

# Outside the whale: (re) thinking social movements and the voluntary sector

## *Abstract*

- Martin Geoghegan, Laurence Cox -

Over the last decade or so, an increasing degree of sophistication has been devoted to the projects of theorising 'social movements' and 'the voluntary sector', two approaches which clearly overlap in subject matter, but rarely in theory. Despite dramatic changes in the organisation of politics from below in recent years, these parallel projects have been primarily a matter of developing and 'synthesising' previously existing approaches, rather than asking after their ultimate value and purpose. The net effect has been the reproduction of prior assumptions which remain within the given boundaries of would-be subdisciplines. Most importantly, these involve a definition of what is relevant in terms of its relationship to the state; a tendency to ahistorical definitions of 'fields?', and methodological individualism. In this paper, we use the case of community politics - one of the largest forms of voluntary or movement activity in Ireland, as in Latin America - to illustrate the weaknesses of both 'problematics?'. We contrast the approaches of these two literatures with the perspective of working-class community activists in Ireland as a starting-point towards identifying other ways of thinking about these issues. These we find particularly within Marxist traditions of thinking about working-class self-activity. In these terms, the intersection with the state, while important, is by no means the central aspect of community politics. The 'fields?' defined by the movement and its organisations are subject to large-scale historical changes. Finally, participants' own theorising rejects comprehensively any form of methodological individualism in favour of interactive and developmental understandings of collective needs.

The conclusion discusses some of the methodological problems we've encountered in trying to theorise this movement in conventional terms, and asks after their theoretical implications. In particular, what appears as relevant is a conflict between the 'colonisation?' of movements by the state on the one hand and the reassertion of human needs in new forms on the other. In this context, the 'hidden discourses?' of movement participants become as important as their public engagement in the process of negotiation over language and institutions, and form part of the 'political economy of labour?', which appears as opposed to conventional theory's implicit identification with the state's viewpoint, its acceptance of existing institutional organisation as definitive, and its collusion with capitalism's positing of individuals as originally isolated and self-seeking.

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- draft only: comments welcome! -

Overheads summarising and developing the arguments made in this paper can be found [here](#).

## Inside the whale, or the view from academia

This paper is a reflection of work in progress, coming out of parallel intellectual paths. Both Martin and Laurence came to social research as activists, frustrated with the existing levels of theorising (and corresponding problems in practice) we found in our own movements - Martin in working-class community development, Laurence in "new social movements" - and hoping to develop an understanding of those movements which might be politically useful. Neither of us were entirely convinced with the literatures we were presented with, but both "played the game" well enough to produce initial accounts of our movements drawing loosely on those literatures (Cox, 1999a; Geoghegan, 2000). In this paper, we critique and try to think beyond what we are finding less than helpful perspectives, in the "social movements" and "voluntary sector" literatures.

Over the last decade in particular, the projects of theorising "social movements" and "the voluntary sector" have proceeded apace, and usually in isolation from one another. This is perhaps odd, given that their subject matters clearly overlap, but understandable when we see these concepts not primarily as attempts to understand real-world phenomena but rather as attempts to define new subdisciplines which may enable greater survivability in the academic market. (To give one indicator of how distant these concepts sometimes are from reality: Laurence has recently been requested by two separate groups of experienced activists to give talks introducing the concept of social movements, as if it was something completely removed from their own experience - which, as a means of academic boundary definition, it probably is?)

While this same decade has been one of dramatic changes in the organisation of politics from below - to mention simply a few examples, the movement against corporate globalisation (Starr, 2000), the transformation of politics in eastern Europe (Singer, 1999), democratisation in Latin America, the marginalisation of the oppositional left in parliamentary politics across western Europe and the intensification of corporatism in our own Irish context (Community Workers' Co-operative, 1996) - the academic projects we are discussing have dedicated themselves to what Alvin Gouldner (1980) described as "sophistication". In practice, this has meant much attention to institutionalisation - textbooks, overviews and readers; journals and conferences; research networks and so on. Consistent with this, a deluge of literature has argued for forms of "synthesis" - which, in practice, amounts to the institutionalisation of the "field" with a minimum of internal dissension, and above all a minimum of attention given to the potentially disruptive questions of how that field should best be defined.

