

Learning from each other's struggles

Laurence Cox

Making connections

Sociology has always been in dialogue with social movements, from Tocqueville, Marx and Durkheim to Angela Davis, Herbert Marcuse, Frances Piven and Toni Negri. As a young activist, wanting to understand the movements I was involved in and see how we could take them further, sociology was the obvious starting-point. I had grown up around human rights and anti-apartheid, the peace and ecology movements. Travel and study around Europe showed me whole movement scenes and subcultures – feminist, libertarian, socialist – with roots in the 1960s and 1970s and still generating new movements in the 1980s and 1990s.

I started to research where these shared histories and cultures had come from, and how we could draw on them to build new alliances. My PhD, on the potential for radical alliances developing the everyday popular rationalities expressed by these cultures, was written against the background of the Zapatistas and submitted just in time to see the Seattle protests against the WTO validate its conclusions and change the movement landscape across the industrialised North. Writing the thesis went hand-in-hand with editing an activist magazine which tried to make those links in practical ways, and with small gatherings of activists from different movements – around the possibility of a new left, networking independent media, reviving the older alternative movements and trying to create cross-movement dialogues.

Knowledge for social change

My first full-time job was teaching residential care workers in the rustbelt town of Waterford. Mature students introduced me to a whole world of community organising I had never heard of but which represented many of the same grassroots, radical-democratic values in working-class voices. I also started to work with postgrads doing research “from and for” their own movements.

Movements need research of many kinds. But much supposedly radical knowledge – hard-hitting, critical analyses of why things are the way they are – gathers dust in government departments, university libraries and NGO offices because it seeks to speak to the powerful and wealthy who benefit from that very situation. Something else, and more, is needed.

Social movements struggle to change the world, which is a kind of practical sociology. But mistakes are easy and can be costly, while real movement learning is a struggle. One of the least costly things to affect is the movement's own practice, ensuring that participants' efforts do not go to waste - that we are not just acting out our *beliefs* about change, or letting organisational goals become an end in themselves.

“Participatory action research in movement practice” means activists exploring together what they do, and how they can do it better. It can have different kinds of impact: awareness of *being* a movement (not always obvious, where activism has become service delivery), a wider perspective on social change, clearer articulation of strategic choices, a chance to reflect on the whirl of “things to do”, the ability to ask what is working, or a chance to hold discussions that would otherwise not happen.

Methodologically, this means treating participants as everyday experts on their own activities and purposes and working with them to develop that, bringing in as great a variety of participants as possible to combine the knowledge implied by their different standpoints.

Over the years I have worked with researchers in community education contexts, activist courses and PhDs, with people involved in everything from working-class community organising to home birth activism and from feminist pagans to fighting extractive industries. This has meant very different things in different movements and situations, with outputs ranging from oral histories via radical education and communication projects to “lessons learned” for other campaigns. Most participants say that they value the experience, while the research feeds back into movements' own education and development processes.

Intersectional politics

Back in Dublin, anarchist comrades invited me to join them in calling a “Grassroots Gathering” bringing together different Irish movements opposed to neo-liberalism. In all eleven gatherings were held between 2001 and 2008, each organised by a different group in a different city but all with the shared goal of helping form alliances between social movements.

In the Gatherings we tried to turn theoretical understanding into practice. In a single society, different forms of oppression and injustice are interconnected and need to be challenged together. States and many NGOs present these as separate “issues” which can be solved by policy initiatives without seriously challenging social structures – but the barriers which prevent such initiatives from transforming situations of exploitation, oppression and stigma are represented by entrenched social interests which can only be tackled by large-scale alliances of those affected and other movements for change.

To turn this understanding into practice, and to come to see each other as allies, is easier said than done, but some key alliances were made between ecologists, the left and international / peace activists. Community activists were more sceptical for a range of reasons, but nevertheless links were made which have stood the test of time. Sexual violence within the network was met with a feminist uprising which transformed movement culture in many ways and helped give rise to a new wave of feminist politics in Ireland.

The network also played an important role in resisting the World Economic Forum and the EU’s neo-liberal Lisbon Agenda, in opposing the use of Shannon airport for US military and CIA aircraft, in supporting opposition to the Shell pipeline at Rosport and in creating the space for social centre and other alternative culture projects.

Most importantly perhaps, many activists (not all) came to act in ways that supported the basic analysis: oppression and injustice are interconnected, and movements must work together to challenge them. When we do, we found, we are stronger – and we understand more of what is happening.

