

Book Review: Dylan Taylor, *Social Movements and Democracy in the 21st Century*

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Dylan Taylor, 2017, *Social Movements and Democracy in the 21st century*. Cham (Switzerland): Palgrave (xi+290 pp; £66.99)

The challenge of comradely criticism

There is a problem, today, with disagreement on the left. Disagreement itself is no bad thing: it can be a sign of movement democracy, or an indicator that a particular space is able to hold more than one social position, movement, organisation, political tradition or organising approach together. Given the forces we are up against if we want large-scale social change, we need this situation.

But we also need disagreement that can either be overcome in our own learning and alliance processes, or at least lived with as an enriching factor and a reminder of the need to engage the much wider social realities that our opponents often make manifest. Put another way, the really important strategic conversations are the difficult ones, because they represent alliances that have not yet been made, or learning that has not yet been gone through.

Disagreement often doesn't work like this. All too often it produces self-righteousness (a refusal of learning or alliances), denial of the realities represented by our comrades and comp@s, new grievances which stand in the way of further conversations, and widespread demobilisation of those who lack the time, energy or emotional resilience to continue. In some spaces, victory goes to the last person standing, as in earlier generations committee or assembly decisions were made by the faction willing to keep going longest.

A culture of deliberately vicious ("sectarian") polemic is nothing new, but recent decades are different. The material conditions of radical political action and theory have, in the global North at least, radically changed over the past fifty years. If in 1967 the primary context and point of reference was parties, unions, left periodicals or other movement institutions, today a greater proportion of radical positions are articulated within traditional intellectual relationships, those of academia or those of left celebrity, the building of niche markets largely disconnected from movement organisations.

Under these conditions, there are greater rewards for representing disagreement as unchangeable: as the result of a fundamental flaw, whether theoretical, moral or personal. Audiences can be built and satisfied in this way – and with information overload one of the main things even radical audiences need is easy dismissals, good reasons *not* to know more about this or that. The one-liner which presents a different movement, political tradition, organisation

or theorist as not worth knowing about is an extremely welcome tool in this context.

How to overcome this? In *Interface* we ask authors to speak beyond their familiar audiences and write for those they do not usually speak to; this process is not always easy, and does not exclude forming alliances at the expense of a third party. It is not that we need to or should agree all of the time; the question is rather how to practice constructive disagreement without precluding future alliances.

Reading Dylan Taylor, I found myself disagreeing repeatedly, but not wanting a fight. I felt this book was a good representative of another left reality which cannot sensibly be ignored and needs to be engaged with rather than written off.

Structure and strengths

Social Movements and Democracy... is written in three sections. Part I gives us an introduction, a potted history of social movements, an overview of social movement theory, a summary of Marxist political economy and a discussion of “left political strategy”. Part II gives us an empirical study of Occupy, organised around issues of internal decision-making, how the collective subject was understood and discussion of space and the Internet. Part III draws on Poulantzas’ theory of the state and offers a conclusion in terms of political strategy.

The book is well-written and accessible. It has the great merit of opening up a wide range of issues and ways of thinking about movement politics to newcomers; clarity and ambition are a powerful combination. Its ambition lies in thinking these different things more closely together: contemporary social movement theory is often quite innocent of movement history; rarely does analysis of contemporary movements engage seriously with radical political theory; we need to think the relationship between movements and political economy more systematically; and so on. It is perhaps less important whether we agree with the specific conclusions that are drawn and more important to say that we should be having these discussions far more frequently.

This sort of work is a much-needed antidote to a positivist version of social movements research as an institutionally and intellectually narrow subdiscipline, and to the kinds of Marxist work that internalise the boundaries of the academic fields they seek a home in. Social movements, as a central aspect of the social world, enable connections: as the practical meaning of popular political subjectivity in ordinary times, without which “radical political theory” is either oxymoronic or theological; as a term which helps political economy become something other than either the hidden hand of subject-free structure or a dystopian account of elite agency alone; and as a positionality from which we can take the Feuerbach theses seriously.

The view from where?