### Constructing the "social movements" field

Thus, within the social movements field we have seen one textbook or overview after another - Scott (1990), Zirakzadeh (1997), Byrne (1997), Tarrow (1998), Meyer and Tarrow (1998), della Porta and Diani (1999) and Buechler (2000) are among the most obvious examples. In terms of journals, the long-standing *Research on social movements, conflict and change* now shares library shelves with *Mobilization* and, from next year, *Social Movement Studies: a journal of social, cultural and political protest*. The American, British and International Sociological Associations all have their relevant research committees; and so on.

As part of this process of institutionalisation, it has now become a cliché to present the relevant literature as consisting of two and only two streams - resource mobilization theory (RMT) and new social movements (NSM) writing - and to call for a synthesis between them. This line, which was original when it was first outlined by Cohen (1985) and Diani (1992), now appears simply as an automatic reflex generated in textbooks and reproduced uncritically by academics from other fields (e.g. Canel, 1997) and postgraduates (e.g. Hourigan, 2001) alike. That a "why", as NSM theory is often held to be, could be unproblematically added to a "how", as RMT is held to be, without changing the terms on which that "how" is understood might seem strange, particularly given that RMT represents a particularly hard version of methodological individualism, something which the traditions in European sociology from which NSM is usually said to descend have spent some energy trying to undermine. Yet, with the important exception of Jürgen Habermas, NSM theory, as received within the new subdiscipline, at best adds class location as a "predictor" of individual action, as in Eder's (1993) mechanical materialism. More commonly, the two approaches sit side by side, with awkward figures like Touraine and Castells marginalised. As we shall argue below, this "synthesis" in fact ignores or obscures intellectual and ideological assumptions which are present in both versions - something perhaps best explained by the institutional rather than intellectual dynamic for the project of "synthesis". In place of an elucidation (let alone critique) of shared assumptions, this "synthesis" represents rather a refusal to let theoretical issues get in the way of institutional alliance-formation around the incipient subdiscipline of "social movements". Rarely if ever does this synthesis add up to anything substantial - as the introduction to Johnston and Klandermans' collection *Social movements and culture* makes clear, the orientation of the guardians of institutional orthodoxy to broader developments in social theory is one of cooptation and reassertion of the primacy of the field:

"it is unlikely that the sociology of culture is able to incorporate the most enduring findings of the past two decades of social movement research [?] The fundamental question as we see it is what answers cultural variables [I] can provide to the core issues of the field, that is, the rise and decline of social movements and the waxing and waning of movement participation, movement success or failure." (1995: 21)

In other words, here we are and here we stay.

## Constructing the "voluntary sector" field

As the social movement literature was developing, a body of literature on the "voluntary sector" also began to emerge (e.g. Weisbrod, 1977; Gladstone 1979; Spicer, 1988) (1). Attempting to describe and theorise the multiplicity of voluntary associations that occur outside of both the state and market (in some theorisations, the field was also deemed to subsume social movements e.g. Powell & Guerin, 1997), its initial formulations were singularly economistic and methodologically individualistic, homogenising non-profit (as opposed to non-market), non-state collective action as the pursuit of the production of public goods. Emanating primarily from America, this perspective overlooked the social dimension of why such associations were growing, seeking - initially at least - to house the study of this "new" phenomenon in pre-existing frameworks, notably economics (2). As more academics entered this field of study, they brought their own definitions of what this "voluntary sector" actually constituted (Morris, 2000). As this occurred,

other perspectives developed which were less economic than the initial literature, but which nonetheless brought their own unreflected assumptions. This fragmentation of thought was reflected in the multiplicity of terms that came to be used. Whilst often unproblematically and interchangeably used to conceptualise this apparently "new" social space, terms such as "civil society", "third sector", "non-profit sector" and "l'économie sociale" indicated that scholars were thinking along somewhat different lines about what voluntary activity actually was. "Civil society" harked back to an eighteenth century "enlightenment" interpretation; "non-profit sector" clearly fit within an economic understanding; and "l'économie sociale" perhaps indicated an understanding that social interaction was an important element to consider. By the early 1990s, the intellectual project of the study of the "voluntary sector" was in some disarray, and a synthesising project akin to that experienced by the social movement literature began to emerge, largely through the enormous John Hopkins Comparative Non-profit Sector (JHNS) Project which sought to positivistically measure, and subsequently compare, the level and extent of voluntary activity across several states (Salamon & Anheier, 1997) through the involvement of several high-profile, high status research institutes. In contrast to the social movement literature (which assumed knowledge of what social movements are) the voluntary sector literature claimed the opposite: an acknowledgement that scholars weren't adequately conceptualising the range of human endeavour deemed to be within this "voluntary sector", and even - perhaps - that it wasn't possible to achieve this at all (Marshall, 1996; Salamon & Anheier, 1997). This claim was made most strongly in the JHNS Project, which, in order to fulfil its aim of comparative study, proceeded to construct a synthetic definition of the field (in a similar manner to Diani, 1992) by comparing how these associated concepts were being used by different scholars in different political and cultural settings, then retaining commonalities and discarding the excess. What resulted is the now dominant "structural-operational" *definition* of what constitutes voluntary activity which appears to have more purchase on the ability to publish than it has on the ability to describe social reality (3), and which has become the concept around which almost all consequent "voluntary sector" literature has either explicitly or implicitly revolved.

