



## The protagonism of social movements transforming the world as we know it...

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### review of

Cox, L. (2018) *Why social movements matter: An introduction*. London and New York: Rowan & Littlefield. (PB. pp. xviii + 130, £ 17.95, ISBN 9871786607829)

The title of Cox's new book may call the attention of both new readers and those long acquainted to one of the most relevant references in contemporary social movement theory (SMT). In an unpretentious way, he presents social movements (SMs) as the materialized agency that transforms the social order. Along the text, he employs many anecdotes about how some people get involved, even if incidentally, with a social movement and how this experience changes one's life and her or his more immediate surroundings. This strategy of writing brings some fresh air in the text, although, many times, those stories end up showing how everyday life is dull or difficult and the discomfort with it leads someone to take the initiative of engaging on a SM. Add to it the fact that there are very few quotations, and you have a book palatable to the non-academic reader interested in SMs.

Before continuing, I must say that, being a Latin American scholar interested on the theme of SMs, my reading of the book is obviously influenced by my context of practice and the very reality of SMs in my

region. Even though positioned, my reading was engaged to the text and intends to present it to the audience in general, eventually pointing out particularities of the SMs or some of the concepts presented at the book in my subcontinent.

At the early pages, Cox states that ‘to understand social movements [...] we need to put emphasis above all on the people involved in creating this collective agency, in whatever way, and to ask about the relationships between them’ [xii]. Despite the simple terms of the definition proposed, it states a very important claim about the social movements that goes beyond the acknowledged understanding of them as things-in-themselves and the usual symbolic interactionist focus on how the bonds and networks of sociability of activists within SMs (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1996). Highlighting that is it the actual *praxis* of collective subjects that change the world allows that reader to move onto more broaden terrain, where it is possible to see that the objective transformations of reality and the consequent subjective changes of the activists are produced within social struggles. The chapters of the book develop the argument in a very organised way, turning more complex, at each time, the relations within SMs; those of SMs and the Left; those with academia and the *intelligentsia*, as Gramsci (1981) would put it, in both ways, from the university to the streets and from the latter to reflection.

The *Introduction* brings examples of well organised social movements, such as workers unions and peasants’ movements, as well as those of more ephemeral or less structured ones, such as green consumption, solidarity acts to immigrants and refugees that took place and continue to happen in various countries such as Ireland, France, Portugal, Russia, the United States, Brazil, India and China. As part of the book’s argument lays on the fact that ‘movements are widespread and frequent but *not routine*, running throughout the social world and across societies but *not homogenous*’ [ix], there is a great effort of trying to show the reader that ‘social movements, then, are everywhere – both geographically and in the different parts of the social order. They are defeated or decline as well as having their moments of winning. They are not all nice, or right. They are creative and unpredictable, resisting the lazy generalisations of journalists under deadline pressure’ [ix]. Although Cox’s definition of social movements may sound a little loose to

someone - as it affirms, they are everywhere and happen every time - it must be said they are not anything, as the unsuspected reader may find.

According to him,

what makes something a movement rather than something else is above all *conflict*: movements develop (and argue over) a sense of “we” which is opposed to a “they” (the state, corporations, a powerful social group, a form of behaviour) in a conflict which is about the shape and direction of the society, on a large or small scale in terms of geography but also in terms of the scope of the issue. [xii]

In Latin America, the relationship between SMs and conflicts are quite evident, as well as the solidarity amongst activists of different movements. SMs are generally organized against a determined governmental initiative, or a company that threatens directly or indirectly people’s lives. Frequently, workers’ unions, the unemployed, feminist collectives, black people, LBGTQI subjects, traditional communities, ecologists, students’ collectives, leftist political parties and so on, gather together to help each other fighting their struggles, even if the immediate interest is of one of those groups.

As the centrality of SMs lays on the conflict, it is possible to agree with the author that

one thing movements are not, it is dull and predictable: if they settle into routines for a few years, they rarely have the resources that in other kinds of social activity keep people behaving in the same way over decades with only minimal changes. [xiii]

Being an Brazilian academic interested on SMs, I can assure that immobilism and overlapping of the movements by allegedly progressive parties when they get into power bring great damage to the SMs.

As the book shows, SMs involve people thinking hard and creatively about how to win against opponents who are often more powerful, wealthier and with greater cultural authority than them. ‘They are among the spaces people makes them such a delight to participate in and to study – they are among the spaces where people push themselves most fully, in more dimensions of their being than in more narrowly defined contexts’ [xiii].

