

"The interests of the movement as a whole": response to David Harvey

Laurence Cox

The communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties...

The communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole...

(Communist Manifesto part II, "Proletarians and communists")

"The trap baited by 'Political Economy' "

Structural analysis has many merits. It enables us to agitate effectively, to make the links between the immediate problems people experience and the broader power relations which cause them. It can give us intellectual – and, these days, academic – credibility. It can even, when linked as in David Harvey's work to uncovering elite strategies, convince readers or students that the current situation is not written in the stars, and so by implication that it can be changed. Yet I find myself wishing more and more – as an Irish activist and as one involved willy-nilly in global politics – that somewhat fewer of our comrades had invested *so much* of their time and energy in structural analysis, and (in particular) that fewer of them had invested their professional or political identity in it to the point where they believe it is possible to read off the movement situation from a "bird's eye" view of reality.

Structural analysis is rather like weather forecasting: it tells us whether a particular day is propitious or unpropitious for the task we have before us, and so – on occasion – that we should perhaps put more or less energy into it, or that we should perhaps see if we can delay it slightly. But that is about all it can tell us; rarely do we have the choice to ignore the task altogether. Structural analysis does not, and cannot, tell us where other people are suffering and about to enter into struggle, how we can make links with each other and what form those links might take, or how we can defeat our shared opponents.

As EP Thompson observed, political economy easily becomes a trap, and this is what I think has happened – not only with David Harvey's piece, but with many attempts by university Marxists to engage with contemporary movements which wind up reasserting the theorists' position of power by dint of missing what is specific about movement organising. If my comments on Harvey are sometimes

critical, this is because the intellectual quality of his (justly renowned) work is normally so high as to make it clear that its difficulties, when it comes to movement strategy, are those of a whole approach rather than individual failings. If Harvey cannot derive a strategy from a structural analysis, perhaps the attempt is misguided.

There is of course much of analytic value in "Organizing for the anti-capitalist transition", although there are elements that miss the mark. For example, the comment that neo-liberal governance seems "immune to legitimacy problems and unconcerned even with the creation of content" ignores important aspects of the "sturdy structure of civil society" which Gramsci noted as lying behind the visible state – and much of the work of opponents of racism, nationalism, fundamentalism and the organisation of right-wing popular culture. There are also some sectarian missteps, such as the attack on anarchists and autonomists for disregarding the importance of the national level – as though the struggle for power in national parliaments was a central, or even imaginable, goal for the left across much of the planet rather than (outside South America) further from our grasp than it has been within living memory.

Most importantly, though, and characteristically for structural and post-structural analyses whether of capitalism, patriarchy, industrialism, racism (or indeed of disciplines, rhizomes, class composition and so on) when the account moves from the confident terrain of structure to the discussion of movements it goes from the systematic to the anecdotal, and from high-level engagement with serious theoretical debate to the casually dismissive - at precisely the point in the text where the call comes for building alliances with those whose organising and strategic work has just been written off, ignored or trivialised.

Teaching grandmothers to suck eggs

For anyone who has read, for example, the debates collected by Jai Sen, Peter Waterman and others around the World Social Forum, or the suggestions of the Zapatistas as to how the struggle against neo-liberalism might proceed – or simply for anyone who has been involved in attempting to build alliances between movements, Harvey's comments on movements are disappointingly feeble, platitudes rather than strategies.

The essence – which could be summarised "there are a lot of us out there, we organise in different ways and have different perspectives, but we need to work together and we need to be serious about our goals" – has been said time and time again; indeed, it defines the "movement of movements" to a large extent. There are the familiar accents of a particular kind of Marxism – "we should tackle capitalism, not just neo-liberalism; we should not ignore the question of state power" – which are a routine part of the conversation. But none of this takes us past a position that movement conversations had reached in the late 1990s, or tells us *what we should do*. If anything, there is a tendency to substitute analysis for action:

"The central problem is that in aggregate there is no resolute and sufficiently unified anti-capitalist movement that can adequately challenge the reproduction of the capitalist class and the perpetuation of its power on the world stage.... [A] global anti-capitalist movement is unlikely to emerge without some animating vision of what is to be done and why. A double blockage exists: the lack of an alternative vision prevents the formation of an oppositional movement, while the absence of such a movement precludes the articulation of an alternative."

All of which might have been fair enough, in 1993 or thereabouts, when the production of "alternative visions" was at a somewhat low ebb and a "global anti-capitalist movement" was a phrase without a referent. It is a very strange thing to say at the World Social Forum, the locus *par excellence* of animating visions and one of the most important locations of movement articulation over the last decade – sometimes in opposition to capitalism per se, sometimes more narrowly in opposition to neo-liberalism.