The book's own positionality is not as clearly accounted for, but the ways in which its individual themes are approached will be familiar to Anglophone Marxists within the sorts of spaces marked out by points of reference such as Jacobin or the International Socialist Tendency, Left Forum and the Historical Materialism conference: a post-1968 left, neither social democratic nor Stalinist.

This approach is distinctly statist in tone, to the point of assuming at times that what defines Marxism *is* its relationship to the state, but characteristically Anglophone in that it is rarely expressed from within or in relationship to left parties of any electoral or governmental significance, or from any long-term position of strength in social movements, even (as the rhetoric might suggest) the labour movement. Put another way, in countries where radical left parties are permanent or occasional power-holders, or significant electoral presences, Marxists tend not to agonise about The Party as an ideal, but spend a lot of time discussing the many problems with the actual party or parties that they have to deal with.

The long-term institutional bases of this particular tradition, then, lie within micro-parties, the English-speaking Internet and the university. It shares a key weakness inherited from Trotskyism as “the last surviving Anglophone Leninist tradition” (Davidson 2017): a tendency to an abstract internationalism which seeks a single, universally applicable line (in English!) at the expense of in-depth engagement with the concrete and the national – and an underlying assumption that with the right line somehow everything else will fall into place.

At least, this was my impression as a reader trying to understand the book, although it tends to present itself as something of a “view from nowhere”, reluctant to account for its own choices as to what to think about, who to read and how to interpret them. Taylor edits the interesting *Counterfutures: left thought and practice Aotearoa*, whose self-description (counterfutures.nz) situates it between the left academy and social movements; but this book reads rather more like a rewritten PhD thesis.

An obvious example is in the chapters on political strategy. Rather than (for example) a critical analysis of people who are read today within different movements, or for that matter within different Marxist traditions, “reconceptualising political strategy” appears here as a task assigned to the academy (p. 99). We are presented with Badiou, Žižek, Rancière, Laclau and Mouffe, Hardt and Negri, Poulantzas as “prominent theorists in this field” (p. 100), although what the field is, and who determines prominence, is never quite specified. The questions of whether “contemporary left theory” is really best represented by an academic reading list, why the changing sociology of “the left” might make this so, or how culturally specific the authors chosen, are not discussed.

There is also no discussion of what *concrete* political challenges their reflections draw from, or how they have actually engaged with and been read by movements – surely an important question for Marxists thinking about theory.

Even with Poulantzas, presented (ch 9) as the way out of the difficulties of contemporary strategy (treated here as synonymous with theory), we are given no account whatsoever of his relationship to Greek or French parties or movements; we are told that things have developed since his death (p. 234), but not what he did while alive.

I do not think we should hand over responsibility for the strategic direction of our movements (or parties) to a purely academic logic, particularly one which assumes rather than justifies the significance of a particular set of authors and thus naturalises the local logics of an unspecified academic context. It is not that we can learn nothing from such debates; many of our best thinkers *do* operate within university contexts. But the touchstone has to be practice; as Marxists we cannot simply leave Theory to its own devices and be content to listen at the feet of different Masters.

Difficulties of the analysis

One point where I felt this strongly is in the book's repeatedly failing to learn from the left trajectories that constitutes our shared political ancestry, in the account of "after 1968", in chapters 2 (history of social movements) and 5 (political theory). There is a back-handed recognition that the Party, and its orientation to the State, had been seen to fail by 1968 on many fronts, though the discussion of these is often blurred. This failure lay in the reality of Soviet state socialism (if not yet, for some, the Chinese variant); in the reality of western Fordism, *particularly* where social-democratic parties had achieved some significant power; and in the reality of independent post-colonial states.

The once entirely reasonable assumption that the way forward lay in taking power within a state which was, in the mid twentieth century, more central to economic activity and social development than before or since, now came face to face not just with the disappointments of partial success in these areas, but with tanks in Prague and social-democratic support for the Vietnam War.

Yet in Taylor's account the reason activists turned away from a focus on parties and the state is not primarily explained by the disappointments of statism, or even by the defeat of the revolutionary struggles around 1968 and the question of how to continue fighting under conditions not of our own choosing. It seems to be the turn from unity to multiplicity in academic left theory. And here I have some questions.

Is this account not every bit as idealist as those liberals who ascribed the French Revolution to the influence of the *philosophes*? Does it not make more sense to treat academic left theory as a rarefied and often distorted reflection of learning and discussion processes within popular movements, rather than as "the conscious element" somehow imposing itself? If this is a material analysis, how are we to imagine the theoretical impact of Rancière or Žižek on the Arab Spring? Will we find, if we read through the tweets of the day, the turn to multiplicity as an ideological element imported from above?

I do not think so; even for a more obviously movement-connected thinker like Toni Negri it makes more sense to see his theorising as growing from the extraordinary richness of Italian struggles in the 1960s and 1970s, and subsequently his engagement with the movements of the 1990s and 2000s. I have met activists who have read Negri (far more than have read Rancière): and it would be unfair and self-defeating to suggest that theory never affects what people do. But surely a core Marxist proposition is that analysis needs to start from people's material realities and everyday praxis rather than to treat them as "cultural dupes"?¹

One crucial strategic difficulty of idealism is in how it leads us to think about contemporary movements as somehow the incarnation in this material world of Ideas – rather than, as the historical analysis of ideas no less than movements would suggest, seeing the ideas expressed around particular movements as bearing in interesting, but indirect, relationship to their practice. Consider, for example, Marx's enthusiasm for the innovative *practice* of the Paris Commune as against the predominantly Blanquist, Jacobin and Proudhonist *ideas* of delegates to the Commune – or his comments in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* on how revolutions seek for a language to express what they are actually doing.

We should of course engage with movements' own fumbling attempts to articulate a theory of their own; but that engagement needs to be helpful and comradely, if we can: to understand that people are, of course, developing their ideas as they go, and engage as a peer, not judging them from a great height for the benefit of some external audience. The latter, will neither convince them nor help us to learn from them.

From a comparative perspective, what I found most telling was the failure to ask why Occupy was such an Anglophone phenomenon. It took place simultaneously with revolts across the Arab world and anti-austerity uprisings around the European periphery; yet the question of why Occupy took place *where* it did is barely discussed here. Of course, doing so would suggest that – far from being a general expression of a particular moment in history, to be responded to theoretically – it was deeply shaped by the politics of a small number of English-speaking countries with a particular history of neoliberalism. In these countries, at least up till Momentum, "the Party" is invoked by some kinds of Marxism precisely because of its absence in political reality. Understand the *difference* between these contexts and those of other global struggles, and we start asking different kinds of political question.

¹ A more trivial, but indicative note: Taylor reads Alf Nilsen and myself as taking a broadly similar position to Laclau and Mouffe (p. 69), with the comment that either we are hiding our debt to them or that our putative similarities are due to a common awareness of Gramsci (which is not, perhaps, as unusual as it may seem for European Marxists). This point of similarity, however, turns out to be the question of how a movement or party can *find allies* and *convince others of the value of its strategy*. These are rather important, and pretty basic, questions for activists, and it speaks volumes about the "strategic" value of this kind of political theory that they are read simply as indicators of a particular intellectual tradition.

Models for the future?

In some ways this book recapitulates Barbara Epstein's (1993) arguments about the relationship between the grassroots-democratic practice and culturally-liberatory spirit of more recent movements and the rather bird's-eye view of Anglophone academic and sectarian Marxism, and arrives at a point not a million miles away from Hilary Wainwright's (2009) *Reclaim the State*². We have been here before, in other words, because the relative isolation of an older model of left practice in the English-speaking world, and its consequent manifestation in universities and micro-parties, has tended to mean that a certain way of articulating Marxism in relation to (wished-for) parties and the state is a sort of boundary-definition exercise; or, to borrow a phrase, identity politics. From this perspective, social movements are both necessary and – in their actual practice – rather frustrating.

Politically, the book calls (chs 9 and 10) for a new relationship between parties and movements, in ways which have been common on the west European left since 1968 and sometimes before. There are spaces in which this is a new, and surprising, thing to say; but this position really outlines a question rather than providing an answer.

Chapter 9 rightly points to different experiences in southern Europe (Syriza, Podemos) and Latin America (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador). The logic of the book, however, suggests that these experiences are primarily the result of advances *in theory*, of having the right line: but from the point of view of empirical research into social movements and revolutions, much is missing.

