

## **Book reviews: *Interface* volume 3(1)**

**Reviews editor: Aileen O'Carroll**

### **Books reviewed this issue:**

Davis, Laurence and Kinna, Ruth, eds. (2010). *Anarchism and utopianism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. (304 pp. £60 hardback)

Reviewed by Martha Ackelsberg

Dukelow, Fiona and O'Donovan, Orla, eds. (2010). *Mobilising classics: reading radical writing in Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. (265 pp. £14.99 paperback, £60 hardback)

Reviewed by Fergal Finnegan

Graeber, David (2009). *Direct action: an ethnography*. Oakland: AK Press. (568 pp. \$25.95 paperback)

Reviewed by Mandisi Majavu

Hyde-Clarke, Nathalie, ed. (2010). *The citizen in communication: re-visiting traditional, new and community media practices in South Africa*. Cape Town: Juta. (240pp. R269.95 paperback)

Reviewed by Marian Burchardt

Kuhn, Gabriel (2010). *Sober living for the revolution: hardcore punk, Straight Edge, and radical politics*. Oakland: PM Press. (304pp. \$22.95 paperback)

Reviewed by John L. Murphy

Nilsen, Alf Gunvald (2010). *Dispossession and resistance in India: the river and the rage*. Oxford: Routledge. (242pp. £80 hardback)

Reviewed by Lesley Wood

**Davis, Laurence and Kinna, Ruth, eds. (2010). *Anarchism and utopianism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. (304 pp. £60 hardback)**

Reviewed by **Martha Ackelsberg**

Many years ago, Lewis Mumford wrote, in *The Story of Utopias*, that "Utopia has long been another name for the unreal and the impossible. We have set utopia over against the world. As a matter of fact, it is our utopias that make the world tolerable to us: the cities and mansions that people dream of are those in which they finally live." As many of the essays in this volume note, because of the association of "utopia" with the "unreal and the impossible," "utopianism" has an ambiguous legacy. On the one hand, those who are critical of movements for social change often condemn them with the charge of utopianism; and, on the other hand, as Peter Marshall notes in his preface, "Utopian thinking and reverie have been with us... ever since our ancestors on the African savannah first lifted up their heads and wondered what kind of society might be over the horizon or on the other side of the mountain range." Similarly, anarchism has sometimes been "tarred" with the utopian label. What makes this volume—which focuses on the relationship between anarchism and utopianism—particularly compelling is that its contributors include both those who attempt to distinguish anarchism from utopianism, in hopes of escaping the label, and those who proudly claim the utopian label. The inclusion of both advocates and critics of utopianism is but one example of the diversity of the contributors to this intriguing anthology.

The essays are, indeed, very diverse, ranging from explorations of Daoism in ancient China to the politics of love and desire in late Nineteenth Century Britain and the mid-late Twentieth Century US; examinations of literary utopias; and (conflicting) presentations of the place of emotions in anarchist and/or utopian theorizing. While the topics are varied, and the approaches even more so, they are all linked, as Laurence Davis rightly points out in his fine introduction, by the "idea of speaking/living/being utopia as a manifestation of the anarchist emphasis on the inextricable interrelationship of means and ends." And all of these contributors question the received wisdom of our time that capitalism is here to stay, and is, in effect, the "only game in town." While some of the contributors are more hesitant than others to offer alternative visions (perhaps for fear of being labeled "utopian!"), all begin from a critical standpoint vis-à-vis dominant relations of economic, political, and gendered power.

The volume is arranged in five sections: the first offers an historical and philosophical overview; the second has two essays on antecedents of the anarchist literary utopia; the third consists of four chapters exploring anti-capitalism and the anarchist utopian literary imagination; then follow three chapters on free love, anarchist politics and utopian desire (my favorites!); and the final section contains

four concluding essays on contemporary anarchist politics. One aspect of this volume that differentiates it from other anthologies, and that I found particularly appealing, is that the essays are all relatively brief: 10-20 pages, on average. The authors tend to present their arguments in clear and pithy prose, which makes these essays accessible to academic experts and "lay" readers/activists alike.