It is not always clear whether this and similar comments are intended as indirectly supportive of existing movement processes, as the "ruthless critique of all that exists", or as a call for the formation of a *party*¹; there is little sense here of engaging with what activists are actually trying to do:

"the first rule for a global anti-capitalist movement must be: never rely on the unfolding dynamics of one moment without carefully calibrating how relations with all the others are adapting and reverberating".

Yes, we might say, and this is why we try to connect with people in other places and other movements. In the process, some things have even been learnt. Thus Harvey offers us some "general guiding norms" for a transitional movement:

"respect for nature, radical egalitarianism in social relations, institutional arrangements based in some sense of common interests and common property, democratic administrative procedures..."

and so on, and so forth. I recall signing up to a similar set of points with comrades in Ireland ten years ago². Even then we were able to plagiarise such ideas from existing movement debates internationally, and – far from being utopian future possibilities - our own movement networks had no difficulty operating on this basis for the best part of a decade.

When structural theorists offer us *dei ex machina*, they often turn out to be poorly assimilated versions of what activists *have already been doing*, which have become sufficiently common sense in the movement that even political

¹ The distinction between party and movement, highlighted in Barker's piece elsewhere in this issue, is one which could have been helpful here. It is easy to dismiss *movements* for not being radical enough, when it is in their nature to be contradictory and contested. To demand of a movement that it be uniformly anti-capitalist is simple sectarianism; to take part in an anti-capitalist party (or faction, or network, or...) and argue for your position and strategies within that movement is good political practice in diverse movements.

² Online at <http://www.wsm.ie/story/2799>.

economists have encountered them. Harvey comments, heroically, "Of course this is utopian! But so what! We cannot afford not to be." Indeed; but most of the points of his programme have been familiar on the anti-authoritarian left since some point in the 1970s³, and have been part of our starting-points for organising for a decade or more.

As Harvey notes,

"The current populations of academicians, intellectuals and experts in the social sciences and humanities are by and large ill-equipped to undertake the collective task of revolutionizing our knowledge structures."

The solution, however, does not seem to lie in listening to movements, and following the reflections of e.g. Boaventura de Sousa Santos or Hilary Wainwright, who have had useful comments to make on this point; instead, "[t]he only hope is that a new generation of perceptive students (in the broad sense of all those who seek to know the world) will clearly see it so and insist upon changing it". This is hardly likely to happen if prominent left intellectuals like Harvey systematically direct us away from listening to what has already been done in this direction, and instead insist on the foundational primacy of their own disciplines.

This tendency to ignore or trivialise existing work positions the theorist ahead of movements instead of, as would be more accurate, lagging somewhat behind. Thus, to pick out a few points in his five-minute overview of the last fifteen years of anti-capitalist organising, "attempts to forge a global justice movement... have been concentrated over the last ten years" in the WSF – apparently to the exclusion of locations like summit protests (essentially ignored), Indymedia (ditto) or come to that People's Global Action and other bottom-up alliances.

These last have to be ignored, because anarchists and autonomists are presented as believing "that local action is the only meaningful level of change" – which, whatever one's views about the politics of horizontalism, is sheer caricature. Similarly, movements against dispossession are reduced to a pre-theoretical space "not so much guided by any particular political philosophy or leanings" and hence, at a later point in the argument, in need of publicists and strategists: "the task of the educated alienated and discontented is to magnify the subaltern voice so that attention can be paid to the circumstances of exploitation and repression and the answers that can be shaped into an anti-capitalist program".

The point is not that such alliances are irrelevant; it is that they have *already happened*; in the Narmada, in Via Campesina (which Harvey name-checks) or in Abahlali. These movements don't need a *new* Theory to tell them to act on a world stage and ally with others; they have already done this work. Indeed northern anti-capitalism, in its current form, comes rather from the push given

³ In fact, other than the comment on nature, the rest can be found in left debates of the mid-1960s without difficulty.

by movements of Southern peasants, shanty-dwellers, indigenous populations and so on than the other way round.

Harvey ends, then, where movements started the current wave from, ten or fifteen years ago, but presents it as news:

"there is a lot of work to be done to coalesce these various tendencies around the underlying question: can the world change materially, socially, mentally and politically in such a way as to confront not only the dire state of social and natural relations in so many parts of the world, but also the perpetuation of endless compound growth?"

