2001 Review of Robin Cohen and Shirin Rai, Global social movements. social-movements international forum for discussion and information on social movements

Your Finger You Fool: a theoretical fairy tale

Once upon a time, there was a debatable and mountainous territory on the borders of many kingdoms. The inhabitants were noted for their colourful dress and customs, not least of which were banditry, revolts and the terrorising of undesirables like tax-collectors, missionaries and prefects of police.

Under the circumstances, they were naturally very diverse among themselves, speaking a bewildering variety of dialects and languages, following dozens of local deities and unorthodox sects of more official religions. They had no overall name for themselves, though the neighbouring kingdoms had a string of names which they gave to the area, many of them unprintable.

As so often happens, with the passing of time the local inhabitants found themselves more and more caught up in the tides of modernity. Schools were established in the surrounding kingdoms by kings, reformers and churches. Soon, young people who had made the long treks out of the mountains in search of knowledge, prosperity, a job in the city or salvation started to trickle back homewards and make use of the new tools they had found to think about themselves and their homelands.

In no very long time the whole region was aflame, as one prophet after another swept the scattered tribes into new alliances against the kings who attempted to rule them. The tribespeople found a new sense of unity and a confidence in their own destiny to transform, not only their rocky mountain home, but the whole planet on which they lived.

As this sequence of events started to become something of a way of life, it was natural for the teachings of the various prophets (as understood and refracted by their surviving followers) to be institutionalised in books, schools and chapels. Each of course taught their own theory of who this mountain people were, how they should relate to the world outside and what the future paradise on earth was to look like, and the debates between them grew complex and highly sophisticated.

As the fame of these schools grew, scholars from the capitals and the seminaries started to make the dangerous pilgrimage into the mountains in search of the truest and deepest teachings. One by one, their colourful teachings were transported back to the metropolitan universities, written up in textbooks and plagiarised for the establishment of new faculties and - in exalted cases - new states.

With the process of civilisation clearly under way, another kind of movement to the mountains also started to happen: first as a form of tourism, and later as a retreat from the world, visitors from the metropolis started to arrive in the mountains to study the people themselves.

Linguists, folklorists, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and more started to map and draw the inhabitants of this by now increasingly well-known region. Along with

the visitors, increasing numbers of bright young locals started to take up these disciplines as a way of describing and valorising their own unique ethnic identity, by now generally known as Social Movements.

In time, the languages of the indigenous cults became increasingly remote from everyday life and more and more accessible through the universities of the metropolis rather than the by now grim and conservative chapel schools of the hills. But the newer modes of celebration of the people of Social Movements also tended increasingly to be driven by the fame and fortune available for international experts on this well-loved population, rather than by the needs of the scattered communities of the hills, which were in any case not easy to establish.

Banditry (now frowned upon as anti-social), revolts (seen as anti- democratic since the king had declared himself a constitutional monarch) and the terrorising of tax-collectors (seen as somehow irrelevant to the essence of native culture) of course continued anyway. Yet somehow the languages and institutions of their own churches were less and less available to support these activities, and the studies of the universities seemed not to have many concrete points of connection.

In the meantime, the area had become something of a tourist resort, and local entrepreneurs made a quick killing selling the local equivalent of stuffed purple donkeys and handmade carpets as "authentic pieces of the world-famous Social Movements culture" to visitors. The latter, in their turn, often went home happy, convinced that the act of having shared a few pints in an authentic local hostelry had given them a privileged insight into a timeless way of life.

So while people in the mountains continued to resist and revolt as they had always done, the ideas they used to do so were increasingly drawn from Australian soap-operas and MTV rock- videos, which unsurprisingly tended to let them down at exactly the point where they could have done with some creative strategies.

Prophets still continued to pop up, but since the kind of mind that made a prophet was usually one which refused to read books or go to church, they had a tendency to be increasingly eccentric and to be unable to convince anyone beyond a small handful of faithful followers, who often died in the faith that they were immune to bullets.

Meanwhile, the rocky bits of the mountains (where nobody much lived anymore except a few diehard hermits belonging to local cults and some of the oldest herders) were starting to become home to people who were thoroughly uninterested in the whole thing - landless immigrants from the plains as agribusiness developed, exiles fleeing the consequences of defeat in political conflicts elsewhere, and people who were no longer able to cope with life in the big cities.

As they too found themselves marked down for targetting by army patrols and social workers, fighting against assimilation into whatever kingdom happened to be ruling the mountains at the time, and struggling with harsh winters, subsistence-level farming and the pressures of market economics, they too started to resist: without a theory, without a strategy, and all too often without a hope. Until one day....

What I Did On My Holidays: a book review Robin Cohen and Shirin Rai, editors, *Global social movements*. London: Athlone, 2000. 231 + xiii pp. ISBN 0-485-00615-4. IR£20 (about US$25?)

Something funny has happened in social movements studies. On the one hand, the people who have been busily labouring away for the past couple of decades to establish the field as a legitimate area of scholarly study can take comfort from the fact that established academics now find it worthwhile to borrow the phrase for their own work. On the other hand, that is virtually all they have borrowed in this particular book.

While many of the authors are well-known and respected for their study of movement-related topics (Robin Cohen on ethnicity, Cynthia Cockburn on women's networking, James Beckford on new religions, Ronaldo Munck on labour, etc.), and clearly a number of them are or have been politically engaged in their own fields (Upendra Baxi on justice for the Bhopal survivors, Sarah Ashwin in ICFTU, Deborah Stienstra in the women's movement, etc.), virtually none of them seem to know anything about "the social movements literature" bar the name, which begs some very interesting questions about what happens when "a literature" secludes itself this far from wider academic and political debates.

To take one obvious indicator: the 15-page bibliography is full of references to works of general sociology, literature on "issues" and literature produced by social movements, but "the social movements literature" is barely present: as far as I can tell, there is only one reference to anything published in any of the 3 existing social movements journals (Research on SMs, conflict and change; Mobilization; Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen), and that is to an article from 1981.

In an edited collection, it is perhaps unfair to single out individual pieces, but the editors' own introduction would hardly have been accepted for publication by any reader familiar with "the field". It is perhaps sufficient to observe that their starting point is Aberle in 1966 and Wilson in 1973 - although attentive teachers will know that precisely this level of up-to-dateness is routine for general textbooks in sociology. (Conversely, much the same is often true for "social movements" writing in terms of its level of engagement with large-scale theoretical debates, its understanding of Marxism, etc.)

The editors were presumably also responsible for the suggestion to the hapless contributors as to what might count as social movements theory, because a handful of titles recur in most of the articles. Byrne's and Zirakzadeh's recent overviews are unobjectionable points of reference, but adding them to Castells' *Information age* blockbuster (along with Hirst and Thompson on globalisation) - and treating this as a sufficient baseline - makes for a reading list which I for one would be unhappy with in an MA student who was proposing to present a conference paper on social movements.

The repeated stress on Castells is particularly interesting in that he is an excellent example of a writer on social movements who is taken much more seriously outside the "social movements" literature than within, where he is only occasionally taken

into the main canon. People from post-colonial societies can perhaps think of parallel examples in writing on their own countries.

The point is not, of course, that only the "social movements" literature is worth looking at, but rather that the boundaries are being drawn in such a way that passers-by (including those with personal or academic involvement in the same substantive area!) barely register what we feel to be going on, while the books that they take as indicative of the state of play have very little internal resonance.

Because many of these authors do in a sense "live locally" - they write about issues that movements thematise, or they are activists in their other lives - they then routinely have very little time for what they assume, on this limited evidence, to be the key issues in contemporary social movements thinking. Thus Upendra Baxi is happy to talk about "my admittedly limited reading of this genre" on p. 37, and a few pages later to issue sweeping indictments: "The violated of Bhopal have been deeply reflexive. It is time, perhaps, for the theorists of the 'new' social movements to begin to respond." (p. 45)

It is easy enough to rubbish this kind of thing. But it does raise important questions. How is it that "social movements" has been so narrowly defined as a subdiscipline that people who spend their professional and / or political lives in the area are barely aware of its existence and will swallow the first hand-me-down account of what is going on?

The issue is not that social movements theory has nothing to say. Many of the essays collected in this volume would have benefitted greatly from a serious engagement with the issues raised by the literature: what macro-historical forces lead movements to develop when and as they do (rather than every time there is a grievance or a problem?) how and why do movements tackle their strategic and tactical problems the way they do, and could they have done differently? what is it like to "live" and "do" social movements? and so on.

In the absence of this questioning, the bulk of these essays are flat and dull accounts of "issues" and organisations, overviews which for the most part will tell those involved in the respective areas nothing new, and which are hardly likely to offer much in the way of theoretical tools to people trying to make hard choices as activists.

This is not universally true: there is some primary research in Cynthia Cockburn's piece on women's networking and in Steve Yearley and John Forrester's piece on anti-Shell campaigning. Deborah Stienstra on global organising in the women's movement and Peter Newell on "environmental governance" start forms of analysis which could have been usefully developed in a "social movements" mode. Paul Lubeck, discussing the Islamic revival, stands out as the one author who is familiar with and able to make effective use of the social movements literature beyond the label.

But in general, in the absence of any serious understanding of what "social movements" theorists are talking about, it is perhaps unsurprising that the most frequent resting place is a more or less descriptive account of NGOs and related activities. It is perhaps indicative that in an attempt to update Tilly on "movement repertoires", the editors suggest as examples of transnational movement repertoires

Band Aid, Telethons, Earth / Women's summits and international consumer boycotts. In the age of the Zapatistas and Seattle, of Via Campesina and anti-GMO action, this is something of an illustration of theoretical bankruptcy. There really is more to social movements, even global ones, than Band Aid.

More could of course be said about the individual articles in this book, some of which offer information that will be new to people not familiar with the issues they discuss and some of which make points that could indeed usefully be considered by social movements theorists. Overall, though, there is little real (as opposed to rhetorical!) engagement with the "actually-existing" conversation of social movements research, and hence no direct contribution to social movements theory as a whole.

The fault is, however, not entirely with the authors, who are neither stupid, anti-intellectual or ignorant of what they are talking about on a practical level. In a sense, this book illustrates a key problem of movement organising in post-Fordist contexts: the slow "death of theory" as a means of making real decisions about our collective actions in a way that makes a difference, and the consequent taking for granted of "the way the world is" on a very fundamental level.

"These organisations are the way they are because of the immediate situation they are in"; "these issues arise because of the way the world is going"; "here are some interesting observations on things" - left at this level, within the isolation of people struggling with their own movements or their own need to publish, these kinds of analysis do not enable us to *change* our situation in any way. And yet that is what we set out to do when we engage in *movement*.

In an age of increasing "pressure to publish", particularly in the Anglo-American academic world, it is perhaps unsurprising that little attention is given to reflexive questioning of the point of any particular subject, so long as it "sells". Social movements now clearly "sells", and we can hardly complain if more established businesses move into the market. If on the level of content this book seems to have very little connection with the "social movements literature", on the organisational level it is perhaps the overview we deserve.