Learning from each other's struggles

Since 2008, Ireland has been in severe economic and political crisis. As the state has increasingly attacked social movements and poor and marginalised communities, we are seeing a decline of professionalised advocacy and a rise of grassroots organising by those directly affected.

In this context, a few sociologists and adult educators set up an MA geared towards social movements, moving away from existing models emphasising policy, legal, media and fund-raising skills for state-funded professionals and towards broader questions of power and injustice, tools for radical education and personal transformation within an overarching sense of community education methods and activism as a skilled practice.

This MA in “Community Education, Equality and Social Activism” is not a simple activist training – the “nuts and bolts” of how to organise a meeting, do up a website or run a protest are ones which most participants already have – but rather gives activists the chance to step back and reflect on their day-to-day activities, and crucially to “learn from each other’s struggles”. A history of increasingly separate and professionalised “sectors” has led to distrust between movements, and a tendency to take one particular way of organising for granted. Spending a year with a small number of other activists is a very powerful – if sometimes bumpy! – way of overcoming these barriers and coming to see ourselves as reflective practitioners.

This same double process – of supporting activists to develop their own theoretical and practical reflections and of bridging the many gaps between them – has found shape internationally in the open-access social movement research journal *Interface*. Unlike other social movements research journals it is not a space where academics talk “about” movements as experts, but a space for dialogue between movement theorists and engaged researchers at every level, from editing and peer review to writing and distribution.

Interface asks its authors to share what they have learned with people involved in *other* movements, in *other* countries, using *different* disciplines or thinking within *different* intellectual / political traditions. Rather than preaching to the choir and debating within an already-agreed framework, it asks participants to try to create knowledge that “works” beyond its specific context of origin: again, “learning from each other’s struggles” as a principle. Now working on its eighth issue, *Interface* has

become a productive space of encounter between activists and researchers across the world.

Conclusion

If the different structures of inequality and power that make up the contemporary world are interlinked, they cannot be understood in isolation. The knowledge needed to do that – and to change them – has to be *earned*, in reflecting on our own experience of trying to challenge them and talking to others who have done the same, in putting theory to the test of practice. Social movements, in this sense, are a long process of practical sociology, trying to understand the workings of oppression and exploitation in order to bring about change. Our Irish experiences are part and parcel of this learning process.

Bio:

Laurence Cox did a BA in European Studies and a PhD in Sociology at Trinity College Dublin. He has taught in TCD, Waterford and many activist and adult education settings and now works in the National University of Ireland Maynooth. Along the way he has been a busker, kitchen porter, translator, magazine editor, kindergarten organiser and father.

Dr Cox has been active in many different social movements over the past quarter century, and collaborates widely with activists on teaching, research and writing. Publications include *Understanding European movements, Marxism and social movements, Ireland's new religious movements* and *Buddhism and Ireland*. (99 words)

Media links

“Ireland from below: grassroots organising”. Robert Allen, *Blue* vol. II #86 (15 June 2003)

<http://www.bluegreenearth.us/archive/article/2003/allen1.html>

“Organisers condemn banning of May Day march”. *Indymedia Ireland* 30 April 2004

<http://www.indymedia.ie/article/64713>

“The Grassroots Gatherings: networking a movement of movements”. *Red and Black Revolution* 12 (2007), archived at

<http://eprints.nuim.ie/1535/>

“Community development: lessons for social movements”. *Indymedia Ireland* 3 February 2010

<http://www.indymedia.ie/article/95699>

“Another world is under construction? Social movement responses to inequality and crisis”. *Irish Left Review* 17 May 2010

<http://www.irishleftreview.org/2010/05/17/world-construction-social-movement-responses-inequality-crisis/>

“There must be some way out of here: social movements and the crisis in Ireland”.
May Day International special 1 May 2011 (ZNet / New Left Project / CrisisJam /
Greek Left Review)

http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/mayday/article/there_must_be_some_kind_of_way_out_of_here_social_movements_and_the_crisis

“Garda to examine findings of report”. Lorna Siggins, *Irish Times* 25 April 2012

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2012/0425/1224315146774.html>

Related resources

Homepage for the MA in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism:

<http://ma-ceesa.blogspot.com>

Homepage for *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*:

<http://interfacejournal.net>

“Saying something useful: the challenge of movement-relevant research”. University
of Nottingham Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice podcast

http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~ldzwww/podcasting/cssjg_Laurance_Cox.html

Colin Barker and Laurence Cox, “What have the Romans ever done for us?”

<http://www.into-ebooks.com/essay/what-have-the-romans-ever-done-for-us/>