The work starts, I would suggest, with taking each other seriously and finding out what work has *already* been done. Knowing Harvey's interest and involvement in processes like the WSF, perhaps the absence of a sense of this in "Organizing..." is a reflection of theory can lag behind movement practice.

Who are the communists?

Harvey, like many of us, finds the *Manifesto's* discussion of who the communists are inspirational; but there are many ways to read this. For Harvey, who the communists are is defined largely by superior *knowledge*:

"They simply constitute themselves at all times and in all places as those who understand the limits, failings and destructive tendencies of the capitalist order..."

His communists, then, "are all those who work incessantly to produce a different future to that which capitalism portends".

This is not all that Marx and Engels say about communists, however. They say rather that within "the national struggles" of the proletarians communists bring the interests of the entire proletariat to the fore; "in the various stages of development" of class struggle, they represent "the interests of the movement as a whole"; they represent "the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of each country"; and they understand "the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement".

If we agree that the *Manifesto* perspective is a good starting-point - which of course leaves many questions unanswered - the "advanced and resolute" character of communists is only one point, and one which is stated in relation to their presence *within working-class parties*. The other three points similarly have to do with presence inside actual movements, parties and struggles, and with the attempt to represent the interests of "the entire proletariat", "the movement as a whole", and to draw on an understanding of how the movement works.

In this, alternative reading of the *Manifesto's* comments, the starting-point is engagement with actually-existing movement practice (and from a serious, historically-informed, analysis of movement development and decline). We do certainly need to go beyond that - to ask after the interests of the entire

proletariat, to understand the line of march of the movement, and so on, and also to ask after the "ultimate general results"; but we do that from a starting-point of engagement with other people's practice.

The characteristic failing of political economy comments on movements is to project its own one-sidedness (neatly analysed by Michael Lebowitz as lacking an analysis of "the side of labour") onto people who are in the process of becoming, or have become, active, collective and radical political subjects. Structural analysis is happiest speaking of what the objective situation demands from "us", or how it makes "others" act; but what marks moments of revolutionary fervour like the present is precisely that large numbers of ordinary people make the move from being primarily passive objects in relation to economic and political structures to becoming active, conscious and collective agents in their own right.

As people are pushed into movement, different questions, which political economy cannot answer, but which are fundamental to any post-capitalist, radical-democratic, diverse etc. society, come to the fore⁴. This is the terrain, of course, which Marx and his contemporaries sought to understand by exploring the history of "the social movement", in France and elsewhere; it is the terrain marked out by later Marxist discussions of class struggle and revolutionary politics; and, in different ways, by academic research on social movements. It is a central theme of movement learning and practice.

In other words, the question that is left untouched by political economy, but which is fundamental to revolutionary actors, is *what should they do?* Or, more particularly, *what should they do within, around and beyond existing movements of this kind?* These are the questions that most need answering, and I think an alternative approach to the *Manifesto's* comments on communists may be helpful here.

The ABC of activist practice

To start with movement practice: Marx and Engels' comments draw on a basic activist ABC, which they had learnt from the best activists of their day - in the first months of 1848, these people were about to challenge empires - and which defines good practice for radical activists. This ABC is largely the fruit of learning from practice and from each other. A contemporary statement of this ABC, with some notes on its dangers, might run something like this:

- Within movements, seek to push for a broader discussion of the issues raised by the movement, and a less naïve reliance on the powerful and the wealthy. The danger to be avoided here is sectarianism: this discussion has to start from real, felt needs and experiences rather than prior commitments which aren't shared by other activists.

⁴ One attempt at answering these questions for the Irish context can be found at http://eprints.nuim.ie/1530/1/LCglobalisation_from_below.pdf.

- Connect different movements and different issues, and build a shared sense of "we", with suitable movement media, shared spaces, and so on. The danger to be avoided here is that "activism" becomes a lifestyle ghetto; the linkage has to be one of constantly opening up radical ways of being which do not set themselves up as a cultural hierarchy.
- Internationalism: getting practical and theoretical perspective on our local context by building links with similar movements abroad, and making links with people working on similar problems in different ethnic contexts at home. The danger to be avoided here is that of romanticism, of thinking that elsewhere is always a better, or at least more worthy, place to be.
- Engage with new popular mobilisations, which are often around unexpected issues, and offer solidarity and practical assistance with no strings attached. The danger to be avoided here is that of losing confidence in ourselves, and treating new movements as per se better and sweeping away the past.
- Think seriously about power and strategy *before* we are faced with the problem concretely, whether in the form of state repression or of a breach in power relations which makes a new government (or a new society) possible. The danger to be avoided here is that of letting the hardness of such thinking set our overall tone.
- Look for breach points: try to identify possible new alliances on our side, or possibilities of splitting ruling alliances, strategic fulcrum points where it is worth risking everything. The danger to be avoided here is that of being clever-clever and falling into wishful thinking.