John P. Clark's introductory essay takes the reader directly into the conflict between the dominating/repressive and the creative/expressive/libertarian dimensions of utopian thought (especially in literary contexts). In this respect, his contribution both introduces and manifests the tensions about utopianism that are explored throughout the volume. Clark argues—as do many of the contributors—echoing Mumford, that there is a prefigurative dimension to both anarchist and utopian politics; that is, "utopia is present in all the creative play of energies, in spiritual and material voyages of discovery, and, of course, in everything touched by the transformative imagination... Even if it can never be attained, utopia is already present or it is a fraud." Thus, this essay provides a compelling entry into the complexities that are also explored in other chapters in the volume.

The two essays in the section on antecedents of anarchist literary utopia were, to this reader, at least, rather less accessible than the rest. Perhaps because I am less familiar with the historical contexts (particularly of Rapp's essay on radical Daoism "re-examined in light of the Guodian manuscripts"), the articles sometimes felt as if they were beginning "in medias res." Some readers might well benefit from a bit more historical contextualizing. But the arguments the authors raise about the complexities of utopian visions are certainly clear, and relevant to contemporary movements.

Some of the contradictions—or at least differences of opinion—among the authors and within the volume come through clearly in the chapters in the sections on the anarchist utopian literary imagination and on free love and radical politics. Indeed, although the first section seemingly focuses on literary genres—and the essays certainly begin with literary utopias—they tend to range rather far beyond, including anthropological, psychological and historical analyses and perspectives. There is an intriguing common thread running through these essays, which is brought to the fore more directly and explicitly in the fourth section: namely, explorations of the place of desires and emotions in utopian theories and practice. Thus, Nicholas Spencer's essay on B. Traven and Pierre Clastres, and Gisela Heffes' on the "political implications of emotions," highlight not only different forms of power (coercive vs. non-coercive), but also the disruptive effects of desires and emotions in would-be utopian/anarchist contexts—a theme that Dominic Ording also explores in his discussion of post-Stonewall gay liberation manifestos.

Taking a different tack, fascinating chapters by Judy Greenway and Brigitte Koenig (found in the section on anarchist politics and utopian desire) explore late-nineteenth and early twentieth century experiments in free(r) love—both historical

and literary—and suggest ways that desires and emotions, while potentially destabilizing, can also point the way to new possibilities. Nevertheless, while Ording's essay, drawing on early post-Stonewall gay liberation manifestoes, did a fine job of exploring both the utopian promise and complex realities of sexual liberation, I was struck by the absence in it of a feminist awareness and sensibility. No doubt, the essay reflects the perspectives of the gay male activist-writers of the time, who believed themselves to be inventing new modes of being in the absence of any models. That they were ignorant of contemporary radical feminist efforts to re-imagine love, desires, commitment, etc. was one thing; that Ording fails to mention those efforts is another. It is not that late 60's radical (and lesbian) feminists had all the answers either; but at least they, too, were struggling with the questions. It would have been valuable to note the disjuncture, the relative lack of communication, between groups that were attempting similar utopian explorations.

The four essays in the final section bring us back, directly, to the tensions and the creative possibilities in the confrontation of anarchism with utopianism. Whether in explorations of the place of education within the anarchist/utopian project or in examinations of the possibility of dissenting action within contemporary advanced capitalist (or post-capitalist) industrial society, these essays make clear that anarchist and utopian perspectives have much to offer us, particularly at moments that seem as politically bleak as our own. I found Uri Gordon's concluding essay particularly compelling. He confronts head-on the claim that the "type of present-tense utopianism" explored in the volume "necessarily leads to abandoning the thankless but necessary work of building a mass revolutionary movement...?"

