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## How do we think in movements? Learning, knowledge and struggle

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### **Introduction: puppets and protests**

In June 2003, I was standing over a photocopier running off programmes for an activist get-together in inner-city Dublin. Over that weekend, perhaps 150 activists crowded into the rooms of an old Georgian house, now a trade union social club, to share their experiences of organising – how to carry out direct action, how to make alliances between movements, how to deal with burnout, how to work with internal diversity, how to build alternative media, in the fifth of a series of “Grassroots Gatherings”.

The highlight was a puppet show about the Argentinean revolution of 2001, which saw five governments in the space of two weeks. Activist Graciela Monteagudo and *piquetera* (roads blockader) Neka presented a show with puppets made from waste cardboard – some of those whose livelihoods had been destroyed by neoliberalism live from collecting it. Together they showed us an inspiring picture of the alliances between the different social groups involved in blockading highways, self-organising their own neighbourhoods, running collective soup kitchens and carrying out the street protests that brought down one president after another.

The weekend was structured around opposition to the World Economic Forum’s planned regional event in Dublin Castle that October, one of a series around the world attempting to respond to the increasing contestation of the WEF and other international financial institutions since the Zapatista uprising of 1994 and the Seattle protests of 1999. Between the Grassroots Gathering in June and the overlapping Irish Social Forum, perhaps 200 or 250 activists had directly agreed to resist the WEF: but behind them were much larger networks of anti-capitalist, ecological, Third World solidarity, feminist, anti-racist and working-class community organizing. The Gatherings, and the Social Forum, were helping movements learn how to work together again after years of often separated activity and the dominance of NGO models.

In the event, it was more than enough: the WEF event was cancelled. For a glorious week or so the police statement that they couldn’t guarantee security for a literal castle against maybe 150 non-violent activists was allowed to stand ... before some PR person came out with the line that the real issue was that a report hadn’t been prepared in time. The puppet show had told a story that helped Irish activists think about their own alliance-making, and fed into a wider process of self-education for action. The following year, we put Ireland’s largest-ever anti-authoritarian protest together, in a weekend of

resistance to the EU's Fortress Europe policies, increased militarisation, privatisation of services and the cuts that preceded official austerity after the crash.

In this chapter, I want to explore the problem of how movements can create the spaces they need to think and learn. I am writing as someone who has been involved in organising such spaces for a third of a century, variously in activist mentoring, publishing movement periodicals, organising encounters between different movements and communities in struggle, writing for movements, as an activist trainer and educator and supporting activists' research into their own movements' practice.

Some of this has been smuggled into more or less sociological contexts, and has drawn on the fringes of academic sociology; for this chapter, my concern is to keep returning to the problems facing organisers and to use sociological tools when they are helpful for thinking about those problems, rather than trying to frame this as an academic problem or (worse) pretend that the solutions disciplinary sociology have to offer are necessarily the ones that movements for social transformation actually need.

### **Why movement thinking matters**

It's easy to be impatient with people talking about the need to think and learn when there's something wrong in the world. And of course it *is* hard that people who are poor, oppressed, and culturally stigmatised have to do all the heavy lifting when it comes to changing their situation – but it isn't surprising that they have to do so.

If people's suffering was enough for things to change, that change would already have happened. The same would be true if it was sufficient to raise widespread awareness of the suffering, or if many people taking action was enough in itself. The second round of Black Lives Matter – and the continuation of police killings, the policies and relationships that underpin them and the overarching racism of US society – made this clear: many people suffer, many people know this and many people take action, but not very much has actually changed.

Sometimes you just can't win a battle – or it can't be won at the moment, because the forces you are up against are just too large. Often enough, though, battles are winnable, but are lost because of things that we can have some effect on. People buy into ideologies that make their suffering seem natural and inevitable, or that make the struggle for change seem unwinnable. Or people recognise that change can come, but prefer to talk about it in the past than take action in the present. Or people take action, but in ways that make them dependent on the powerful, wealthy and privileged groups their issue threatens. Or people do take action on their own behalf, but in ineffective ways. All of these are spaces where knowledge can make a difference, in sharpening the tools of action.