I think most serious radical activists will recognise this kind of practice, although it may not always be their language. It is easier caught than taught, although of course movements do attempt to transmit it consciously. This kind of practice is what we do as we build campaigns - and as we try to win.

Unpopular language

Winning is currently out of favour at the moment for a range of reasons, some good and some bad. One good reason is that in the past "winning" has not always meant what we thought it would, whether in the form of Stalinist and social democratic states, of feminists and environmentalists in government, of the democratisation of fascist and state-socialist dictatorships. This is a major reason for doubting simple statist radicalisms of the old-fashioned kind, and for thinking seriously about what it looks like when movements win; it is not, of course, an argument that we should treat social movements as a kind of self-indulgent play rather than a serious struggle against a potentially brutal opponent.

The bad reason is a failure of the theoretical imagination. In the 1970s, under the impact of the events of 1968, it was possible to imagine a radically different world from many different positions: feminism, majority world liberation, East European dissidence, ecology, black activism, gay liberation, even peace movements, to say nothing of the traditional left. Now, apparently radical theorists push the curious position that it is possible to have radical social change without taking on the state, even to abolish it, while others ask "how can we redefine winning so that it doesn't involve overcoming a more powerful opponent?"

When *Interface* called a special issue on crisis, movements and revolutionary transformation, many people (activists as well as academics) metaphorically held up their hands as if to say "only Marxists know or are interested in that stuff; it doesn't affect the rest of us". Thankfully for everyone who lives in a country which was once a monarchy, or a colony, or a fascist dictatorship and is no longer so, this perspective is more of a historical aberration – in need of understanding, but hardly as self-evident or morally superior as its proponents feel⁵.

One feature of this unusual situation (which is mostly that of the global North) is the power relations which were already visible in 1968, when in Prague and in Paris alike the ultimate military power of the opponent was never in doubt, and in both cases there was a tacit cooperation to limit the use of violence – by comparison, for example, with Hungary in 1956 or indeed the liberation of Paris in 1944. Subsequent to this experience, the celebration of "civil society" has often meant celebrating the avoidance of the big question of power (see *Interface* vol. 1 issue 2.) Thinking seriously about this question is key to actually doing anything about capitalism, however.

For this reason Harvey's piece, and its emphasis on taking the anti-capitalist transition seriously as a contemporary possibility, is a very welcome dose of seriousness.

Understanding the stalemate

This issue of power confronts us very powerfully if we look at the strangest feature of the current situation, which is the length of time the relative stalemate has endured. The Zapatistas have held their territory for some 16 years. The Northern anti-capitalist movement is now some 11 years old, and has not retreated in the face of the turn to warfare and criminalisation; rather, the "leaders of the free world" remain in hiding at their regular summits. On a larger scale, the "New World Order" has both lost control of large parts of South

⁵ Indeed some of the hardest struggles at present are being fought in explicitly moral languages: those of indigenous populations in the Americas, for example – which often marry a demand for sovereignty with the languages of indigenous religion – or those of Buddhists in Burma, Tibet or India, whose demands for a change in power structures are not intended as rhetoric. Perhaps the issue is more that in western countries we have come to naturalise much of the structures of state and capitalism.

America, traditionally the US' backyard, as well as facing severe problems with European and Muslim allies alike in its Middle Eastern wars. The past decade has seen warfare as a way of life, neo-liberal capitalism and ecologically destructive policies – all central movement targets – suffer massive losses in terms of popular consent.

Conversely, our movements have remained that much more contained than ever before. In the global North, there are sharp class and ethnic boundaries which we only occasionally manage to break out of, as well as long-standing political cleavages which limit our mobilisation. In India, China, Indonesia there are powerful popular movements, tendentially opposed to neo-liberalism, but essentially isolated. Indigenous people's struggles globally are often utterly disconnected from the perspective of the majority settler populations. Finally, the popular anguish of much of the Muslim world remains fragmented, self-lacerating and all too easily instrumentalised.

This stalemate – where we cannot build past what we have already achieved, other than in South America, and where they cannot crush us – will not last. Global elites cannot allow it to; and as new would-be leadership formations seek the support of states and large capital for new regimes of accumulation, tackling popular insurgency will be a tempting means to demonstrate their capability. If there is a genuinely urgent task for our movements, it is to lose the complacency that comes from a partial perspective and to see this bigger power struggle and our place in it – and to ask how we can push for a genuinely popular outcome to the crisis. This cannot come, however, from ignoring "actually existing" popular movements.