## The hidden assumptions of the "voluntary sector" literature

Notwithstanding the original claim to conceptual modesty, the emergent structural-operational definition (which, not incidentally, largely places rival interpretations of Irish working class community activism, *inter alia*, outside its definition) sought the state as its reference point, and the market (particularly its organising logic) as its allegorical comparison. Thus the literature identified the "phenomenon" of the voluntary sector first and foremost as "not" being the state (a rather negative way of conceptualising something) and then sought to theorise the existence of this voluntary sector in terms of its relationship to the state. In a sense then the literature began to ask the "why" of the existence of the voluntary sector, but was apparently content at quite an early point to limit this question to whether it arose out of the state (i.e. that pluralist states would provide finances to foster "active citizenship" in groups otherwise too inefficient to provide social services by market standards (Salamon, 1987)), or in response to the shortcomings of the state (i.e. that private citizens sought to put social services in place where the state did not, notably in societies with heterogeneous social groups (Weisbrod, 1988)). The debate on the "why" complete, the voluntary sector literature then turned to the "how" and the "what" (i.e. the measurement) of the field, resembling RMT (and its implicit reliance on organisational theory) in its orientations, whilst not - as of yet - reaching the

same level of sophistication. This new project encompassed theorising voluntary activity's place within the mixed economy of the welfare state (even where this was acknowledged as being infinitesimally small e.g. Lundström & Wijkström, 1997), to corporate philanthropy (Amenomori, 1997), to its role - current and potential - within neo-corporatist arrangements (Crickley, 1996), amongst other things.

## The hidden assumptions of the "social movements" literature

The underlying assumptions of the developing social movements field are those of unreconstructed American pluralism: methodological individualism, the identification of separate "sub-fields" relating to different "spheres" or subsystems of activity, and the taking for granted of the overall social order within which these operate. This might seem an unduly harsh critique, and of course it is rare for the point to be made this openly.

The methodological individualism underpinning resource mobilisation theory is no great secret, and indeed is normally heralded in historical accounts of the development of the discipline as marking the ascription of (individual) "rationality" to social movement actors (see e.g. Mueller, 1992: 3; for a more critical reading, Perrow, 1979). Perhaps more surprising is the identification of social movements in primarily state-centric terms. This operates most directly through the implicit identification of social movements with protest, and it is worth pausing briefly on this point.

Protest, in general terms, consists of the transfer to the political arena of a social conflict. Whether the state, as an apparently neutral institution, is being asked to intervene on one side of a dispute or whether its effects on a particular social group are being objected to, the general assumption within the literature is that social movements are identical with this kind of appeal to or objection to state action: consider e.g. the title of Jasper's recent (1997) *The art of moral protest: culture, biography and creativity in social movements*.

Now consider what is surely a paradigm case of social movement activity, the labour movement. While protest certainly forms part of labour movement activity, to treat protest as identical with that movement's claim to be a movement seems perverse. States do indeed routinely intervene in industrial disputes. But are industrial disputes, as such, usefully conceived as "protest"? And what of the vast penumbra of organisations making up late nineteenth and early to mid twentieth-century labour movements: credit unions and friendly societies, sports clubs and newspapers - are these too to be understood as "protest"? Or do they fall outside the remit of what constitutes a "movement"? The answer, for Jasper at least, is apparently the latter:

"Social movements are conscious, concerted and relatively sustained efforts by organized groups of ordinary people (as opposed to, say, political parties, the military, or industrial trade groups) to change some aspect of their society by using extrainstitutional means."  
(1997: 5)

The stress on protest, as the introduction to a recent book by Meyer and Tarrow (1998) makes clear, is tied to the understanding of social movements as contentious politics (two terms treated as synonymous in the subtitle of Tarrow's definitive (1998) *Power in movement*). This is not a theoretical point or an attempt at conceptualisation - in fact, Meyer and Tarrow's explicit definition makes no reference whatsoever to protest or contentious politics:

"Movements, in our view, are best defined as collective challenges to existing arrangements of power and distribution by people with

common purposes and solidarity, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities."

