We Make Our Own History

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Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism

Laurence Cox and Alf Gunvald Nilsen

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'The This-Worldliness of their Thought': Social Movements and Theory

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. It is in practice that human beings must prove the truth – i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of their thought.

Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

In every country the process is different, although the content is the same. And the content is the crisis of the ruling class's hegemony, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking, for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of broad masses … or because huge masses … have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution. A 'crisis of authority ' is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the state.

These are the words of the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci (1998: 210), writing from behind the walls of Mussolini's prisons. The 'red years' of 1919–20, which saw north and central Italy swept by a wave of strikes, land and factory occupations and councils, had thrown liberal capitalism and parliamentary democracy into a systemic crisis, to which fascism had appeared as offering a way out. Such crises – organic in Gramsci's terms – are essentially those moments in modern history when economic growth grinds to a halt, when existing political loyalties wither away, and when dominant groups are confronted with the oppositional projects

of subaltern groups – that is, *social movements from below* – which no longer accept the terms on which they are ruled and therefore strive to develop alternative social orders. Organic crises, in other words, are those moments when subaltern groups develop forms of collective agency that push the limits of what they previously thought it possible to achieve in terms of progressive change.

The present is just such a moment. The spectacular failure of neoliberalism as a global, elite-led project of market-oriented economic reforms is increasingly evident. Launched in the late 1970s as a response from above to the stagnation of post-war models of state-regulated capitalist development and to the movement wave of 1968 (Lash and Urry 1987, Wainwright 1994), the neoliberal project has produced an economic system that systematically privileges the needs and interests of an ever-narrowing segment of the global population. This was already evident long before the onset of the financial crisis of 2008.

Between 1960 and 1997, for example, the ratio between the share of income received by the richest 20 per cent of the world's countries to that received by the poorest 20 per cent increased from 30:1 to 74:1; the richest 20 per cent of humanity received more than 85 per cent of the world's wealth, while the remaining 80 per cent had to make do with less than 15 per cent of the world's wealth (UNDP 1999, 2000). The trend towards spiralling inequality has accelerated during the crisis: in 2013, 1 per cent of the world's families own 46 per cent of the world's wealth, while the bottom half of the global population owns less than the world's 85 richest people (Oxfam 2014, UNDP 2014). Behind these figures lie the poverty, unemployment and dispossession that result from how neoliberalism has concentrated wealth and resources towards global elites across the North-South axis over a 30-year period (Harvey 2005, McNally 2011). Importantly, the rewards offered to the northern service class and petty bourgeoisie in the early years of Thatcherism and Reaganism have dwindled away to the point where the 'death of the middle class' is regularly announced (see OECD 2008, 2011; West and Nelson 2013, Peck 2011). In other words, the key allies of the neoliberal project in its northern heartlands are being systematically disaffected.

Conversely, since the mid-1990s, we have seen the development of large-scale social movements from below across most regions of the world-system (Polet and CETRI 2003, Juris 2008, Zibechi 2010, Manji and Ekine 2011). While this development has unfolded according to specific rhythms and assumed specific forms in different countries and regions,

it is increasingly clear that these protests, campaigns, movements and – in some cases – revolutionary situations, or even perhaps new state forms, are not isolated occurrences, but rather a historical wave within which we can see an emerging if complex 'movement of movements'. Indeed, the past two decades have witnessed an unprecedented degree of transnational coordination and alliance building between movements in different locales across the world, as well as the articulation of direct challenges to the global structures of economic and political power that have been entrenched in and through the neoliberal project (de Sousa Santos 2006, McNally 2013, Wood 2012).

In this book, we suggest that the current crisis can be thought of as the twilight of neoliberalism. Dramatic movements in Latin America and the Arab world have shown the limits of US geopolitical control of these once-crucial regions, while what once seemed an all-powerful New World Order has run into the sands of Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. European anti-austerity struggles have pushed the EU to the limits of governability, while North American movements have started to rebuild the alliances broken apart by post-9/11 nationalism and repression. Indian and Chinese capitalism are both facing large-scale resistance in rural areas, India's 'special economic zones' and Chinese factories. The ability of neoliberal institutions to weather financial crisis, continue delivering the goods for their core supporters, maintain internal and international alliances and (literally) turn back the tide is increasingly feeble. In the absence of any capacity to develop alternative strategies, neoliberal actors are increasingly adopting a siege mentality, marked by a narrowing of public debate, the tightening of the screws of austerity and a quicker resort to repression. Indeed, 'neoliberalism' itself has become a dirty word in public, and its representatives now have to meet in remote locations protected by alpine mountains or deserts in order to be safe from their own publics.[1]

