Trade unions and social movements

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Introduction:

**defining the terms ‘social movements and ‘civil society’ more generally and their theoretical underpinnings**

Like so many concepts in popular usage, ‘social movements’ and ‘civil society’ are both contested terms, depending upon the theoretical perspectives of those applying them. In the US radical tradition, for instance, social movements have been defined in terms of the mobilisations that take place when ordinary people ‘try to exert power by contentious means against national states or opponents’ (Tarrow, 2011). Examples of such mobilisations would include the American Civil Rights movement, the peace and environmental movements and feminist movements, revolts against authoritarianism and the rise of new Islamist movements (an important reminder that social movements are by no means necessarily progressive). For other writers, however, the definitions have been far looser, with greater emphasis upon informal networks and identity politics.

European theorists such as Melucci and Lylyr (1998), for example, have placed more emphasis upon the differences between varying types of social movements, ‘old’ and ‘new’. The new mobilisations were not ignited by wages struggles that had been characteristic of old left politics, including trade union politics it was argued. Rather they were concerned with issues of identity, culture and lifestyle (Habermas, 1987). Ultra left/anarchist syndicalist and reformist approaches (along with some of the versions of these that emerged within Marxism Today, for example) highlighted the inherent conflicts between the old social movements and the newer varieties, contrasts and conflicts that have been challenged in their turn.

For Castells, for instance, social movements were the equivalents of trade unions, but
concerned with the sphere of collective consumption, rather than the sphere of production, organising at the workplace. In contrast to trade unions focussing upon the world of work, urban social movements were concerned to mobilise around issues such as social welfare, including social housing and urban redevelopment. They were not specifically class based mobilisations, per se (although activists might be expected to be mainly working class, radical intellectuals and others might also be involved). In Castells view, (in parallel with Lenin’s views on trade unions) social movements were campaigning and negotiating within the framework of existing social relations, rather than strategizing to overthrow these, as part of wider agendas for fundamental social change. But both types of social movement were key to such wider struggles for the future.

There would seem to be some parallels here with competing definitions of civil society more widely. Civil society has been defined by mainstream sociologists and political scientists in terms of its separation from the state – and from the market. Each has been portrayed as a separate sphere, with civil society key in terms of holding the balance, safeguarding citizens from potentially over-powerful states, with rather less emphasis, in the past, on the need for citizens to be protected from the pressures of increasing marketization. For Gramsci (who has frequently been misrepresented and misquoted in this regard) these relationships between civil society, the state and the market were linked and overlapping. Rather than representing a separate sphere then, civil society affected, and was in turn affected by, the market as well as the state. So, for example, education could – and did – perform functions for both the state and the market, in terms of reproducing labour power within the framework of existing social relations. But education was also providing a key service for the working class and its allies. Given the extent of marketization within the voluntary and community sector, in the current context, this reading of Gramsci makes so much more sense.

Challenges and dilemmas for Marxists involved in union alliance building in the current context

The implications of these types of analyses for Marxists have been clearly enunciated in relation to their role within the trade union movement. Trade union struggles were necessary but by themselves insufficient as contributions to the longer term struggle for socialism. These trade union struggles were essential to defend the interests of the working class in the sphere of production, and even to win immediate gains (such as a shorter working week, health and safety regulations and most importantly to raise wages). Engaging in such struggles could also contribute to processes of politicisation, providing Marxists with opportunities to unpack the underlying causes of workers’ problems, raising questions about alternatives for the future. Marxists would, in addition, draw out the common threads between different struggles, building unity and solidarity rather than competition and conflict between different sections of the working class.

There are parallel arguments to be made about the role of Marxists in relation to social movement struggles around issues of collective consumption. Here again, the point was to keep Marxists’ focus upon the longer term goal, whilst building consciousness and solidarity through activism in defence of current interests and/ or in the pursuit of actual gains. So, for example, tenants’ struggles over rents and poor housing conditions in the past were also linked to campaigns for public investment in social housing along with security of tenure and rights for all tenants. There were gains to be made here too, just as there had been gains for the trade union movement in parallel, in the post World War 2 period for example.
Traditionally, there had been close links between workplace struggles and community struggles in working class communities in mining areas, for example. There are potent myths here about the strength and solidarities that existed in such occupational communities. In practice of course, there was also a history of divisions within the working class. In London’s docklands for instance, there were episodes of solidarity in struggle. But there were also divisions – between dockers and those involved in the furniture and clothing trades, just as there were divisions between both of these and those working in public services (whether as manual or as white collar staff). But there had been significant opportunities for building solidarity. As a result there had been some scope for presenting alternative (if social democratic, rather than socialist) scenarios for the redevelopment of the docklands area. Real gains were being fought for here, if not specifically socialist gains. And Marxists played key roles, bringing sectional interests together and drawing out the wider political lessons, concerned with taking forward the interests of the class as a whole, for the future.

The scope for building alliances and solidarity had been significant then, if limited. But this was further undermined in the Thatcher years. There was increasing fragmentation within the labour movement, as a result of her attacks, as well as increasing fragmentation as a result her assaults on public services e.g. via the Right to Buy social housing). These processes of fragmentation were further re-enforced as a result of Thatcher’s increasingly market driven approach to urban regeneration (impacting upon the class composition of these areas via gentrification and dispersal). Recent attempts to promote trade union community organising can be seen as responses to these attacks and their impacts, together with the impacts of more recent attacks under both previous New Labour governments and under the current Coalition government.

Building alliances and solidarity was never been straightforward. But this is arguably more problematic - and more necessary – than ever in the current context. There are, in addition, particular challenges here, including the challenges posed by the very different ways in which trade unions and community based organisations organise themselves, with very different concepts of democratic forms of accountability. Trade unions tend to be perceived by community organisations as being mainly concerned with recruiting members, it has been argued (whether or not this is actually the case) with little evidence of pursuing wider strategic goals (Sim, Holgate and Heery, 2013). And conversely, as Holgate’s study of London Citizens and the Campaign for a Living Wage (Holgate, 2009) demonstrates, community –based organisations have criticised trade unions for being bureaucratic and slow. Meanwhile the trade unions were in many cases sceptical about annual assemblies as a genuinely representative approach to democratic accountability. In addition, on a more anecdotal level, both types of organisation tend to attract particular types of activists to leadership positions. Dedication, determination and single mindedness are key qualities for leaders who are going to make a difference. But these are also qualities that don’t necessarily enhance the scope for alliance building and solidarity based upon mutual respect.

Having raised these challenges however, it is important to remember the successes that have been achieved, nevertheless. Chris Wright’s study, ‘Swords of Justice and Civic Pillars’, offers a range of such examples (TUC, 2010).
Possible pointers forward

In conclusion, Marxists have key roles to play BOTH as trade unionists AND as community activists.

- The challenge of building alliances and solidarity would seem greater than ever. This is why their insights (including their insights into the nature of the differences and the varying approaches to organising and struggle) are so vital.

- And most importantly, as Marxists have demonstrated in the past, their task is to play leading roles in the struggles of the here and now, defending past gains and advancing gains wherever possible for the future.

- WHILST holding onto alternative agendas for the longer term, building alliances and solidarity, rooted in increasing political consciousness amongst the working class and its allies.

References


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