On the same page, however, they outline their thesis of a "movement society" in terms of (1) the routinisation of "social protest", (2) the greater range of groups using "protest behavior" and (3) the professionalisation of "the major vehicle of contentious claims - the social movement" (all 1998: 4). In other words, these are taken-for-granted assumptions. Social movements, on these assumptions, have a claim to count as something "different" because they are "politics by other means" (like warfare). One important effect of this unexamined and untheorised identification of social movements with contentious politics is that movements are seen to exist not from the point of view of their actors, but at the moment when they emerge into the view of the state. It is then logical that an author like della Porta (2000) can speculate authoritatively that movements are coming to an end when protest ceases to occur. No protest, no impact on the state - no movement. This in turn of course points to a historically limited (and theoretically problematic, but never problematised within the literature) conception of "the state", as well as a certain mystification which tends to make of social movements an epiphenomenon of the political system - a theory exemplified in the "political process" and "political opportunity structure" subsets of resource mobilisation theory. What is ideologically marginalized is not just an alternative sense of social movements as "changing the boundaries of institutional politics" (Offe, 1985) - fighting battles which may take many forms and relate to the state in very differing ways - but more deeply a sense of *social* movements as forms of conflictual interaction between social actors (such as classes).

If we followed this last thought through, it might strike us that (as Piven and Cloward observed in 1979) the state relates to different classes in different ways. Thus an emphasis on the situations in which protest occurs may obscure some important forms of collective agency (incidentally offering reasons why "distasteful" social movements, notably those of classes whose relationship to the state is not routinely contentious, are less studied within the literature, as Esseveld and Eyerman note (1992)). By assuming an understanding movements as a particular form of interaction with the state (protest), the possibility of other perspectives is foreclosed without examination.

## Lines on the map

The social movements and voluntary sector literatures, then, have been produced through parallel processes of disciplinary formation. The ultimate value and purpose of these two approaches to the social world remains largely mystified in this process, and it is then unsurprising that prior assumptions are reproduced in a largely taken-for-granted, and often untheorised, fashion. What counts are the boundaries of would-be subdisciplines of academic learning. What from our point of view is missing at the foundations of these literatures is any systematic attention to the needs and concerns of activists as individuals; any coherent relationship to the production of theory within movements; and any critique of the relationship of knowledge to the institutions within which it is produced.

In saying this, we are not condemning the process of intellectual institutionalisation en bloc. We do, however, want to argue from a theoretical point of view that it is a bit late in the day for social theory to be this innocent of its overall presuppositions; from an intellectual point of view that there is something to be gained by thinking about what is ignored in the rush to develop consensus between potentially conflicting theoretical elites; and from a political point of view that basic sociology of knowledge questions about the interests embodied or assumed by particular

academic discourses need to be asked if movements are to be able to use these literatures for their own purposes. For the moment, we will restrict ourselves to three brief suggestions on why these literatures work the way they do. Firstly, it seems plausible that a state-centric point of view reproduces the actual situation of the writers involved, who (whatever their other activities) are writing for and within the institutions of academia, rather than for the theoretical debates that occur within movements.

Secondly, the definition of a "field" in terms of the relationships between institutions works as a strategy for the creation of subdisciplines precisely because of its apparent theoretical nullity: to separate "politics" from "economics", for example, is an institutional move that will rarely be opposed (among other things, it means more jobs all round), whereas to propose the development of a field of study that would cut across the two is to make dangerous claims which other academics may be all too happy to shoot down.

Thirdly, methodological individualism, by foregrounding individual rationality and relegating other issues to secondary status, enables the continued production of "voluntary sector" and "social movement" literature which is innocent of any broader debates within social theory about the specificity of capitalist or late capitalist society, the relevance of this theory to the majority world, the ways in which actors are produced, and the ways in which they understand themselves. In other words, the conclusions we are coming to suggest that these literatures are essentially driven by the institutional logics of academia, and are largely devoid of any self-criticism or self-awareness. There is no necessary reason to think that they are shaped in a way that is likely to be able to offer much to activists, other than as intellectual figleaves for activists who, like ourselves, are seeking academic credibility for what is essentially applied work. This being the case, is there any alternative?

## Thinking community politics

In this part of the paper, we move back to the activist side of things to reconsider the implications for theoretical production of how activists see themselves, using the example of community politics in Ireland. Community politics, in its various forms, is probably one of the largest forms of voluntary or movement activity in the world (see e.g. Kaufman and Dilla Alfonso, 1997), after the labour movement and comparable only with the women's movement and nationalisms in terms of numbers and comparative size. As it happens, community activists in Ireland and elsewhere have devoted quite a lot of thought to the nature and strategies of their movements (see Geoghegan, 2000 for an analysis of activists' self-understanding and Mullan and Cox, 2000 for some relevant bibliographical elements). This is not, incidentally, unique to community activists - Marxists and feminists have equally generated large bodies of theory for movement purposes, which are routinely marginalised in the literatures we are criticising (see Cox, 1999a). There are, in other words, alternative forms of theorising this area which merit attention in their own right.

### Activists' theories of movement

In terms of the nature of the movement, working-class community activists in Ireland base their endeavours, not surprisingly, on their situated concerns, further contextualised by personal and interactive historical (experiential) accounts of their objective social structural position. When talking about the nature of the movement and of their involvement, activists speak of the pathologies that come hand-in-hand with their class status (e.g. poverty, criminalisation, educational disadvantage, the

ravages of alcohol and other drug misuse, etc.); argue that these pathologies are the result of the power relationship between them and other social groups and institutions (i.e. a structural theorisation of their position); and posit an "other", against whom they "push" in their everyday struggles, and who - as activists are all too aware - pushes back.

As a response to this situation, the self-activity that they engage in seeks first and foremost to fulfil the felt human needs as described by the actors themselves. It is also an inversion of the standard decision-making processes that they have become accustomed to - processes that marginalise their knowledge claims - with the experience and opinions of ordinary participants assuming centrality. This is at once a cultural expression of the movement (i.e. it is a markedly different way of going about "routine" day-to-day activities); and a political challenge to dominant social forces, who have been forced to make concessions to the movement both in terms of form and content of social policy (4), often by dint of the sheer size of the movement.

Notwithstanding these achievements, the movement meets its current limitations inter alia in an inability to move beyond the increased comforts afforded by encroaching corporatism. That internal dialogue within the movement under these corporatist arrangements continues to characterise community activism as deeply radical is significant, as the "outside view" provided by researchers (Walsh, Craig and McCafferty, 1998) and government departments (DSCFA, 2000) continues to posit the movement as a "social partner". This is an area where we hope that theory could make a significant contribution, which is at present sadly lacking (5).

## A different kind of theorising

The ways in which activists in these movements understand their own activity has relatively little to do with the themes stressed by the "voluntary sector" and "social movement" activity. What it does have striking parallels with (and of course historical connections to) are Marxist traditions of thinking about working-class self-activity. To name some obvious points of reference, the Marx of the *Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 1967), Gramsci's (1975) discussion of hegemony and the role of organic intellectuals, EP Thompson's analysis of the English working class (1963, 1993; Vester, 1975) and Raymond Williams' discussions of the *Long Revolution* (1965; 1985) outline an alternative tradition of "movement theorising". It is perhaps unsurprising that these theories, developed as they were by activists for activists, come closer in shape and structure to those of contemporary community activists than do the writings of the "social movements" and "voluntary sector" literatures. Firstly, for community activists and the Marxist tradition we discuss alike, the state is not the be-all and end-all of movement activity. It is certainly true that the question of the state has to be posed, in the Marxist tradition, or that the interaction with the state, in community contexts, is a problematic one (Mullan and Cox, 2000). However, our activists recognise that the root of movements is *social*: in the day-to-day struggle between opposed social interests (Geoghegan, 2000), which only occasionally reaches the level of state intervention or a challenge to the political order as such; and in the focus on the satisfaction of human needs, for which interaction with the state is only a means.

Secondly, the "fields" both of movements and the state are held up to question. Movements - unlike the static beasts implied by a focus on "rationality" without learning or on relationships between pre-given fields - grow and decline; they constantly strive to become other than they are; and as part of this they constantly seek to *transform* relationships of power: not simply to acquire greater influence over policy-makers, but to create institutions of working-class power from below, to extend the sphere of state influence into the "private" realm of the economy, and



ultimately to challenge the principles of power from above on which the capitalist state rests.

