

## Review

Laurence Cox and Alf Gunvald Nilsen (2014) *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism*, Pluto Press, Paperback, ISBN: 0745334814, £22.99

This is a book about social movements. Unlike most such books, it seeks to understand the phenomenon of social movements with a view to assist them (us) in discerning a way forward in the current political context of neoliberalism. The authors, who are both movement activists and academics, argue that neoliberalism is mortally wounded and seemingly unable to reinvent capitalism. This presents an opportunity for social movements. What they provide is not a blueprint or road map but rather a tool kit - a set of analytical resources which movement activists can use collectively to consider how to act, and which strategies might help to deliver another world.

These resources are drawn from Marxism, not deterministically nor exclusively but critically and dialectically (arguably, as Marx intended) and are invaluable for self-reflection and political practice in social movements. Marxism, the authors argue, is one form of 'frozen' activist knowledge among others and by analysing Marxism through praxis they hope 'that others will be inspired to do something similar with whichever forms of frozen activist knowledge they are most familiar: to break them free of the academy ... and return them to where they started, in the struggles of ordinary people not only to make sense of their world, but to change it'.

Academic approaches to social movements tend to be restricted to particular groups of organisations or discrete categories of interests (eg the environmental movement, the women's movement). In contrast, Cox and Nilsen understand social movements as the fundamental animating forces of society that drive the construction of social formations, as unequal groups compete for the resources needed for a good life - to satisfy their 'needs and capacities'. In this contest, powerful groups act collectively to

protect and extend their privilege as 'social movements from above', whilst subaltern groups, dispossessed of their capacities, mobilise to defend their interests from this oppression and exploitation. So the women's movement challenges the oppression of heteronormative patriarchy which privileges straight white men but does so through an alliance of powerful actors which includes heterosexuals and white people etc. Neoliberalism is a hegemonic bloc which serves the collective interests of the movements from above, involving the international capitalist class but in alliance with national and sectional interests, military and state bureaucrats and other interests, albeit constrained by resistance from below.

There are patterns in the ways in which social movements from below develop. What Cox and Nilsen call a 'social movement process' starts with the ways subaltern people find of living with oppression as it is experienced - 'local rationalities'. This resilience sometimes turns to resistance, for which they use Raymond Williams' phrase 'militant particularism'. As the limitations of militant particularism are reached, activists start to 'join hands' with others challenging similar oppressions, and 'join the dots' by analysing their common enemies and the systems that connect them. Such 'campaigns' seek concessions from elites, and sometimes achieve these, but again as the limitations of these are realised there is a collective realisation of the necessity for more systemic change. In this way, a 'movement project' emerges, which ultimately builds an alternative hegemony that can challenge the existing social order. At each of these stages, 'common sense' falls away as 'good sense' breaks through and the collective interests of the subaltern groups becomes clearer. Of course, this process can also go backwards as movements from above repress resistance, fragment alliances, or outmanoeuvre campaigns. As each side mobilises for advantage, 'truce lines' shift in this war of position. There are times when advances can be made by movements from below, and theory - in this case Marxism - is there to help discern when and how this can be done.

Of particular interest to community educators is the claim that the social movement process is driven by learning. Understanding the limitations of any local rationality, militant particularism, campaign or movement project, and therefore moving to the

next level of analysis and political action, is, as Gramsci wrote of hegemony, pedagogical. Cox and Nilsen draw heavily on Gramsci, as well as Freire's 'critical consciousness', to interpret what happens when communities become activists, launch campaigns and mobilise into movements and generators of new realities. Helping to facilitate this process is, of course, the stuff of real community education, and this book contains essential reading for community workers who find themselves positioned 'in and against the state', NGO campaigners as well as trade union representatives, civil society mobilisers and activists in social movements - all who need to discern with whom to form alliances and in what contexts compromises are necessary, when concessions can be achieved and when power brokers can be confronted.

The middle section of the book consists of a historical analysis of capitalism, from primitive accumulation in slavery, enclosure and the revolutionary emergence of the bourgeoisie, through liberal, managed and neoliberal stages of capitalism. None of these developments was inevitable, but rather the result of the agency of movements from above and below, working within the constraints and opportunities of economic conditions. Managed capitalism, which in much of the West took the form of social democracy, was largely constructed out of the destruction of war, by the capitalist class fearful of both the collapse of the capitalist economy and the agency of the domestic working class and the independence of colonies.

A challenging section of the book considers the role of the state. The authors are clearly addressing both sides in the contentious area of political mobilisation between Marxists and anarchists, as well as those engaged in parliamentary politics - particularly the tendency either to reify or dismiss the role of the state. They provide a constructive whilst critical account of the recent 'pink tide' of leftish governments in South America. Many of us are involved in defending the achievements of the social democratic state whilst recognising its contradictory compromise with capitalist interests. I would have been interested to read a little more about the authors' interpretation of attempts at radical transformation through the state, from Kerala's

popular planning through Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting and Cuba's committees for the defence of the revolution.

The 2008 crash in neoliberalism constitutes an opportunity for movements from above to reconfigure new forms of capitalism in their interests, which they have so far failed to do. It also provides an opportunity for the movement of movements from below to generate alternatives and mobilise to achieve them. Ultimately, this book addresses the question of what it means for the movements from below to win - what would revolution look like? There is no blueprint for revolution, they argue, and no particular party, faction or ideology will lead it. There will be no re-play of 1917 Bolshevism or the Zapatistas in 1995. We can see some of the material from which it must emerge in local community resistance to austerity, Occupy, the indignados, the South American 'pink tide', and the Arab Spring. These are not failed revolutions so much as shifts in the truce lines between movements.

Creating a better world can only come from the hard, pedagogical work of movements trying to understand each other in building hegemonic alliances, and to interpret, however imperfectly, the conditions which are collapsing around us through action. Marxism, the authors argue, provides us with tools to do this but without dogma and in dialogue with the other analytical tools - feminism, anarchism, ecologism, anti-colonialism - that have emerged as frozen knowledge of movements from below.

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