But it is not enough, we argue, to critique the nature of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005), celebrate the existence and practices of the movement (Maeckelbergh 2009), or proclaim a refusal to engage in traditional statist politics (Holloway 2002). Movement participants have already done their own thinking – on which much sympathetic academic writing relies, in a hall-of-mirrors relationship. It is certainly useful to movements to find books which articulate their current points of view well; it does not, however, help them think *forwards*, or more exactly, it does not take them beyond the belief that if only we keep on doing what we are doing, as we are doing it, hopefully with more participants and more adherence to our

specific approach, we will win. As activists, we need something more from theory or research; we hope for the ability to think *beyond* our current understanding and identify perspectives that help us develop our practice, form alliances and learn from other people's struggles. Not all activists, of course, see things this way.

Why Do Activists Need Theory?

We start from the existential situation of activists as we understand and have experienced it. In this perspective, the process of becoming an activist is primarily a process of learning, which we describe in individual terms, though of course often this learning is that of a subaltern group, movement, or organisation (Vester 1975, Flett 2006, Raschke 1993). Initially, we become 'activists' because we find that something is not right in the world, and more specifically that it cannot be fixed within the normal channels. To become an activist, then, is to learn that the system does not work as it claims, and to move towards the understanding that to achieve change, we need to organise and create pressure.

For some, though not all, activists, this learning process continues, as we find that the system[2] is itself part of the problem, and that its resistance to our struggles for change is not accidental or contingent but, at some level, fundamental to its nature. Thus we come to connect our own issues with those of others, and to create solidarity in opposition to given power structures. This experience – of finding that we have to face off against a system, and that that system is both powerful and fundamentally opposed to us – raises some very large questions. The first, and most obvious, theoretical question that arises from this existential situation is simply 'What should we do?' (Barker and Cox 2002). Secondly, as we come to understand the agency of the various parts of the system, we ask 'How will the system react?' Thirdly, we have to ask ourselves, as struggle deepens and success does not seem easily within our grasp, 'What will work and how can we win?'

Laurence remembers very clearly the moment of realising that he had to think further than he had ever done before. It was early 1991, and the second Gulf War[3] was just about to start. As an activist researcher, he was spending the year in Hamburg, partly working with a local branch of the Green Party (going through its own convulsions), but becoming increasingly involved in a peace camp outside the US embassy in sub-zero

temperatures. In Germany, as in several other countries, a massive movement had opposed the war, and the key arguments had apparently been won. Yet not only was the war going ahead, but opinion polls were suddenly swinging around in favour of it. Something was happening that was not caused by surface events; despite winning the public debates and on the streets, the movement was encountering hidden structures, and deeper resistances than could be explained by any conspiracy theory.

Focusing as it does on the structural nature of social problems and political issues, Marxism constitutes a particularly relevant resource when we seek answers to questions like these. This flows from the fact that Marxism is one among several bodies of theory that strive to go beyond everyday 'common sense' and ideological justifications of why things are as they are, by drawing on the knowledge built up by activists in movements grounded in communities in struggle. Such theories – movement theorising – are shaped very differently to the understandings of the world generated within the official institutions of 'intellectual production', such as universities, newspapers, government departments, or churches. They are grounded in the experience and activism of subaltern groups – working-class people, women, racial and ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, indigenous peoples and others – who do not hold power, own the 'means of intellectual production', or benefit from high cultural status. Most fundamentally, the key goal of theories coming from such movements is not to reaffirm a given power structure but to change such structures, and their key resource is what activists have learned in their own lives and struggles, and from other movements, about how to do so (Eyerman and Jamison 1991, Conway 2005, Cox and Flesher Fominaya 2009, Choudry and Kapoor 2010, Hall et al. 2012, Cox 2014a).

This book is unashamedly based on this kind of activist theorising, whether it comes to us through our own lives and those of our friends and comrades, or through other writers who have attempted to articulate it. While we focus primarily on the example of Marxism, this is more because of our own familiarity with this body of thought than because we want to claim it as the only such kind of theorising.[4] Our concern is not to produce yet another defence of one activist theory *against* others. Rather, it is to show how we can reclaim activist knowledge – 'frozen' in the very specific form of Marxism – for our own movements and problems, and to encourage others to do the same with other forms of activist knowledge. The theoretical discourse of Marxism, in other words, has to show its 'this-worldliness' in practice, by offering something helpful to activists in terms

of telling us what to do, what to expect, and how to win. What we have found, and what we want to discuss, then, is not a set of pre-packaged answers but rather a way of thinking about these issues.