Thirdly, human needs are seen in developmental terms (no "all-present grievances"! ) and as discovered in *interaction*, for example within community education processes (Hope et al., 1984), not as given properties of isolated individuals. Indeed, the strongest claim made both by Marxism and by community development movements is that individuals are *social beings*: and of course this is a shared tradition, given the importance of Marxist thinking in the development of contemporary community politics in the majority world.

At this point it might be useful to describe how these needs manifest themselves within the community movement, but it is indicative of the praxis of the movement that this is neither possible, nor appropriate, as it would assume that experts can gain unproblematic knowledge of how actors intellectually, emotionally and spiritually experience their position on the margins of society. This though is telling in and of itself, as it is a reflection of how the movement thinks about human nature: that we exist and feel as individuals, but within the context of, and subject to, collective experience - both in terms of our presence within a specific social group, and our relationship to other social groups. That this is likely to be experienced differently from person to person, and from location to location is then unsurprising. From the movement's perspective of attaining social change, it is perhaps somewhat disappointing that this humanistic, spatially delineated worldview often mitigates against solidary alliance-building. A theory that could offer genuine help here would be more than welcome.

## Outside the whale: why does the literature fail to work?

For community activists and theorists, this question answers itself (Lynch, 2000 etc.): it is not reasonable to expect theories developed to operate primarily within powerful institutions, such as the academy in majority world societies, to be capable of emancipatory use by movement actors. Power relations between researchers and researched - rarely theorised in the literature (see Kriesi, 1992 and Jones, 1993 for exceptions) - are real and not to be wished away. This should have been predictable if theorists had been aware of their own assumptions: if "social movements" or "voluntary sector" are other than and defined by a contrast to the state, how could researchers working in state institutions hope for unproblematic, neutral and transparent relationships with their research subjects? After all, it is not such a profound thought that our institutional location affects our understanding of the world.

## How the literature works in practice

This is exemplified within the Irish academic literature where the movement is not thought of as having independent "self-activity" reasons for existing; consequently, this literature has little emancipatory use (Connolly, 1997). Under a dominant state-centric paradigm, theorisations of community politics have occurred within a largely consensual a priori framework, with the relationship to the state being regarded as given, and of central importance. Such a theorisation assumes a static institutional framework - including the polity, the apparatus of the state and the service class that inhabit it - that acts as a passive background against which unusual activity takes place (Cox, 1999a). That community activists cannot recognise themselves in such a portrayal (Geoghegan, 2000) is telling and significant.

The limits of such state-centrism are true whether the approach is *historical*, accounting for the current incarnation of community politics in terms of its reaction to major state (and allied groups, such as the Catholic church) initiatives (e.g. Devereux, 1993; Tobin, 1994); *typological*, attempting to place different forms of community activism on a spectrum with alliance with and to the state at one end, and opposition to the state at the other (e.g. Burgess, 1996; Commins, 1985; Curtin & Varley, 1995); even *empowerment debates* (i.e. to what extent is community politics capable of providing actors with the skills to address their structural marginalisation) are posited in terms of ability to influence the state (e.g. Varley, 1998); or *sectoral*, which explicitly attempts to locate community politics within the rubric of the voluntary sector (e.g. Crickley & Devlin, 1990, McInerney, 1998). None of these approaches are potentially emancipatory: indeed, how could they be when they look more towards the state than the nominal subject of their enquiry? Attempting, as we have done, to use social movement theory to initially shed light on (and potentially help) community activism has also proved very difficult. Whether this be in terms of attempting to "parachute" a theoretical framework onto data on the community movement, or as an attempt to find a "best fit", the experience has proved a frustrating one. The two dominant approaches of RMT and NSM theory haven't worked well in our experience of thinking about the movement: RMT proving to be elitist, economistic and instrumentally rational; and NSM theory only resonating in part (specifically useful in thinking about movement culture, but not so in thinking of how that culture is a response to experience). So much for the academic theory: what of movement theory?

## How activists use theory

A particular complication of the use of theory within community development movements is that of necessity, as with Marxist theorising, it has multiple faces. Firstly, the intention is to "take people where you find them" or to deal with people as they actually are, not to start from where we might want them to be. This necessitates a particular language of engagement - which is not, however, static, but geared, as Gramsci (1975) puts it, to bring the "simple" up to the level of the intellectuals, through a political pedagogy of praxis. Secondly, there is necessarily a shifting debate within movements as to strategies and tactics. Thirdly, given that both theories ultimately pose the question of power in ways that they recognise are unacceptable for existing power-holders, both may need at various times alternative languages with which to engage the state.