Thinking forward

One possible approach to understanding the question is in terms of the double movement of popular power – at once successful and incorporated. Here I am using a longer timescale than the familiar shift from Keynesianism and developmentalist nationalism to neo-liberalism: I am thinking rather of the shift in Western Europe from monarchies and limited-franchise parliaments to democracies, in most of the world from colony to independent statehood, in Latin America, Eastern Europe and much of Asia from dictatorships to democracies.

In saying this I am conscious of the limited nature of these gains, but I want to stress that they are real gains, as anyone familiar with the political map of the world c. 1980 can attest. Much has changed since then, and far more since 1940. Within living memory, most of the world has ceased to be colonies, has ceased to be monarchies and has ceased to be dictatorships. We cannot and should not take this for granted, or minimise a state of affairs which was achieved after such struggle and suffering. There is a slow, ambiguous but none the less real

increase in popular power over this period, which is in part a development of organising skills that are now embedded in many modern states⁶.

There is also, and as part of this same process, an incorporation of movements. Thus anti-colonial movements have often become symbiotic with new nation states; trade union movements have become linked to welfare states, feminists have become part of cultural modernisation projects, community organising has become part of urban management, environmentalists have sought their place in the sun, and so on. These incorporations have at times marked real gains; they have also marked incorporations, and more crucially one-way dependencies (the movement once incorporated can only operate through a sympathetic state, but the state can do without the movement).

This situation marks the heritage of popular mobilisations in two ways. One is where the movement simply becomes – and seeks to turn itself into – state, and then becomes dependent on the logics of state (and hence capitalist) power relations for its ups and downs. The other, where movements retain independent organisations, has nonetheless seen a powerful institutionalisation and routinisation of movement activity made possible by these democratic gains, as well as a sectoral fragmentation and intellectual isolation from one another, as the boundaries between these different movements become in effect professional boundaries.

If the slow growth in popular power is one reason why states cannot simply drown out the anti-capitalist movement, the Zapatistas or (come to that) Chinese labour movements in blood, the institutionalisation of movements is one reason why (as in August 1914, when trade union and socialist leaders decided to support what was to become the bloodiest war in human history) movements are extremely wary of raising the question of power. What should radicals do in this situation?

Movement upsurges, such as the present one, can lead to a transformation of movements if they mean a remaking of organisations, a turnover of leadership (formal or informal) and a transformation of ideology, away from reliance on the state and a purely sectoral or national perspective, and towards the bigger picture. The most immediate job of radical activists – whether they call themselves communists, Zapatistas, or something else – is to help with this

⁶ Paradoxically, the first *sign* that popular power was growing in this sense was the development of Bonapartism in France, and later the development of fascism elsewhere. Earlier, monarchical and clerical forces sought above all to restore the traditional, routine operation of deference, custom and hierarchy – as late as the inter-war period, Catholics were discouraged from organising political parties, in part for this reason. What Bonapartism and fascism did was to recognise that the mass popular mobilisations of, first, the French revolution and its associated national, liberal and secular movements, and, second, the workers' movement, could not be reversed, and that elites which wished to remain in power had to find new forms of active popular support and mobilisation. We are now, arguably, several steps further down this path, as elites quickly borrow each new movement technique, from cultural revolt to co-designed websites, as tools to reinstate their power, and conjure up whole fake social movements – white-ribbon protests or "colour revolutions" to suit their needs. But they would not do so if they could achieve their goals without popular mobilisation.

remaking of movements, turning towards each other, towards others who are struggling and towards those who are suffering but not yet openly in struggle.

This conversation and alliance-building does not take place between those who possess Theory and those who do not; it takes place between activists who respect each other's organising skills and political achievements, recognise the specific situations which other movements are working within, and try to define shared directions together. David Harvey's work is immensely important within the academy in legitimating the return of Marxism and giving us a theoretical sense of objective possibility. But there is a gulf between political economy and the practice of popular movements which cannot be so easily overcome.

About the author

Laurence Cox has been involved in networking between social movements in Ireland for the last 15 years, most recently through the Grassroots Gatherings. He runs a participatory action research programme in social movement practice at the Dept. of Sociology, National University of Ireland Maynooth. He can be contacted at [laurence.cox AT nuim.ie](mailto:laurence.cox@nuim.ie)