Book review:


Fergal Finnegan

Even a cursory glance over some of the most prominent books produced over the past decade from within the ‘global justice’ movement would be sufficient to recognize a distinct style and sensibility (Mertes, 2004; Notes from Nowhere, 2003; Yuen, Katsiaficas & Rose, 2002). On a superficial level these collections, like the ‘movement of movements’ they sought to analyse, appeared to be a strange and unruly carnival of opinion and dissent which might, to pick a random selection, find Bolivian anarchists, Marxist academics and French peasants all rubbing shoulders. For many commentators this joyful cacophony clearly demonstrated the weakness, incoherence and irrelevancy of the global justice movement. However, on the contrary the form and the themes of the movement of movements indicated just how historically significant this period was. At the Zapatista encuentros, the world social fora, the various summit protests and direct action camps alongside thousands of other less well publicised events a new contemporary radical imagination was being shaped by coming to terms with the challenge of neo-liberalism. Inevitably any attempt to describe social reality on a global scale in a period of rapid change will be plural and unfinished. Just as importantly it is hardly a historical accident that activists chose at this moment to work within broad progressive networks using participatory forms of democracy in which a plurality of opinions and strategies were encouraged. In this sense the shape and organization of the global justice movement can be understood as a conscious attempt to reevaluate the complex legacy of a century of radical thought and experience. It is thus unsurprising that a movement born under the shadow of the enormous failure of Soviet authoritarianism and
inspired by the victories of the ‘new social movements’ should be concerned with how radical ideas can serve to deepen democracy and encourage diversity rather than stifle dissent and how utopias can be imagined without forgetting the grotesque brutality of the gulags and the lies of authoritarian Marxism.

Of course when direct action know-how is placed besides grand Hegelian theory and NGO lobbyists work with committed anti-capitalists debates inevitably emerge over political strategy and ethical values. Debates which, a decade after the Seattle protests, we can now fruitfully reflect upon. One way of framing these debates is to ask how we can usefully understand the relationship between epistemology and politics. What do we mean by ‘knowledge from below’, how is it produced, what is its ultimate value, and what is, and should be, its relationship with formal, ‘expert’ and institutional knowledges? These are knotty and significant issues and it is precisely these important questions that *Praxis and politics* sets out to address by analysing the activities of one part of this ‘movements of movements’ at a local level.

The author, Janet Conway, is a Canadian scholar who spent most of the 1990s working as a full-time social justice activist in Toronto. In her book she examines a broad based coalition of Toronto activists that she helped establish called the Metro Network of Social Justice (the MSNJ) as it evolved and responded to the neo-liberal restructuring of the city between 1992 and 1997. It documents the organizational prehistory, founding and development of the MNSJ within the social and political context of a changing Toronto.

In this account the network, one of several such social justice coalitions that emerged in Canadian civil society in the 1990s, became an important space of resistance and collaboration as the neo-liberal assault on the welfare state intensified. The MNSJ grew steadily from 30 to almost 200 member organizations bringing together activists from a wide range of NGOs, radical political organizations, advocacy groups and trade unions. Inevitably, within such a politically diverse coalition very different objectives and strategies were espoused by various constituent groups within the network but according to
Conway for a good deal of the MNSJ’s existence this was a source of creative
tension and political experimentation.

However, as the 1990s progressed and as the effects the neo-liberal reform on a
state and city level became clear a split slowly emerged between those within the
MNSJ who advocated a popular education strategy and activists who were
pushing a narrower and perhaps more ‘traditional’ campaign and protest agenda.
Conway’s sympathies lie with the former rather than the latter strategy and she
was evidently frustrated by what she saw as tendency towards ‘hyper-activism’
within sections of the MNSJ who relentlessly pursued campaign after campaign
at such an unforgiving tempo that it left little time for reflection. Similarly, she
enumerates some of the difficulties of political work that is overwhelmingly
concerned with pressuring elites to make decisions rather than focusing on
developing alternative practices at a grassroots level. This is contrasted to the
slower rhythm of popular education initiatives undertaken by Conway and others
within the MNSJ which were orientated to what the author calls long-term
‘capacity building’.

Most of their educational work was done under the self explanatory rubric of
‘Economic and Political Literacy’ (EPL) and involved both grassroots community
workshops and activist education. The aim of this work was to create a dialogue
within communities about how they understood their own social needs by
learning and discussing political economy. The book gives considerable attention
to this subject and the writer is still clearly excited by the potential of such work
to develop social awareness of political issues, to help create social solidarity and
ultimately to encourage meaningful forms of political agency. However, when the
activists associated with this popular education approach sought to formalise and
further their work within the network by securing funding for a properly
resourced EPL centre in 1997 the initiative was blocked. As a consequence a
number of activists split from the MNSJ and in Conway’s estimation this
irreparably damaged the MNSJ as a space for creating knowledge from below and
seriously hampered the reach and strength of the network.
Thankfully though *Praxis and politics* is not just another jaundiced account of possibility betrayed but a reflection on social movements and an argument about how to produce social theory. Conway uses her experience in MNSJ as an occasion to think through creating social movement theory from the ‘bottom up’. Furthermore, embedded within this history of the MNSJ and this approach is a thesis about the role of knowledge and learning in contemporary social movements. The author argues that the lived, formal and informal, knowledge of activists deserves careful attention and such work provides the key to understanding both the dynamics and potential of social movements. In this account the everyday and ‘largely tacit, practical and unsystematised knowledge’ (p.1) of social movements are described as powerful tools for remaking culture and identity. This, Conway argues, is particularly true in coalitions and networks such as the MNSJ which potentially offers a dialogical space for the development of more sophisticated and systematic political analyses through open debate.