To this question, he offers two (partial) answers. The optimistic one is that it is precisely the building of alternative spaces, the practice of prefigurative politics, that offers the strongest argument for joining a movement for social change. The "pessimistic" response is that "a lack of belief in revolutionary closure becomes a strength rather than a liability; having let go of long-term utopian aspirations, activists are already partially equipped with the mental and emotional resources they need to carry on with their work despite the bleak prospects they might anticipate for global society in the coming decades." In short, despite the dystopian conditions of contemporary life in the West, the need for utopias—and, in particular, anarchist-inspired utopian thinking—has never been greater. While this book does not offer us any blueprints—and, in fact, insists that anarchism is not about offering blueprints—it does offer us many compelling stories, as well as possible grounds for the hope that change is possible. And that is no small thing.

### **About the reviewer**

**Martha Ackelsberg** is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor at Smith College. Her teaching, research and writing all center on the nature and structure of political

communities, and, in particular, patterns of power and participation within them. She is the author of *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women*, and *Resisting Citizenship: Feminist Essays on Politics, Community, and Democracy*. Her email is mackelsb AT smith.edu.

**Dukelow, Fiona and O'Donovan, Orla, eds. (2010). *Mobilising classics: reading radical writing in Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. (265 pp. £14.99 paperback, £60 hardback)**

Reviewed by **Fergal Finnegan**

The idea behind this book is both a good and deceptively simple one. In fact the editors should be commended for a coming up with such an engaging and straightforward format for a book that immediately makes you think “why hasn’t this been done before?” They approached a number of Irish radicals, nearly all of whom are academics, and asked them to write about a “classic” piece of radical writing which has inspired them or which they considered particularly important.

The book consists of eleven chapters each of which explores one “mobilising classic” in detail. Every chapter provides some introductory historical and biographical material about the author of the classic text along with an analysis of the piece in question. Crucially, the writers also explore the relevance of the text to social movements and explain how the piece of writing has been read and been acted upon in Ireland. Most of the writers also describe how they first came across the text and the political motivation behind their choice. So although the book is academic there is no pretence to false neutrality from the contributors. These things mark it out. After all, there is no shortage of collections of writings on social movements, but the emphasis on how ideas circulate and get *used* combined with some insights into the personal reasons underpinning the choice of a piece of writing gives the book an avowedly political, intimate and human quality that many academic collections lack.

Most of the chosen pieces are very well known. So included in the eleven are Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man*, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton’s *Black power*<sup>1</sup> along with writing by Ivan Illich, Adrienne Rich and Robert Tressell. Two other socialist writers are featured who may not be familiar to non-Irish readers but are famous in Ireland—James Connolly and William Thompson. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Carmichael later renamed himself Kwame Ture.

only real surprises, for this reader at any rate, was the choice of *Our Common Future*—the 1987 UN report on the environment and sustainability which is used as a way of exploring debates within the Irish environmentalism, and a very stimulating essay about *The Myth of Mental Illness*, an attack on mainstream psychiatry by Thomas Szasz.

Given the purpose of the collection, the familiarity of most of the choices is not surprising or disappointing. In fact much of the pleasure in reading the book consists in seeing a familiar set of ideas through another's eyes or in being gently reminded that in fact you have never got round to reading a certain piece of writing. The structure and focus of the collection also means that it provides accessible and readable introductions when texts are unknown or a chapter is exploring unfamiliar areas of activism. As such it is likely to appeal to activists searching for ideas outside their main field of interest and academics concerned with exploring the relationship between theory and practice.

It is probably already clear from description of its contents that *Mobilising Classics* mainly features writing from the latter half of the twentieth century<sup>2</sup> and strongly reflects the concerns of “new” social movements with gender, race, sexuality and environmental issues. The importance of class is also highlighted and the book is emphatically internationalist. Within the collection there is also a marked interest in the connection between education and mobilisation (see the pieces on Thompson, Illich and Freire). It is also noteworthy, and I think very telling, that most of the chosen classics were written by people who were primarily activist intellectuals rather than traditional academics and includes no arcane versions of post-structuralist or postmodern theory.