Societies rarely provide us with the knowledge and culture we need to transform them radically: but it takes time to fully realize this. After all, most of our education, most of our media and many people who make a career out of doing so will tell us that the

solutions are closer to hand: raise awareness, express outrage, seek better representation, engage in lobbying, donate money, vote the right way, comment on shows and movies, buy the right things... It takes time and thought to notice that doing the obvious thing may feel good but rarely brings about real, structural change – and to realise that what makes something obvious is precisely that it is already a routine part of everyday life in the society we want to change.

If we look back at the movements that really have changed society – the anti-colonial struggles that defeated empires around the world; the democratic struggles that overthrew monarchies and, later, dictatorships; the feminist and LGBTQ+ struggles that changed gender relations and sexual possibilities; the anti-racist struggles that defeated slavery; the struggles for labour rights and welfare states; the struggle against fascism or the struggles of indigenous peoples – we discover that they were, precisely, *struggles*. People had to work out for themselves how to do something that had not yet been done, see their way past the answers they had been brought up with and work through trials and errors at the cost of police violence, executions, torture chambers, exile, damaged lives and more, until they worked out how to do what they needed to.

What we need to know in order to make a better world – and the tools to create that knowledge, share it, take it further – comes directly or indirectly from movements for change, not from the world we are trying to overthrow. We have to learn to think, together, *as movements* – not as isolated readers of books sold by major presses, as people who follow celebrities on social media or TV, or as students in for-profit or state education. That also includes the challenge of working out what *our* questions and learning needs are, not what sells, or gets clicks, or is approved by our favourite experts. We have to create the institutions and languages to answer those questions and meet those needs; and this is easier said than done.

### **Social movement “learning and knowledge production”**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, working-class education activists countered the instrumentalist rhetoric of providing “useful knowledge” for the working class (the skills then required by employers) with the phrase “really useful knowledge” (the knowledge that might enable workers to free themselves from lives dominated by the needs of capital). This focus on knowledge for *action* is all too often missing, in lineages of critical thought shaped by academia which assume that knowledge on its own will change things – or that possession of the right theory is enough.

If we compare movement thinking spaces in the 2020s with those of the early 2000s (in the period of Indymedia, the social forums and the Zapatista-inspired networks of global action), the increasing enclosure of our space for thought starts to become visible. But if we compare the early 2000s to the jungle of newsletters, journals, flyers, posters, music and art that sprang up globally in the “long 1968”, and which I and colleagues recently collected (Mohandesi et al. 2018), the decline over 50 years is even starker.

Go back a century or more, when the working-class press in countries like Germany included literally dozens of daily newspapers (94 associated with the SPD in 1914<sup>1</sup>) and radical meetings (outdoors in summer, indoors in winter) were a form of popular entertainment in a city like London (see Bocking et al. 2014: 15-24), and the scale of what we have lost is clear (Williams 1960 already discussed the shift from a radical press to the commercial “yellow press”). Yet even in the past two decades we can see a massive decline in spaces *owned by movements* to think about *their own action*. This situation is of course part of the wider decline of the “infrastructure of dissent” (Sears 2014).

In the 2020s in the global North, radical discussion is increasingly dominated by, and is therefore subject to the pressures of, for-profit publishing (including radical commercial publishing); social media; and academia. This means that what *looks like* movement thinking is in practice subject to the logics that drive these other spaces – the familiar logics of profit, algorithms, academic status, celebrity. Or put another way, there has been an enclosure of our thinking about social change. This has concrete implications for the kinds of things we can talk about – and what is hard to talk about<sup>2</sup>.

