the process of mobilisation, in ways that go beyond the purely political (Coover et al., 1977). "Cultural radicalism", in Epstein's (1991) neat analysis, is a particularly precarious project because of the attempt to remake its own psychological and interpersonal basis, in a sense to rebuild the boat while sailing in it. As many readers will know from their own experience, there is huge transformative potential in certain kinds of activism, and it is entirely possible both to challenge power relations radically and to unpick one's inner allegiance to those relationships (Starhawk, 1990). Often this is best done in a relatively trusting but high-intensity small-group context, such as a camp or occupation, where time and depth of relationships permits a collective remaking of selves and rethinking of interactions, but where a stable group or network survives over time its members can collaborate on this in slower ways.

From the movement point of view, a decisive question may be how much collective preparation – for the pressures of conflict and in terms of prefiguring a different way of being – the group has engaged in before this kind of confrontation, and how much time is available for subsequent processing. A shared religious basis can often provide this kind of support in advance, while once the group is thoroughly formed it is not uncommon for members to create institutions (intentional communities, social centres, political or publishing projects) intended to make it possible to continue the new way of being with one another while simultaneously challenging wider social relationships. Alternatively, relatively short-term retreats can at times be effective (e.g. Wells, 2007 or the "Sustaining Resistance, Empowering Renewal" courses offered by www.ecodharma.com).

Of course the pressures are often great: we are often drawn to cultural radicalism because of our own disjunctures with existing social relationships, something which in our society often exacts a high psychological toll, or may arise from underlying trauma etc. Confrontation with powerful others, and small-group dynamics, can also make such situations highly unstable; for example, successful *long-term* intentional communities are the exception rather than the rule, and are often based either on religious commitments, sexual and family relationships or successful economic projects.

Prefiguration thus logically draws on the particular tools of such contexts. Practices such as meditation, service to others, vegetarianism and other forms of food politics, artistic creativity and ritual can all be organised in ways that place the group or community at the centre while infusing its movement activities with deep personal meaning. They can also enable the ritualisation of confrontational activities: as forms of asceticism, as performance art or as displays of mutual commitment. Sustainability in these contexts, however, is a particularly fragile achievement, which often has to be invented again to work for each specific context, while people who fall out of the group can struggle to sustain the transformed sense of themselves in a world which does not treat them that way.

Cultural survival

Finally, indigenous communities in particular can often find themselves in situations where the struggle to sustain themselves *as indigenous* and *as communities* is put in peril by the forces they are fighting against, and where movement mobilisation can offer a way of revitalising and restating cultural ideals which have often come under heavy attack from other societies and may also need reworking for a new situation (Marcos, 2002). This is one reason why indigenous groups have often been such effective opponents of extractivist projects (drilling, mining, logging etc.): if the project goes ahead, and the wider processes it symbolises continue, their young people are at risk of becoming migrant labourers, losing their language, abandoning their traditional economic activities and cultural practices etc.: in other words, ceasing to be active members of the community. The alternative to resistance, in other words, is often to accept becoming a racially-despised shanty-town population - though Zibechi's (2010) remarkable ethnography of El Alto shows just how much is actually preserved in such situations, including for radical struggles.

Such situations often pit different agendas for sustainability against one another: among Native Americans, for example, conservatives and cultural radicals may both assert the value of tradition and culture but with very different inflections. Gender and sexuality can pit patriarchal customs against young people's struggles for self-assertion and acceptance. Well-meaning organisers who want to bring mainstream education, technology and emotional practices may wind up undermining more creative attempts to assert local rationalities. Put another way, indigenous communities are characterised in the modern world by their coexistence with more powerful societies, economies, states and cultures, and the viability of different strategies for sustainability often depends on how much agency the community is capable of asserting under these circumstances.

Nonetheless it is clear that there is an extraordinary political and personal strength available when communities, indigenous or otherwise, are capable of standing even partly outside dominant social relationships, an experience that is well worth reflecting on for other movements, even though the situation cannot be replicated (Knapp et al., 2016).

Conclusion

In the very broadest sense, activist sustainability represents the challenging question of how people lacking power, wealth or cultural privilege can become and remain active and radical political subjects. Those who highlight the need for structural resolutions of this problem are not wrong in saying that some of these problems can never be fully resolved within existing social forms. The chicken-and-egg problem, though, is that it is precisely such movements that are needed to overthrow existing social forms; so that sustainability, and democratic participation, are always likely to be a work-in-progress until movements have overthrown class society, patriarchy and the racialised world order. That process will, as this argument hopefully makes clear and can be seen from the experience of successful revolutions, involve participants remaking themselves and their relationships to one another as they remake the world around them.

In the meantime, activist sustainability is a wheel that will continually be reinvented, or more exactly a challenge that will always be rediscovered as part of the necessary learning process of movement participation. We will always be scrambling to keep up with the challenges we meet in this area, starting from the very real problem of recognising and naming the difficulties. In the process, hopefully, we can come to treat ourselves and each other less in line with mainstream social and cultural relations and with more radical forms of relationship and emotion – solidarity, compassion, mutual support, comradeship and a wider interest in one another's flourishing as full human beings.

The above discussion has highlighted some of the tensions and complexities of different approaches, at times critically. But the power and importance of activist sustainability – even when the attempt to achieve it "goes wrong" somehow – arises because human beings will and do struggle to meet their needs in the most challenging circumstances. In this sense activist sustainability is an irreducible aspect of any attempt to change the world.

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