This theory of social movements as fertile spaces of knowledge production, identity formation and political experiment certainly deserves careful consideration by both activists and academics. It is developed by drawing on the work of the radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and feminist theory in order to outline a social movement epistemology. Within this paradigm the process of democratic decision making and the experience of participatory knowledge production is an integral part of any genuinely democratic political project. In other words the process of making politics and social meaning is much more important than simply achieving campaign objectives. It follows from this approach to epistemology that all knowledge is shaped by power and history and is therefore necessarily, partial and provisional. In methodological terms this means that privileged formal, expert and institutional knowledges require an open and dialogical relationship with experiential knowledge to be really meaningful for progressive social movements.

While this is hardly a novel proposition it is interesting to have this idea explored in the context of the most recent ‘movement of movements’. As such Conway’s book can be read critically and usefully alongside the recent work of the radical
educationalists Michael Apple (2006), Henry Giroux (2004) and some of Stanley Aronowitz’s (2003) writings on social movements that consider some of these issues as well as various analyses on popular education by Crowther, Martin and Shaw (1999), Liam Kane (2001) and Majorie Mayo (2005). Of course there are also clear parallels between *Praxis and politics* and the more magisterial work on epistemology and social movements by the Portuguese sociologist de Sousa Santos (2007).

Undoubtedly, Conway tackles a subject that is intriguing and perhaps even of enormous importance to social movement theory and for the most part carefully and painstakingly put together and clearly argued. Besides which the range, capacity and energy of the work undertaken the MNSJ activists is noteworthy in itself and as such the book is worthwhile. The fact that Conway goes to the trouble to elaborate how the MNSJ developed as Toronto became an important node in global capitalism adds to the value of the work. Nonetheless, however interesting and potentially useful some of the ideas might be the brevity of the arguments undermines the overall impact of the book by skating over whole fields of social movement theory, educational analyses and radical political economy so rapidly that the arguments are often more suggestive than compelling.

There are also some very noticeable gaps in the book. The central theme of how academic work such as this has, should or might relate to social movement activism is obviously touched upon in every chapter but strangely there is little reflection on how the research for this book, this act of translation from the grassroots to the academy, has impacted on the author’s life as an activist. Even more oddly given Conway’s personal involvement and that she undertook interviews with other activists the texture of the book is a little flat and the voices and passions behind the events remain a little muffled. Also, frustratingly the work lacks an appendix of materials of the MNSJ or the EPL and does not give any detailed accounts of the workshops organized by the EPL. Oddly given that the work is by an activist-academic there is no postscript on the work of the MNSJ since 1997.
This lack of grit is not solely due to the constraints of academic writing or the fact that *Praxis and politics* is too short to realistically achieve Conway’s ambitious goals. Throughout the book there is a theoretical and political unevenness. Conway has a strong distrust of modes of reasoning that risk theoretical and political foreclosure and is strongly influenced by Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) blend of feminism, Gramsci, poststructuralism and liberalism. Accordingly Conway outlines a conception of radical democracy in which is seen as preferable not to legislate or prescribe for one particular vision of the future. However, in this case this approach leads to a theory that is a more an agglomeration rather than a consistent whole. The difficult work of acknowledging the contextual and provisional nature of knowledge within a framework that allows us to meaningfully discuss and evaluate truth claims is stymied and repeats the tendency in some postmodern work to confuse political and theoretical clarity with authoritarianism.

One of the effects of this is that *Praxis and politics* is often unclear about how power functions and is maintained in modern capitalism. As a consequence there is little attempt to broadly frame the losses and gains of the work described, Moreover, there is little clear and conclusive evaluation on the debates that have dominated networks such as the MNSJ on the value of participatory versus electoral democracy and the limits of the network form itself. A linked problem is that Conway’s preferred terms such as democracy, capacity building remain somewhat vaguely defined. Even more importantly the complex way popular education can be employed by *varied* political agendas is largely ignored. Instead, the popular education agenda is described as a political approach in and of itself against a series of positions with which she disagrees. Certainly democratic, and dialogical process are of paramount importance but it is moot whether the sort of ‘capacity building’ described alone amounts to an effective political strategy. This way of structuring the analysis of the MNSJ ultimately forecloses much of the substantive discussion to be had about how you think beyond the present moment, the obstacles in our way and how you get there.
Early in the book Conway approvingly cites David Harvey’s call for a ‘politics of global ambition’ (p.4) based on local resistance. In *Praxis and Politics* the author goes some way to thinking through important questions about social movements and knowledge which is undoubtedly a fundamental part of creating a politics of global ambition. However, the brevity of the books, the numerous gaps and the political vision that underpins mean that Conway falls well short of this. The book remains locked in a historical moment which was important both as a critique of the radical tradition and an attempt to understand the nature of neo-liberalism but the movement of movements needs to move beyond this moment and give a reckoning of its own strengths and weaknesses over the past decade. Those interested in remaking the world through a passion for freedom, equality, dignity and justice will find much to reflect upon in Conway’s book but perhaps in terms of political vision not quite enough.
References


Crowther, Jim, Martin, Ian. And Shaw, Mae Eds 1999 Popular education and social movements in Scotland today. Leicester: NIACE.


Notes from Nowhere 2003 We are everywhere: The irresistible rise of global anticapitalism. London: Verso.

About the author:

Fergal Finnegan is an activist from Dublin who is an adult educator and a researcher. Any queries or comments on the review are welcome especially from people interested or involved in popular education. His email is fergaltf@yahoo.co.uk or he can be contacted via post at the Department of Adult and Community Education, NUIM, Maynooth, Co Kildare, Ireland.

URL for this article: