

**Book review: William K. Carroll and Kanchan Sarker
(eds), *A World to Win***

Review author: Laurence Cox

William K. Carroll and Kanchan Sarker (Eds), 2016, *A World to Win: Contemporary Social Movements and Counter-Hegemony*. Arbeiter Ring: Winnipeg (413 pp., paperback, CAN\$24.95)

William K. Carroll and Kanchan Sarker's *A World to Win* is a collection of writing by Canadian activists and activist-scholars on contemporary social movements which they see as constituting "agencies of *counter-hegemony*." The book packs a lot into a small space: Part I's seven chapters broadly discuss the situation of contemporary movements at a fairly general theoretical level; Part II's seven chapters cover different specific movements in Canada; while Part III's four explore the challenges of solidarity and alliance-building. Together these 18 chapters are very diverse in scope and style, but the tone is much more consistent, a tribute to good editing.

Beyond this broad arrangement, the structure of the book is largely given in Carroll's opening chapter. This presents the book as a whole as seeking to develop a praxis-oriented approach to social movements, one which avoids either a purely theoretical analysis or a purely pragmatic "what is happening and what we should do". To this end Carroll also produces an overview and attempted synthesis of three different perspectives on social movements and to draw out lessons from each for activists. These are the pragmatic-reformist (essentially canonical US social movement studies), the epochal-interpretive (starting from the North American interpretation of European debates on new social movements, to which are added authors like Laclau and Mouffe, Foucault and Chris Dixon), and a neo-Gramscian form of historical materialism, which Carroll bases on Marx and Gramsci, Michael Lebowitz and David Harvey, and a lengthy discussion of Habermas. Carroll is kind enough to include my own work with Alf Nilsen in this latter perspective.

Carroll draws five lessons from each of these three approaches. From the pragmatic-reformist approach, he distills some practical organising advice around interest mobilisation: what movements need to do in order to win at the most basic level. The epochal-interpretive approach is presented in an optative mode: movements "are" prefigurative, opposed to state-centrism, reflexive etc. – but also, implicitly, they should be all these things if they are to respond effectively to the nature of contemporary society. Gramscian historical materialism, finally, appears to tell us what movements from below have to do if they are to transform social relations: challenge movements from above, construct counter-hegemonic projects, develop solidarity and alliances, resist alienation and decolonise lifeworlds.

The “lessons” Carroll draws in *A World to Win* are very useful for activist thinking, and this core section of the chapter could readily be used in more activist classroom settings or as a background paper for movement discussions. I was left wondering, though, about what has happened to movements’ own theorising since Gramsci. Except for Chris Dixon, almost every post-Gramsci author engaged with is primarily academic in their work. I did wonder whether more could not be done with more closely movement-linked authors like Hilary Wainwright and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, with the implicit theories contained in the organising practice of the Zapatistas and People’s Global Action – not to mention some of Latin America’s new governments and the Rojava revolution, all surely key test cases for the wider systemic transformations invoked in the introduction. There is, I think, something in the book’s reliance on university-based theories which is not ideal when movements are trying to develop their own counter-hegemonic capacity.

The various chapter authors, however, are as much activist as they are academic. Space prevents an in-depth account of all 17 chapters, but the overall standard is excellent, with robust political arguments, solid empirical analyses and good writing: only a handful fall below the standards implied by attempting to develop a counter-hegemonic perspective and sink into intra-movement or intra-academic polemic of a more sectarian kind.

Far more chapters deserve to be highlighted. Steve D’Arcy’s chapter, subtitled “how activists articulate their politics and why it matters” reads the shift from New Left to contemporary political vocabularies in a constructive key. Lesley Wood and Craig Fortier trace the shifting construction of political coercion in Canada in ways that combine recognition of the harsh realities with an attention to the scope for effective resistance and delegitimation. Elaine Coburn and Cliff Atleo’s chapter attempts to theorise Indigenous resistance from an Indigenous perspective, highlighting a wider and alternative sense of how the world could and should be. Matthew Corbeil and Jordan House explore both the practical limits and the wider possibilities indicated by labour solidarity networks using direct action. Finally, Jacinthe Michaud explores historical moments of synergy between feminist activism and other political movements to discuss what is needed for the real transformation of movement coalitions.