Podemos, it is true, did have elements of this top-down origin – but situated within a long and massive tradition of anti-authoritarian movements in Spain. Syriza is a more classical representative of the “older” European new left. Tellingly, there is no discussion of Iceland, Portugal or Italy – though the comparison is instructive. The *diversity* of learning traditions on the European left in terms of how to relate parties and movements is perhaps a more useful resource when trying to make sense of our own local contexts. Otherwise we are doomed (for example) to become disillusioned with Podemos and start making eyes at Momentum; the search for a Model which proves us right and solves our own problems is always likely to be a moveable feast.

So too with Latin America: an account which excludes the 24-year-old Zapatista revolution and the *Argentinazo* in favour of a focus on Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador is making things easy for itself – but by the same token making it harder to think about what can be usefully translated for struggles elsewhere. There is little mention of the dialectics *between* movements and parties here (Cicciarello-Maher 2016 shows this for Venezuela, the most statist of the three);

² It is Wainwright's great strength that, while remaining committed to the necessity for engagement with the state, she consistently does so from within movements, and with an open mind as to what such engagement might actually mean at different times in different countries.

nor of the increasing conflicts between movements and state in these specific countries, expressed in intensifying authoritarianism and (an important economic fact) shaped by the neo-extractivism underpinning these state models. Such accounts will not help us think what we should do where we are.

We cannot choose the situations we act within; but we can, perhaps, acknowledge the crucial importance of national context and not treat The Party as something that exists over and above these minor details of concrete place and history. Nor can we or should we assert the primary significance of The Party as an identity marker of Marxism or on the basis of political theory, separately from the history of actually-existing Marxist parties.

Put another way, the real historical question is what any given party is actually able to do to advance popular struggle in practice³. Given that in most countries in the world over the past half-century social movements have rather more successes to offer than radical political parties (and I imagine this is also true in Aotearoa / New Zealand), movement activists may often and reasonably feel that party politics is not a great use of their time; and they are likely to judge parties in terms of how they actually relate to movements rather than in terms of how their adherents convince themselves of their own necessity.

Learning from movements

Marxism's "material force" has experienced a series of defeats, some external but some very much from our own side if not self-inflicted. As a practice-oriented theory, we have to take this experience seriously and try to learn from it. As a materialist theory, we need to understand the social realities of different kinds of Marxist practice, notably to account for the context and situational meaning of our own work in the way we seek to do for other theories. This also means a less schematic engagement with popular political practice.

Like 1968, the Occupy movement – and the far larger, contemporary struggles of *indignad@s* in southern Europe – helped both to show the possibility of new kinds of mass participation in movement activism and (for the same reasons) undermined the legitimacy of the currently-existing modes of capitalist organisation. Surely the most important intellectual question here is not the theoretical limitations of their exponents' rhetoric, but the question of how they could have got *so much* right in terms of mobilising large numbers of ordinary people around fundamental questions of power and inequality, not least by comparison with Anglophone Marxism's limited ability to do so. Posing the question this way, in terms of political practice, means writing not so much as

³ Taylor criticises Alf Nilsen and myself (p. 248) for placing movements first and being interested in parties to the extent that they actually contribute to movements rather than instrumentalising them, substituting themselves for them and all the other experiences which have become so common. But to put it at its simplest, once a party winds up sending the riot police against popular movements that supposedly constitute its base – as in Greece and Bolivia – it is making a fundamental strategic error, which will irretrievably shape its future.

academically-accredited specialists in How To Think and more as fellow-activists who are also contributing to struggles, hoping to learn from these movements while also having something useful to say.

Conclusion

The richness of a book is often shown by how much one wants to argue with it: bad books are easily dismissed, while strong books require more detailed responses to cover even part of their material. My copy of *Social Movements and Democracy...* has dozens of corners marked down, each noting a point where I wanted to say more, respond or challenge the analysis, most of which I have not had space or time to return to here.

This book is a good read. Readers new to this terrain will find much of value here, while more experienced activists and scholars will still find many points of interest and a valuable challenge in the connections attempted, whether or not they agree with the author's approach. I look forward to the next book.

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