Another strength of the book is how it may help activists of SMs learning from each other's struggles. Of course, no tactics or strategic elements of actual struggles are presented, but there are many reflections on how social movements help changing local reality and can engage in a broader 'movement of movements' (Cox and Nilsen, 2007). I will address the latter some paragraphs below.

Chapter 1 presents reasons why we need social movements as both individuals and part of a society. After three anecdotes about how three people got involved in social movements and how those changed the lives of such people, Cox highlights their importance to one's own life as they are part of everyday and, also, are intrinsically related to human needs. Things such as 'the support group, the leaflet, the website, the small local demonstration to defend services, the email to politicians or the subscription to an NGO', states the author, are 'nothing special; or rather, only some of the time do we even really notice movement activity as out of the ordinary' [3].

To him, everyday life in most contemporary cultures

involves *some* acceptance of *some* kind of movement participation as reasonable and normal. The criteria of normality and acceptance may, however, be the turning point of participating organized groups or social activities into being part of a social movement. [5]

In Cox's definition, a movement comes to reality when there are

networks – formal and clientelist or informal and radically democratic, with many other shades in between – that connect different kinds of formal organisations and informal group, parties and trade unions, cultural figures and politicians and even (in some cases) churches, online media, subcultures, everyday form of resistance, popular memories of past revolutions or lifestyles. [xii]

Being a Latin American scholar interested in SMs, I might say that, at least in the context of SMs in our region, the normality of some kind of participation in movements is optimistic and can drive us to question exactly what kind participation in SMs and social struggles are to be acceptable and reasonable. The *raison d'être* of SMs is indeed to oppose to the social-economic order as it is and to make an effort of changing it. As

Cox usually brings a Marxist standpoint on the book, I feel free to, from that same ground, point out that solidarity to ‘support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of the things’ (Marx and Engels 2010: 34) is contradictory to what is ‘reasonable’, ‘normal’ and ‘acceptable’ at the capitalist social order, specially under neoliberalism. In our region, even well-known and long-established movements as the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST), the *Zapatistas*, the *Piqueteros*, and many others are usually treated as rowdy, vandals and subversive. In recent years, despite the good will one could expect from progressive governments in the region regarding SMs, anti-terrorism laws were stated by the Leftist governments of Argentina, Brazil and Ecuador. All of them targeted SMs that opposed the governments and or their policies and many activists were arrested, reaffirming the radical authoritarian character of neoliberalism (Puello-Socarrás, 2013).

That very opposition to reality as it is, makes the

‘[m]ovements involve a process of education and emancipation: education in terms of thinking more deeply about different kinds of social relationship, power structure or cultural norms – and emancipation in the sense of taking practical action around this. This practical action, even in small doses, is transformative and contrasts sharply with letting our everyday actions be driven by habit while relating to the world through opinions alone. [10]

Chapter 1 ends with this focus on more subjective results of participating on SMs.

Chapter 2 shows how the world as we know it – in its full contradictions and underpinning conflicts – is a result of the action of social movements. Taking social dynamics in retrospective, the author points out how absolutist regimes and colonialism – this last in a wider sense, including plantations, slavery, submissive oligarchies and so on – were fought to give place to bourgeois democracy as we know it nowadays.

Cox asserts that

we should not imagine *separate* women’s, workers, nationalist or whatever movements which only concern themselves with these issues. Instead, we have different forms of political subject which are subject to constant tensions around these issues and which necessarily represent one choice of

direction as against another. Most broadly movements from below can (indeed are forced to) choose between alliance with each other's struggles or the attempt to assert one's own interests *as structured within the given social order* and hence at the expense of one another. [30]

As the theme of movements from below was brought at this point, and it is not covered elsewhere on the book, it is important to highlight that this concept is opposed to that of movements from above. The latter are

those forms of collective agency which are by definition the most widespread and effective in normal periods [...]. More specifically, forms of collective human agency that can draw on central positions of power (particularly within the state), a key role in economic direction (particularly in the organisation of paid and unpaid work) and high cultural prestige quite naturally draw on these resources, are shaped by these relationships, and are connected to specific social interests. This is the broad field – of alliances between elite groups around particular projects for the direction of society as a whole, and of the consent or coercion of various subaltern groups – that Gramsci (1971) discusses under the term hegemony. (Cox and Nilsen, 2017: 120)

Contradictorily, Nilsen and Cox (2013: 73) define movements from below as

collective projects developed and pursued by subaltern groups, organizing a range of locally-generated skilled activities around a rationality that seeks to either challenge the constraints that a dominant structure of needs and capacities impose upon the development of new needs and capacities, or to defend aspects of an existing, negotiated structure which accommodate their specific needs and capacities.