Notoriously, classical Marxism offers relatively little in the way of explicit political prescriptions. Marx and Engels's own political practice and writings are 'multi-vocal' and have been interpreted and developed in many different ways through the Second (social-democratic), Third (orthodox communist) and Fourth Internationals (Mills 1962, Thompson 1997), to say nothing of the various council-communist, humanist, autonomist and non-dogmatic Marxisms which we find ourselves in closer alignment with politically (Gottlieb 1989, Jay 1984). What we are interested in here, however, is not so much the specific 'lines' developed in these traditions as a particular understanding of *what politics is*, and hence of the social situation we find ourselves in as activists.

We have developed this understanding (Cox 1999a, Nilsen 2007, 2009a) around the proposition that Marxism is, at its core, a theory of organised human practice, and thus an alternative theory of social movements, very different in its shape from the academic school of that name. In this chapter, we explore an outline of that understanding, to see what it can have to offer other activists, whether Marxists or not. Our hope is that others will be inspired to do something similar with whichever forms of frozen activist knowledge they are most familiar with: to break them free of the academy and its tendency to reward theoretical competition, and return them where they started, in the struggles of ordinary people not only to make sense of their world, but to change it.

Nothing is more urgent, within this kind of intellectual production, than to free activists from disempowering versions of 'theory' that tell them how impossible change is and how futile or impossible all activism is, and to 'reclaim, recycle and reuse' for our own purposes the precious learning of earlier generations of struggle. In our own exploration of Marxism, we start where activists start in our own learning processes: with human beings' experience of the world and ourselves, our understanding of this experience, and the ways in which we develop this understanding.

An Active Concept of Experience

What is experience anyway? As a point of departure, it is important to see experience as active rather than passive: experience is not just what happens to people, but also what people do with, and about, the things

that happen to them (Thompson 1963). In this perspective, experience is the practical and tacit knowledge that we as human beings generate about the material (social and non-human) world, through our encounters with and interaction with this material world. In other words, experience is what we know about how we can meet our needs – of whatever kind – in the specific world that we inhabit. This practical-tacit knowledge is thus 'an attribute of individuals by reason of their social character, their participation, active or passive, in relations with others within inherited structures' (Wainwright 1994: 107). It is also, as William Blake knew, an attribute of our experience of *ourselves* as beings with needs and as agents engaging in struggles (Thompson 1998).

As Chapter 3 argues, experience is also the seedbed from which consciousness grows. Experience informs our consciousness of the world 'out there' and our place in it, and on the basis of this we choose to act – or not to act – in certain ways: '… human consciousness [is] produced by creative human beings trying to understand their existence so that they can purposefully choose how to better organise their efforts to fulfil their potentials' (Cole 1999: 250). This is central to what Marxist theory calls a materialist understanding of human consciousness: consciousness is fundamentally oriented towards real-world practical problems, not in the sense that all thought is explicitly concerned with practicalities, but that it is the problems that we encounter in our own lives which push us to think, and which push us to change how we think when our current way of thinking is not working for us (see Marx and Engels 1974).

Three key aspects of this notion of experience are worth noting:

1. This concept assumes epistemological realism; that is, it asserts that there is a world out there which exists independently of our perception of it, and which conditions our way of knowing. Our knowledge of this world in turn flows from the practical process of experience, the discovery of needs, and attempts to resolve problems.
2. It is a concept of experience which emphasises social change through human agency: the material and social world 'out there' is characterised by a constant process of people's *becoming* human beings, or *making themselves*, through reflecting on their social experience, developing their needs and capacities, and finding new ways of socially organising these needs and capacities and thus transforming their worlds.
3. It is a concept of experience that assumes *situatedness*: consciousness originates from experiences gathered through social practice that takes

place within, and which is thus specific to, a given social, cultural, historical and spatial context. This context defines the parameters within which experience is formed.

Thus experience is engendered through the practices we engage in to make and change the particular worlds we inhabit, and the problems that we encounter as we go about the business of doing this. As we try to make sense of and move beyond these problems, we are forced to reflect on our problematic, changing and local experiences and develop a more thorough, articulated understanding of it. This is where theory enters the picture.

What is Theory?