For more than 150 years activists have talked about their multiple tasks as involving “agitation, education and organisation” – but there is a lot more scope in these enclosed spaces for passive outrage than for the kind of agitation that leads to action; and there is more scope for disconnected analysis than for the kind of education that identifies where pressure needs to be applied and what alliances are possible. There is very little space for talking about organising, other than to celebrate or condemn as passive spectators.

Along with this – and in part as a product of the continued rise of global English despite the rapidly declining political significance of the US and UK, Canada and Australia – is an intensified provincialism in time and space. Activists whose forerunners read widely about movement struggles and revolutions around the world are increasingly likely to be mentally trapped in our own place, issue and time with only a handful of caricatured references from elsewhere (for example: Gandhi, Mandela and King not as they were but as the icons of a sanitised popular culture).

These logics can be transformed in moments of popular uprising: Indymedia, after all, came out of nowhere and as a response to the corporate media’s refusal to engage with the movements organising for Seattle in 1999, in a time when the old radical print culture was struggling with how distribution could happen without mass movements but only starting to move online. As a space for reporting from movements and discussing within and between them, Indymedia became so effective by the time the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fes.de/adsd50/vorwaerts>

<sup>2</sup> To be clear, it is not that it is impossible to use “the master’s tools” for something else: Audre Lorde was an academic, a professional writer and a publisher among other things. Activists do find ways to *use* social media, the university or commercial publishing – but we have to start from the space of asking what are we using them for, rather than allowing the logics of making a living, a career or a brand within any of these to use us.

protests were over that it was left open, and adopted across the world as a space for activists to talk with one another (Gillan and Cox 2014).

When that moment in turn had passed and the interactive web technologies Indymedia had pioneered were being taken over by the new enclosures of the social media corporations, the uprisings of 2011 – in the Middle East and North Africa, the “movements of the squares” in Greece and Spain, Occupy in the Anglophone world – saw a rediscovery of the value of face-to-face discussion. Not only in movement assemblies and educational events, but in the daily encounter and discussion with *compañeros* and *compañeras* co-organising the practicalities of feeding an encampment, resisting the police, issuing a statement or connecting to local neighbourhoods, movement participants reinvented learning and knowledge production from below for the nth time (Szolucha 2020).

### **Knowledge needs, movement development and direction**

But what sorts of knowledge do movements generate? Eyerman and Jamison (1991) suggest that they generate knowledge of cosmology (how the world is), organisation (how to challenge power) and technology (how to build a different world). This parallels O’Sullivan’s (1999) trilogy of critique, resistance and creation (Cox 2014a). Of course we can think about movement knowledge in many ways; the most important point though is to see it as diverse and as serving different organising purposes.

The far older trilogy of agitation, education and organisation mentioned above works in the same way. There is an agitational task of bringing people to the point not of agreeing that things are unjust and appalling – but that they, personally, are willing to commit to taking action around it. There is an educational task of helping people to understand what the structural barriers – interests, institutions, ideologies – are that keep the problem recurring despite people’s awareness of what is wrong: of coming to understand suffering and injustice as proceeding from relationships of exploitation, oppression and cultural hierarchy, and of identifying which social groups have an interest in preserving the situation and which have an interest in transforming it. It is of course the latter ones who are worth talking to – not because they already recognise these relationships and understand them, but because organising work can bear much greater fruit with people whose “good sense” (Gramsci 1948) stands in clear opposition to the “common sense” that typically keeps them simply trying to cope on a local or individual level.

Finally, and most challengingly – because least supported by dominant modes of knowledge production – we have organising: understanding what forms of agitation, education, mobilisation work and how to bring them about; understanding how to create effective and emancipatory relationships within organisations and movements; understanding the tactics, techniques and strategies of confrontation and power; understanding how to make alliances that go beyond our own region or country, our own issue, movement and community.

Where in movements does this happen? Foley (1999) points us to formal, non-formal, informal and incidental modes of learning, which are of course also modes of knowledge *creation*. These take place in all sorts of movement spaces: formal courses, training workshops, mentoring, practice-oriented debates over strategy or tactics, movement media, activists' own writing etc., moments of defeat, family socialisation, critical reading of mainstream material for our own purposes ... even puppet shows.

### **Differences between and within movements**

But if we think through our own movements, communities and organisations in these terms, it quickly becomes clear that we don't all do everything; and the less developed a movement is, the less of these activities happen. Movement learning is not a universal given: it is often limited, colonised by the "common sense" represented by the social media algorithm, by what can be sold for profit or what gets attention in academia. In fact the historical ups and downs highlighted above are also true in individual communities and movements: the same group may invest deeply in debate, education, training and reflection at one point and abandon the problem at another time.

This isn't simply or easily a problem of resources: some of the most extensive movement learning happens in majority world contexts, such as the South African shack-dwellers' organisation Abahlali baseMjondolo's University, the massive educational investment of Brazil's landless people's organisation the MST, the revolutionary schools of Mexico's Zapatistas or the Autonomous Administration of NE Syria with its feminist education.

Meanwhile well-resourced NGOs in the global north, or movements which exist in their own silo, with their own privileged relationships to mainstream institutions, often resist any kind of discussion that threatens their internal power relationships, culture etc. In practice, such situations also mean that we are relying on "the master's tools" - mainstream education, for-profit publishing and media, social media etc. to do our thinking for us - as though they existed for the purpose of helping us transform the structures they exist within and rely on.

Struggle is a developmental process; movements have differing capacity to act and reflect, but they also set themselves differing goals in terms of their seriousness about reaching beyond themselves, transforming the world they operate within, building wider alliances and deepening the challenge to everyday social relationships. This is partly a reflection of scale and diversity: the more movements go beyond a single organisation in a single place with a single kind of participant, the more they have to articulate what their principles are rather than assuming them from a shared culture and language. They have to work out what their principles mean in different contexts than those they were first formulated in; and they have to mediate between different kinds of needs, situation and fields of struggle etc. (Cox and Nilsen 2014).

The extent to which collective thought, discussion, learning and knowledge creation are integral to a movement's practice also reflects how far something genuinely constitutes a *movement* in the sense of being a collective *actor*. This is not a question of unity but rather of whether there is genuine reflection about "what are we doing" that feeds into a broadly shared argument (Touraine 1991; Melucci 1989) and a sense that "we" can have a collective strategy that is more than the sum of what individuals are up to. In many cases, what now appears as a movement may in fact be a market, an audience or a style: a passive rather than democratic space, cosplaying social transformation.

### **What is to be done?**

Social movements *move* – they exist because things aren't as they should be, and so there is (or there should be) a basic discontent with their current capacity to change the world. To be in movement, honestly and thoughtfully, is therefore to question ourselves in some way. How can we reach the people we haven't yet reached? How can we make alliances with the movements we need on our side? How can we find the strategies we need to effectively challenge power structures, dominant ideologies, economic relationships? How do we imagine the process of transformation?

But how can we know what our movements are capable of becoming, beyond their reality today? This question of "real potential" is not easily answered within the framework of an empirical sociology that is better at the wisdom of hindsight and the explanation of what exists today (Cox 2018).

And: how do we know who to listen to? After all, the people who give us confident answers in the movement equivalent of TED talks have rarely themselves actually brought about the kinds of large-scale change we aspire to, and their examples may not really work in our situation (as with the attempt to emulate the US Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland: Dooley 1998).

And: times change. Few people a century ago would have predicted the effectiveness of uprisings like those of the Zapatistas or Rojava, as against state-centric models of social change; conversely, it was not obvious that the right to vote – for workers, for women, for blacks – would eventually make so *little* difference. William Morris noted this point in a fantasy novella from 1884, whose implications are still lost on many, writing that people

"fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other [people] have to fight for what they meant under another name".