One might get to the conclusion that SMs are, indeed, those 'from below'. However, Cox considers conservative movements from above and those transformative from below in intrinsic relationship of forces that repulse one another. There would not be a challenge to the dominant order if that order did not promote a movement of totalisation. Neither those above nor those below are static, but tension each other more or less continually expressing in actual days the dynamics of class struggle.

Again, positing my Latin American reading of Cox, I must bring the concept of 'from below' as it is developed by Isabel Rauber (2002, 2004), an Argentinian scholar of SMs. To her, the organisations that are being built in popular social struggles are instruments that should not be misunderstood

as the subjects of political change. The SMs are collective subjects and the way they organize themselves is a mean through which they exercise their protagonism. That is why all those involved in the SMs must take part on the actions and the thinking about the movements.

Building and developing horizontal practices and relationships at the organisational level, in thought and in action, is a component of the utmost importance, especially if we consider that the process of organic-political construction also includes the formation of a new mystique, which is strengthened and fruits when there is no difference of principles between the form of organisation, the functioning and the driving practices between the leaders and the bases. [...] With elitist and authoritarian vertical practices it is impossible to build organisations based on the democratic criteria of participation from below. (Rauber, 2004: 12)

Advancing in the formulation of the concept of 'from below', the author means having a conception and formulating a course of action that articulates all those involved in the process. The term indicates a socio-political position from which the construction of power occurs, putting the participation of those below in a central, protagonist position (Rauber, 2002).

Returning to the book, it is important to mention that Cox does not oversee the fragmentation and co-optation of SMs, mostly those related to identity or ecological agenda that are not able to create bonds to other movements outside their most immediate interests. As he points out, after 1980s,

it would become clear that neoliberalism was more than capable of co-opting isolated elements of each of these movements – arguably it had to do so in order to shore up its own legitimacy. Thus (for example), female, gay or black professionals used radical rhetoric to advance their own interests at the expense of the large majority of people in each of these categories; ecological and countercultural movements became channelled into forms of 'lifestyle' consumption; or defeated, demobilised and individualised working-class populations were targeted by right-wing media and politicians as bases of support for their racist, militarist and misogynist policies. [34]

Maybe that is because of the broad definition of SM that he holds. Looking back to SMs in my region of the world, I can notice that reuniting forces against stronger opponents – generally corporations of the governments – is usual and, many times, part of the logics of organizing the SMs. Landless

peasants' movements, workers' unions and many others are usually together in solidarity to each other. These bonds are characteristic of what Dussel (2012) calls 'people', as the collective of the 'poor' – the popular masses that are victims of the neo-liberal capitalism in the region, as the oppressed women, the poor elderly, traditional communities, and so on.

That brings to question what is the role of SMTs and studying social movements.

Where, in all of this, is research on social movements and revolutions? In my own work, I have been strongly critical of 'actually existing' social movement studies, and this book does not follow the freakonomists and evolutionary psychologists in proposing ourselves as some new master science. [...] [S]ocial movements research is such a varied field that it can hardly play this role, even if it wanted to. [39]

The answer relies on the fact that SMs regularly try to learn from their own experience: 'trying to articulate those lessons theoretically in order to think about the big strategic picture; and trying to develop appropriate forms of education and training to return these ideas to the world of practice' [42]. Scholars on SMTs may also have a role there.

Chapter 3 approaches the relationships between SMs and the Left in a historical perspective, articulating parties, movements, unions and popular struggle in general. Since the pan-European attempts of 1848 up to Temer's and Zuma's coups, passing through 1968 in France and the First International, Cox asks about the contributions of the so-called Left (and what this is exactly?) to the development of SMs in the world history.