The editors have bookended the essays with an introduction and a conclusion that offer a broadly Gramscian analysis of the material. However, by its nature a collection like this is heterogenous and the value of the book is that it offers possible departure points for future inquiry rather than a systematic theoretical analysis. Each reader will be drawn to different things. For me there were two common threads within the collection that I think are worth highlighting in a little more detail—how memory and tradition are constantly reworked within social movements and the relationship between hope and radical thought. To sketch this out I will focus my attention on three specific chapters and by doing this, hopefully, will also give readers a flavour of the book.

The politics of memory have loomed large in the Irish radicalism. The major political movement in twentieth century Irish history was anti-colonial nationalism and claiming ownership over this political tradition became very important in Irish radicalism. However, donning the mantle of tradition has its risks and this approach can all too easily degenerate into a secular hagiography of heroes and

---

<sup>2</sup> There is one 18th-century text, one piece of writing from the the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, two from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and six from between 1940 and 1987.

martyrs linked to a simplistic and linear notion of history. Two of the best pieces in the collection work through some of these issues. They acknowledge the importance of tradition but point out, both directly and obliquely, that to remain vital traditions need to be constantly revisited and remade by social movement activists.

This is clearly part of the argument being made in a wonderfully pugnacious and refreshing contribution by Bernadette McAliskey in her analysis of Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*. As a key figure in civil rights movement in the north of Ireland in the 1960s who then became involved in the Republican movement, community politics and a number of high profile campaigns, McAliskey is the best known contributor to the book<sup>3</sup>. In her article she goes on an intelligent meander through the debates on liberty and rights that gripped Europe and America two hundred years ago to explore a model of radical democracy relevant to the here and now. In doing so she is saying something about how she views the Republican tradition and which is critical of narrow nationalism. She is also making an argument about what it mean to be radical and to live and grow through ideas.

Significantly, she begins her article with memories of her working class father and his passion for education, reason and the writings of Paine. She ends with the advice "Read avidly. Read till your eyes hurt, think til your head hurts, then do what you think needs to be done to change what you see and doesn't make sense. This will make you an informed, educated and better human being, and with any luck, lead to you want to read, experience and know more" (p. 20). This type of fine Enlightenment zeal is as refreshing as it is unfashionable. More importantly in exploring the links between Irish history, her family history and her political vision through the ideas of Paine she is making a compelling argument for both the importance of tradition and the necessity of a critical and theoretically aware remaking of tradition.

Similar themes surface in the historian Fintan Lane's account of James Connolly's *Labour in Irish History*. Lane offers a very able and succinct introduction to this canonical socialist and Republican tract which is critically attentive to the uses and abuses of tradition. Above all his chapter reminds us that there is a massive difference between between revered and being read. Following Connolly's execution as one of the leaders of the 1916 rising, Lane suggests, he became a figure around who there was an atmosphere of "dogmatic piety" (p. 39) "but generally emptied of his subversive anti-bourgeois purpose" (p. 38). Ireland wanted Connolly's sacrifice but not his socialism. Lane argues that despite its fame *Labour in Irish History* had always found a very limited audience and was rarely

---

<sup>3</sup> McAliskey may be better known to some readers as Bernadette Devlin and was a key figure in the mass civil disobedience in Derry in the late 1960s, was elected to the parliament in the UK, was involved in Socialist Republican groups and numerous campaigns (including the 1981 hunger strike) and has survived an assassination attempt. She is now a community worker and lecturer.

read outside of the far left and trade union circles. Furthermore, Lane suggests that even amongst the left the book was often used as a talisman for connecting radicals to the Republican tradition rather than as a resource for socialist analysis. By offering a sceptical, historically informed account of a cultural icon Lane also makes a case that an awareness of the uses of tradition is fundamental to informed activism.

This is a version, with specific Irish resonances, of a more general argument made throughout *Mobilising Classics* that engaging with radical writing allows us to resist the gravitational pull of the now, to think beyond the given and occasionally to make the seemingly unthinkable possible. In fact if one thing unites this disparate collection it is the belief that reading offers us resources of hope in an era in which, to paraphrase Fredric Jameson, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.<sup>4</sup> All the articles grapple in some way with how the politics of critique is, or should be, linked to the politics of hope. However, it has to be said though that the results are very mixed and inconclusive, probably because the goals of radical activity are understood in such diverse ways by the writers.