So what can we do? Gramsci encouraged us to trust in ourselves, not as we are but as we bring out what he called our "good sense" – rooted in our social relations with one another and our material relations with the natural world – as against the archaeological stratification of consciousness that he sees as making up "common sense", our starting place. In this sense he pushes us towards what could be described

as a rational organising process, not in a Fordist sense but in the sense of ways of organising that help us to bring out what we already know. Freire's educational strategy takes this up in relation to the knowledge that comes from our given social circumstances alone, as is appropriate for a state-led literacy programme; but Gramsci's also pays attention to the rationality of how we relate to one another in struggle<sup>3</sup>.

How do we create learning spaces (formal or informal), organic intellectuals (individuals or networks) and movement processes that speak to this articulation of what we have come to know together? How can we find the (self-)educational strategies that keep our movements grounded in radical needs, aiming towards change that really meets those needs, and learning about how to get there from here? This is also of course about getting rid of the "muck of ages" – the forms of culture, ideology, socialisation, psychology and so on that stop us looking to one another to work out how to overthrow the things that are breaking us (Barker 1995).

### **Assessing particular movements**

There is no simple way to assess a particular movement's spaces for learning and thinking, other than to compare it to others – the same movement in other countries; other movements in the same country; other movements in the past. We also have to do so being aware that we are comparing apples and kaleidoscopes: the structures and institutions I have listed above make this clear.

Still we can ask how far a particular movement or organisation gets in enabling "ordinary" members of the groups and communities it draws from to articulate their own life experience, not simply descriptively and within their own language but in ways that can speak to people with other life experiences and in other circumstances. Is the capacity to speak beyond your own situation reserved for movement elites and specialists, or is it widespread?

We can also ask how far a movement's learning and knowledge production equips it to *listen* to other movements and communities in struggle, and to movements elsewhere. What capacity for solidarity, relationships of equality, and to see the interconnectedness of struggles is made present in its educational and discussion practices?

We can ask whether a movement is capable of thinking *as a strategic actor*: not simply imagining a desired future or writing the cookbooks of the future (or the policy

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<sup>3</sup> Gramsci and Marx also leave us with another thought, which is that not all social groups have the same potential for organising in terms of this kind of social rationality, or for developing broad alliances. Our different social situations position us differently in relation to the economic, political and cultural relationships of the world, with more or less *potential* to grasp the totality. To say this is not to leap to a magical answer that *of course* the industrial proletariat (or the Third World peasantry, or women, or any other group) is always and automatically in this position. It is, perhaps, to encourage us to *pay attention* to how far particular organising processes are capable of getting on their own, and to *help* when a particular group struggles to reach beyond a certain point, not in any kind of patronising way but out of the basic solidarity that leads us to see the extreme pressures some groups are organising under.



programmes of the future) but thinking through the kinds of mobilisation and alliance needed to bring about that change, the kinds of opposition that will have to be faced down, the strategies required in moments of crisis and the tactics and organising practices today that can enable this.

Fundamentally, the question is what a movement *needs to know* and to *know how to do* in order to bring about the change it needs, at every level: the mobilisation and transformation of its own participants, relationships with other movements, and the overthrow or transformation of the state, of economic relationships and of cultural hierarchy.

These are not small asks – but these are difficult times. In our own publicity we are all too ready to highlight the existential crises of global heating and the rise of fascism, the crises of femicide and of trans- and homophobia, the racism of murderous border and policing practices, the slow death tolls of inequality and daily work, the brutality faced by the disabled or the neurodivergent. But if we take our own rhetoric seriously, we can hardly exempt ourselves from needing to think on a level equal to the challenge. It is not enough simply to “do something”: we have to do the thing that can actually change the situation, not in a Golden Rule fantasy where “if everyone does X the problem will be solved” but in the real world where only some of us will take action, and in very different circumstances.