In a manner similar to that described by Fantasia and Hirsch (1995), activists engage in "hidden transcripts" i.e. maintaining a radical discourse only with fellow proven activists, whilst constructing a more consensual discourse in their dealings with colonising community workers, state agencies and, one assumes, researchers (unless they have "partisan insider" status (Plows, 1999)). That community politics has a hidden story is reflected in Devereux (1993) and Curtin and Varley (1995) who note the existence of left activism within the community movement before proceeding to ignore it, going on to concentrate on the more consensual state-oriented actors present within the "voluntary sector". That working-class self-activity can be lost in the maelstrom subsumed within the concept of the voluntary sector is unsurprising not only in terms of a "hidden transcripts" argument, but also in the unwieldy nature of the concept itself, referring as it does to a wildly heterogeneous group of social activities (Salamon & Anheier, 1997: xi-xiii describe schools, voluntary hospitals, counselling agencies, day care centres and community organisations to name but a very few, as constituent elements of the sector) which are largely assumed to originate from similar structural reasons, with no accounting for agency.

In this way, the JHCN Project can unproblematically and "empirically" group both housing and development activities (what we assume to be their understanding of community politics) together, and then claim that they constitute "5.6% of activity" in the voluntary sector (Salamon & Anheier, 1999:139). The inappropriateness of such classification is evident in that other elements of what might be considered community politics (such as the push for improved social infrastructure) are measured separately in the JHCN Project, further exemplifying our earlier argument in relation to the construction of artificial sub-systems. This sub-division might be useful in the development of cultural capital within the academy, but appears not to remotely approach capturing the reality of movement activity as both the development of tacit knowledge and the expression of felt human needs.

## Theory as an object of struggle

In contemporary Ireland, the rise of "community development from above" as part of the new corporatist agenda involves among other things the attempted colonisation of the language of community development by state agencies such as college courses, policy discussions, local development partnerships and so on (cf Community Action Programme, 2000). At the same time, community development from below necessarily implies (and seeks to imply) a constantly developing articulation of needs, since the movement rejects the attribution of overall knowledge to "experts" capable of telling people what their real needs are in advance (O'Grady, 1999).

This dual movement implies that activists seek both to interact strategically with the state and to encourage the development of people's own articulation of their needs, hence refusing "expert" status in a move which parallels the approach of the Zapatista movement in Mexico. Theory, in other words, becomes fluid: it does not consist of a neatly bounded "field", with authoritative "definitions", fixed categories, etc., but rather these are themselves objects of struggle and negotiation between actors, as one might expect of any kind of "theory-in-movement". Theory-in-movement and theory-as-institution, we might say, are liable to be at odds with one another.

## Conclusion: what can we offer the movement that it didn't already have?

In conclusion, we want to return to our original points of view as activists, unhappy with the practical limitations of existing movement institutions and looking to academic theory to make some kind of difference that goes beyond finding alternative careers for ourselves as individuals and enables some development within the movements we are involved in. We have seen that theory can be found in movements as well as in academia, so that the mere fact of "theory" is not in itself an advertisement for anything. What would a theory have to do to be of significant use to movement activists beyond the theories they already have available to them?

1. Firstly, it would problematise the definition of the movement rather than taking it for granted, whether as "a social movement", "the voluntary sector", or whatever else. We have noted the general assumptions built into these problematics. The "voluntary sector" literature gives us no handle for understanding community development as a significant unit within that

purported sector. The "social movements" literature, for its part, ignores the question of how to tell one movement apart from another. These, though, are among the most basic questions facing organisers: how do we practically define the movement we are trying to organise? An effective theory will do two things. One is that it will see the boundaries of "movement" as created by political struggles (otherwise activists would have nothing to do). The other is that it offer indications as to the objective *potential* for this or that movement to be created. Unlike Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who make the first point but not the second, it will have something concrete to *say* to activists: for example, that it makes more sense to try to organise these people than those people, to concentrate on this alliance rather than that, or to make this choice rather than that one (6). To avoid either of these questions - the open nature of movement boundaries and the underlying potential for movement development - is to abdicate political responsibility and to leave activists in the lurch.