The theme of the alliances between the movements themselves and supposedly organic intellectuals (academics, journalists etc.) is brought under a programme that the author calls

learning from each other's struggles: one in which the basic position is not one of a separate elite judging popular movements and approaching them in an instrumental way, but rather one of activists involved in different ways in the many different learning processes that go on in social movements, who come to understand their own needs, struggles, and visions more clearly in the encounter with each other. [58]

As Cox puts it, SMs have not only an educational purpose for the activists within them, but also for them to learn with each other. That can be the linkage that allows someone who identifies with a particular struggle to consider how far that movement

[...] reach beyond themselves to make allies, to generalise the struggle at a higher level and to understand the structure they are resisting more deeply – and to ask themselves how they can contribute to sharing what they have learnt from their own struggles with new generations of activists in other movements, other places and (as history and age catch up with us all) other times. [60]

When take a look at the movements on a broader way, it is possible to perceive that they respond to various issues such and that the ones involved in such movements are, in fact, fighting for or against something that affects his or her life more immediately. Although everyone involved in a movement is a singularity, there is not only one sole issue that affects one's life. Being a worker at my University does not make me less member of the LGBTQI community neither less Marxist at my theoretical-political orientation. I might be engaged in a specific struggle as member of the board of the Professors' Union but that cannot obliterate my commitment to other causes that affect me and my local context and even less undermine my solidarity to any other popular struggle. The opposite is the truth: being involved in a SM opens my ears and my eyes to popular causes even though I might not be directly related to them.

Chapter 4 addresses the learning that develops through collective practice in SMs and the action-oriented thinking that flow from there. Being part of a movement makes one see being the strict limits of the action of the movement and to have a grasp of the linked phenomena of reality, where racism, gender prejudice, LGBTQI-phobia, xenophobia, genocide of original communities and many other forms of oppression are articulated under a neoliberal agenda that advocates the individualization of society and communities in order to achieve a greater accumulation of capital. All of these people 'are movements and not things, people and not objects, actors discovering and inhabiting their own agency rather than pawns to be moved about in a hypothetical chessboard' [65].

The popular character of movements, stated by Cox above, transcends the limits imposed by traditional analysis that point out the workmen as those responsible for the overcome of capitalism. In the South of the world we have many examples of SMs that are not typical workers movement, but the struggles of the poor, the natives, non-Caucasian races, women, LGBTQI subjects, traditional communities, and those in defence of nature bond together in what Dussel (2012) calls people (*el pueblo*): the collective subject that reunites those with a (partly) shared socio-historical reference. Broader than the workers fighting in class struggle, popular struggles are determined by it, but are not reduced to it.

Not only in our region of the world, but even in central countries, popular struggles and SMs with reference on people's needs and demands are facing the same enemy: the development of neoliberalism. Cox calls that 'the movement of the movements', as it is '[...] a grounding of the attempt to develop a wider challenge to neoliberalism in the lived reality of people's concrete lives' [35], expressed in the complex reality of different struggles in different places.

Chapter 5 focus on how movements 'think for themselves' and how this thinking is manifested in institutions as the university. Cox states that 'the pages of the mainstream press, the books of radical celebrities or high-status theories within academia [...], all these are structured in ways that systematically obscure their relationship to SMTs' [85]. Scholars interested in SMs must, then, find the less glamorous spaces within the movements themselves in which they actually think and argue about who they are, what they want and how they are going to get there.

Overcoming the traditional academic thought, even in SMTs that are still attached to structuralist or symbolic interactionist analysis, is fundamental to those engaged with the reality of SMs. As he defends the need to go beyond structuralism, searching for agency within the movements and in their transformation of reality, Cox stresses the need to observe beyond the very logics of each movement, taking a glance of 'the movement of movements' facing neoliberalism.

For him, the twilight of the neoliberalism has two reasons:

(a) as a strategy it no longer convinces that it is capable of meeting long-term interests; (b) it has increasingly lost the consent of large swathes of the population who initially supported it, as a situation not altered by the willingness of voters to support such candidates when the alternative is the far right. [89]

Indeed,

a substantial part of what has undermined neoliberalism is precisely popular movements ‘*desde abajo y a la izquierda*’, from below and on the left, allied in the form of first the anti-capitalist movement of movements from the later 1990s on, and more recently the wave including the Arab Spring, Indignad@s, Occupy, Gezi Park, Black Lives Matter or Standing Rock. [95]

One last point I would like to call the reader’s attention is to when Cox refers to our task, as academic, in this greater movement. It is

[...] to question the fields we are in and their wider social purpose; to seek to reclaim academic territory for movement purposes that go beyond our own contexts at the same time we attempt to change power relations and culture within those contexts. [105]

To the Latin American academics of SMs this task is even harder, and, just because of this, more urgent to be accepted by our community.

Finally, I must say that this book, which seemed introductory at a first look - helping better those who were interested in SMs but were not acquainted to SMTs - brings important alerts and lessons to those who are already part of the field. Cox demonstrates he continues to be politically engaged with SMs and an intellectual committed to the transformation of the world.

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