As a non-Canadian reader, I found the empirical range of the chapters gave a lively insight into the many dimensions of popular struggle in Canada. The level of the debate was also inspiring, and left me wondering about the context of Canadian ways of thinking social movements. Along with the three modes of theorising identified in the introduction, we also have Coburn and Atleo’s Nuu-chah-nulth perspective as well as others framed within more conventional Marxist approaches that are strong on the critique of issues and structure, and weak on movements and struggle (what we can actually do). Overall, there is no doubt from this collection about the quality of thinking within Canadian writing on movements; but I would have liked some more of a sense of a conversation between these different modes.

If it is unfair to hope for explicit reflection on the forces shaping theorising within Canadian movements and in Canadian academia, surely part of a Gramscian perspective is to attempt to construct more of a relationship between these different elements. As it is, the chapters are not “potatoes in a sack”; but the conversation is not, yet, counter-hegemonic in the sense used in the book. Or, perhaps, in the wider world? What we know from the outside about the strength of First Nations resistance to the petroleum industry in particular, the strength of movements at the level of individual provinces or the organisation of summit protests suggests that there is a wider, and more effective, way of working together and that the rest of the global North at least can learn something useful from Canadian experiences – but it was not obvious to me on closing the book how this capacity for solidarity is supported, developed and theorised.

One important question for activists lies in the book’s subtitle. To the best of my knowledge Gramsci never used the phrase counter-hegemony. It is certainly consistent with his thought, but in practice is used in two rather different ways. In one form, counter-hegemony would be the development of an incipient *new* hegemony: this was, after all, Gramsci’s own perspective. This form of counter-hegemony then involves different movements finding common perspectives and shared interests in the formation of a strategic alliance for a new kind of society; and Carroll’s introduction firmly situates the book within this perspective.

Conversely, there are usages of “counter-hegemony” which are (implicitly) Foucauldian and highlight simply any resistance, from a given location, to existing forms of hegemony. An optimistic reading treats this situation as itself radical, in a way which neither Gramsci nor Foucault gives us much warrant for: historically, most forms of localised resistance or resentment do not get beyond that, and we are left with the gap between their actors who remain “trapped in their own lives”, as EP Thompson puts it, and the might-have-beens glimpsed in their resistance. More sharply, Gary Kinsman’s chapter highlights how queer organising went from being a counter-hegemonic movement to part of a new, neoliberal hegemony: single-issue politics at the expense of other movements is no victory.

Reading *A World to Win*, I felt that its chapters veered from one to another perspective on counter-hegemony, along with a third kind, exemplified by the title of Coburn and Atleo’s chapter, “Not just another social movement”, highlighting the extent to which some First Nations populations remain in a position to resist not just neoliberalism but capitalism (if not always class society) from outside. Similarly, Michaud highlight the very real challenges involved in transforming movement alliances in ways that really take feminism (and, she notes, anti-racism, indigenous politics and LGBTQ activism) on board. The irreducibility, in this sense, of the different ways of life and subjectivities from which movements grow makes the challenge of constructing counter-hegemony a very substantial one indeed; or, from a Gramscian perspective, it is

one which grows out of wider and deeper levels of popular participation in the war of position to construct a different world.

If the introductory chapter does address some of these difficulties (and can usefully be reread after finishing the book), the chapter sequence leaves us *in media res*, with these problems still open and unresolved; and this is, I think, a more honest way of thinking the challenge of counter-hegemony. Fully-blown counter-hegemonic alliances and projects tend to develop at the height of global social movement waves, which tip over into revolutions: the current wave, within which this book has been produced, has had its revolutionary moments (in Latin America and MENA) but Canada, like most of western Europe, has suffered the curse of being sufficiently involved in the wider global wave, and sufficiently mobilised, to grasp the possibility of going further without actually reaching that point. This is, obviously enough, a point where radical theory can be a particularly useful intervention, in trying to develop a shared analysis both of the current situation and of what the next step might be; it is also frustrating, in that the limits of what actually-existing movements can do is continually contrasted with what their most articulate and conscious elements need them to become. Along with struggling for better (broader-based *and* more transformative) alliances in practice, movements also struggle at this point to express an understanding of their own action in terms of its own “zone of proximal development”, the highest potential for “what comes next” that can credibly be articulated to an activist audience. *A World to Win* is a valuable contribution to that process.

About the review author

Laurence Cox has been involved in social movement networking and activist education in Ireland since the late 1990s. He is co-author, with Alf Nilsen, of *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism*. He can be contacted at laurence.cox@nuim.ie.