2. Secondly, an adequate theory would see "fields" in general - the interaction with the state, the state itself, and movements - as the objects and products of movement struggles. Movements, as movements, are not static givens but constantly try to reach *beyond* their current state and to have an effect on "society". The idolatry of the status quo - taking a movement at a given point in time, or within a particular political context, and fetishising that as the object of explanation and theory - in effect rules out of court movements whose aims are to transform that political context. A theory useful to movements would include a theory of structural power relations and social change rather than holding these separate.
3. Thirdly, such a theory would offer useful principles to guide the choices that movement actors are faced with. It would identify actors capable of making these choices, and offer reasons likely to appeal to them. Cox (1999b) is an attempt at exploring what such a theory of political choice might look like in practice.
4. Fourthly, such a theory would understand actors themselves as self-transforming in struggle, and focus on the implications of this for movement practice. The methodological individualism of a Melucci (1989) will give us little help here, to say nothing of the *homo oeconomicus* fantasies of RMT. Dix's (1998) work on how people change in movements has rather more to offer. Such a theory of political praxis might ask how movements can overcome the tension between instrumental organising and collective self-transformation, starting from their existing attempts to do so.
5. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, such a theory would be accessible to movement organisers, engage in dialogue with them, and be open to their critique. In terms of access, language is perhaps not as crucial a problem as the institutional context of theoretical production, the form of writing, modes of distribution, and so on. Activists are often hungry for knowledge, and will overcome the boundaries of language if they have to; but they cannot overcome these deeper-seated problems. In terms of dialogue and critique, the "expert" role has little place in social movements, unless we want to carry out the same evisceration of movement decision-making processes that we have seen with the takeover of political parties by technocrats and focus groups. As people who are academics in one part of our lives and activists in another, we do not see ourselves in the role of proclaiming absolute truth to an audience of people who in other contexts are our peers, nor do we think that they would take much notice of us if we did. Theory would then need to provide an open language for movement deliberations.

These criteria of themselves do not add up to the concept of a "political economy of labour" which Lebowitz (1991) has used to conceptualise the working-class self-activity we are interested in here: they represent the form more than the content of the kind of theory we have looked for ourselves. On the basis of the arguments we have developed in the rest of the paper, the substantive content of such a political economy might have a number of characteristics. Firstly, it would take as its starting point movement participants, rather than the state: what it sees will be defined by their viewpoint and the problems they struggle with daily, not by the times at which movements become "contentious politics" alone. Secondly, it would be political in terms of the development of a class, not in terms of the existing structures of power, which it seeks to supplant and overthrow with something which will not simply be the unchanged structures of the capitalist state. Finally, and rejoining Lebowitz, it will refuse absolutely capitalism's positing of individuals as originally isolated and self-seeking, and start from a sense of human beings as social beings, whose potential is constantly at war with their actual situation.

While this political economy certainly includes "contentious politics" as a tool of struggle and "voluntary activity" as a form of production, we hope to have shown in this paper that it would need to go some way beyond the existing literatures. If we have been critical in this paper, it is also in part a critique of our own past assumptions. In criticising the relationship between movements and academia, we hope to move towards a relationship which would be intellectually and politically healthier. We remain convinced that theory has a contribution to make; we are rather less convinced that it has done so. As Marx wrote in 1845,

"It is in practice that human beings must prove the truth, that is the reality and power, the this-worldliness of their thought."

*Overheads summarising and developing the arguments made in this paper can be found [here](#).*

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## Footnotes

(1) To the best of our knowledge, a stream at this year's European Conference of Sociology is the first attempt ever at a systematic discussion between these two literatures, which have happily coexisted for over two decades without apparently feeling the need for interaction. [Back](#)

(2) The success and depth of such academic strategies of field division is exemplified currently in the voluntary sector literature in the *Community Development Journal*, where it is not uncommon - even within a single volume - to have papers that nominally talk about the same issue, which are largely incomprehensible to other authors. [Back](#)



(3)The arbitrary nature of this synthesising project is best exemplified by a chapter title in the field-defining book *Defining the nonprofit sector* by Salamon and Anheier (1997): *The Challenge of Definition: thirteen realities in search of a concept*. [Back](#)

(4)This is not to suggest that the movement has been "successful" in purely instrumental terms. The concessions of dominant social groups to the movement have been widespread, but often in ways that facilitate the colonisation, professionalisation and control of the movement. [Back](#)

(5)With the partial exception of those discourse theorists who confidently inform us that the language of community is something imposed from above to stifle social conflict, so that working-class activists who merely *think* they are using this language to challenge structures of power and exclusion are by definition mistaken. [Back](#)

(6)A familiar example is the Marxian distinction between a class in itself and a class for itself. [Back](#)