### **Conclusion: a strategic learning course for activists**

I finish with the example of the “Movement Learning Catalyst” project that I am currently involved with, a network of three pan-European activist training groups and scholar-activists. The Ulex Project in Catalunya delivers training on a wide range of subjects to radical movements, notably the “Ecology of Social Movements” course which supports experienced activists to think about their organisation’s place within its movement and their movement’s place in relation to other movements. The European Community Organising Network brings together grassroots organising for power in disadvantaged countries, particularly in Eastern and Central Europe where traditional political languages are stigmatised. European Alternatives brings together intellectual, artistic and activist strategies for a different kind of European continent, beyond the confines and the logics of the European Union. As a sociologist, working with my popular education colleagues Fergal Finnegan and Alberto Arribas Lozano, we draw on Maynooth’s own past experience of involvement with the Grassroots Gatherings discussed at the start of this chapter and a five-year MA for activists.

Together this network is trying to answer the question “What do movements for transformation actually need to know?” We started from an extensive research process talking to experienced activists and adult educators across many different movements, communities in struggle and countries – in focus groups, in expert interviews, using secondary data analysis and with a “community of inquiry” accompanying the research process.

This research feeds into an attempt to articulate the answers in the form of a “competence framework” identifying the knowledge, skills and ways of being that our research participants identify – and more specifically those which are not *already* widely available to movement participants. There is after all a relatively extensive infrastructure of activist training (some provided by the different organisations we work with) and how-to books focussed on more or less technical and isolated skills: social media work, online security, emotional resilience, direct action techniques, legal strategies, organisational decision-making and so on.

As the developmental perspective above suggests, we can expect a lot more of this to exist and in a greater range of movements and communities. “Higher-level” skills emerge less frequently, often only in moments of large-scale uprisings: the skills to connect not just across an individual country but to organise internationally in meaningful ways; the skills to form deep alliances and not simply occasional coalitions between different communities, different social groups and different movements; and the strategic skills for thinking about how movements can bring about large-scale social transformation. Often too, these skills only exist incidentally or accidentally, in individual activists who have read further or taken up particular roles, rather than being shared properties of whole movements and organisations.

With this sense of what movement activists most need to know, need to know how to do and need to know how to be, we are starting to outline a curriculum and create the resources needed – not as a top-down process of providing the answers but fundamentally in an approach geared to “learning from each other’s struggles”, peer learning in a Gramscian or Freirean model which looks to movement practice as a source for (partial) knowledge and creates an egalitarian learning space between practitioners grounded in solidarity where those partial knowledges can become something greater. This is of course also embodying the change we want to see, practicing on a smaller scale the kinds of strategic alliance for transformation between movements that is needed if we are to survive the current crisis.

Our next step is to try this out, as a year-long pilot course with a mixture of residential and online elements provided on a part-time basis for an initial cohort of activists from across different European countries, movements and communities. We are making this available on a solidarity economy basis so that no activist who wants to take part will be prevented from doing so for financial reasons. We also expect that alongside those who follow the whole course through for the whole year, some will take only one or another part. Regional groups in different languages will help to localise and spread elements of the learning, while the curriculum and resources will be available open-access to be used in other movement training settings with or without our involvement. As we go, and after that first pilot year, we need to see what our participants – and other activists – feel about the benefits or otherwise of the process.

This is of course “sociology for social justice”, not in the sense of something derived in a top-down way from The Literature on Theory and Method, but in the sense in which

sociology has emerged along with “the movement of society” (Cox 2014b), as the theoretical reflex of socialist and anarchist movements, radical democrats, anti-slavery and anti-colonial struggles, feminist and LGBTQ+ movements, community activism and welfare organising, radical and popular education activism, anti-fascist and anti-racist movements, indigenous struggles, ecological organising and more. It is movements like these that have pushed us to problematise – and therefore to study – the social world; that have helped us to think about how we can know – and therefore research – its complexities; and that hold out the possibility for there to be a social world capable of studying itself in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century.

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