We start by saying what theory is not: producing theory is not necessarily a scholastic exercise; theory is not necessarily produced within academia; the producers of theory are not necessarily academically trained or holders of qualifications as 'officially approved theorists'. Theory need not be a tool for intimidating others, displaying academic status, or dismissing struggles for change: these kinds of uses are parasitic on, and destructive of, what makes theory worthwhile (Horton and Freire 1990).

Positively, the building blocks of theory are ordinary people's efforts to make sense of and change their social experience; theory is produced wherever this happens. The producers of theory are – potentially – everyone who reflects on their experiences so as to develop new and improved ways of handling problematic aspects of that experience. Theory, in this perspective, is knowledge that is consciously developed out of experience, that has been worked through using experience as a touchstone, that has become explicit and articulate, and which has been brought to a level where it can be generalised.[5]

Gramsci phrased this insight as follows: 'All men [*sic*] are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.' He goes on to say:

When one distinguishes between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, one is referring in reality only to the immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals, that is, one has in mind the direction in which their specific professional activity is weighed, whether towards intellectual elaboration or towards muscular-nervous

effort. This means that, although one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals, because non-intellectuals do not exist … There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*. Each man [*sic*], finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a 'philosopher', an artist, a man of taste, *he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought.* (Gramsci 1998: 9; our emphasis)[6]

Here, as elsewhere in Gramsci, there is a strong developmental sense: knowledge is constructed or sustained, and the role of politics is in part structured around this. One example of this is highlighted by Stuart Hall's (1996) discussion of dominant, negotiated and oppositional 'readings' of texts (he gives the example of watching news about a strike). People caught within, or identifying with, the dominant reading will share the media 'message' both that strikes in general are a bad thing and that this particular strike is bad. By contrast, those who have developed a fully oppositional reading will be able both to criticise the assumption that strikes as such are bad, and to formulate solidarity with those actually out on strike.

However, many people may operate with a negotiated reading, unable (yet) to detach themselves from the general assumption that strikes are bad, but nevertheless making a particular exception in this case (perhaps because friends or family are involved). The problem with this, of course, is that the 'good sense' manifested around this particular strike is not extended into conflict with official 'common sense' about strikes in general; politically, it denies solidarity to those who are not already known, and isolates strikers, making it more likely that they will be defeated. It of course also makes it harder to articulate the possibility of an alternative world, closer to our practical-tacit experience.

The difference between Hall's dominant and negotiated readings is one of *experience*: the person who identifies with the dominant reading may not ultimately benefit from doing so (they may be an employee themselves, even a vulnerable one); however, they have not learned to experience themselves as producer rather than consumer, or to identify as employee rather than boss. Those who hold the negotiated reading are at least able to

understand themselves, or those close to them, as employee/producers on strike – which cannot be taken for granted (see Fantasia 1988).

The difference between this negotiated reading and the oppositional one, however, is one of *theory*: the person who negotiates their reading has a sense of how things are for them, or for people close to them, but does not generalise this, see that others are in a similar situation, identify with those others, or draw more general conclusions about the world. The oppositional reading, in its ability to oppose the media message that strikes as such are bad, draws on a theoretical understanding of how the world is structured, of the general features of being an employee, and of the structural sources of conflict.

Theory and Struggle

Theory, in this sense, is a tool that we use to figure out what is happening to us, why it is happening, and what to do about it, by going beyond the immediacy and situatedness of a particular experience. It is this exercise of going beyond immediate surfaces and appearances that arguably defines theory. 'Going beyond' means trying to understand the wider ramifications of, and underlying processes that give rise to whatever we experience as problematic and frustrating in our everyday lives: 'Theory attempts to understand things not apparent on the surface, to find the inner connections … And the point of all this is to understand the real world – in order to change it' (Lebowitz 2003: 20).

Another way of expressing this is in the 'ABC' of organising practice (Cox 2010a), shared by radicals in many different contexts and traditions, which involves general principles like resisting alliances with the wealthy and powerful; trying to broaden out discussion about the issues a campaign is tackling, and linking to related groups; connecting with different movements; building a wider sense of identity; international solidarity around the issue – an ABC which of course embodies a whole theory of organising, as do more elaborated and specific approaches, from Alinsky (1971) to Starhawk (1988).

There are, of course, different types of movement knowledge (Cox and Flesher Fominaya 2009). Eyerman and Jamison (1991) and O'Sullivan (1999) have articulated broadly comparable typologies. Firstly, movements generate cosmological praxis (Eyerman and Jamison), or critiques (O'Sullivan): the structural aspects of Marxist, feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, GLBTQ and other forms of knowledge clearly fit in here. In