The chapter that deals this issue in the most subtle and nuanced way is Rosie Meade's article on Robert Tressell's novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* one of the classics of the socialist canon. Paradoxically, by articulating her personal feelings of occasional despair in the face of neoliberalism and what she memorably terms "the loneliness of the long-distance socialist" (p. 68) and linking and contrasting this with the experience of the characters in Tressell's working class novel published in 1914, she achieves something very worthwhile. Part of the reason for this is the broad frame of reference she brings to bear on the novel in that she also outlines, albeit very briefly, an analysis of the contemporary logic of capitalism and the Irish left in her essay. In shuttling back and forth in this manner she offers some historical perspective on how and why we encounter despair in a way that makes room for hope.

Meade's piece book is notably ambitious, McAliskey's is remarkably passionate and Lane's is commendably lucid and sceptical but it should be said that nearly all the authors involved in *Mobilising Classics* offer readable introductions that piques the reader's curiosity and manage to deal with substantial and relevant issues in contemporary social movements. This is no mean feat and makes the book of potential interest to an international readership. On a more parochial level the emphasis on how a text has been received and used within Ireland means there are fascinating insights into Irish social movements, most notably the feminist

---

<sup>4</sup> See Jameson (2003: 76). Of course the question of where and how we foster hope has a relevance far beyond Irish social movements and has been a recurrent theme in the 'movement of movements' globally.



movement, and some less relevant but nonetheless worthwhile anecdotes that will make the book of real interest to some Irish readers<sup>5</sup>.

Part of the purpose of such of a collection, which it should be said makes no claims to being "representative", is of course to get readers noting the absences within the selection. Each reader will have their own private zoo of hobbyhorses and bugbears and I was surprised that none of the contributors made an argument for the inclusion of more recent writing as "classic" and that historical and economic analyses received such short shrift. Overall, there is not much encouragement in *Mobilising Classics* to get your hands on material that helps you grasp the systemic logic of capitalism or think through alternative forms of social organisation. I was also taken aback that it includes only one piece of fiction. The exclusive focus on writing may have also been unnecessarily restrictive and the absence of films, photography, music and art that have been "mobilising classics" is arguably a mistake<sup>6</sup>.

This brings me to a more substantive criticism. Why are nearly all the contributors primarily academics? The collection benefits greatly from its concern with the circulation of ideas and how theory and practice inform each other in different times and diverse places. With that in mind it may have been instructive to have seen how including the choices of a few organic intellectuals outside the academy, especially younger intellectuals, would have contributed to the dialogue within the book about the nature of hope and resources of critique.

These caveats aside, this is an interesting, well written and accessible but academic account of some of the ideas that move us and make us and on that basis deserves to be read and circulated widely.

## References

Hyndman, Marilyn (ed.) 1996. *Further afield: journeys from a Protestant past*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale.

Jameson, Fredric. 2003. "Future city". *New Left Review* 21 (May - June): 65 - 79.

---

<sup>5</sup> So if you are at all curious about why Simone De Beauvoir spent a couple of disconsolate days in a pub in rural Ireland or how the radical educational thinker Ivan Illich was received in County Clare in 1989 the book might be worth picking up.

<sup>6</sup> There are hundreds of examples that come to mind here. See for instance Hyndman (1996) which discusses how music scenes impacted on some northern Protestants' sense of identity and politics.

### About the reviewer

**Fergal Finnegan** is an educationalist, researcher and activist from Dublin. He is currently a Government of Ireland Scholar in the National University of Ireland Maynooth. He can be contacted at fergaltf AT yahoo.co.uk.

**Graeber, David (2009). *Direct action: an ethnography*. Oakland: AK Press. (568 pp. \$25.95 paperback)**

Reviewed by **Mandisi Majavu**

David Graeber's goal in writing this book is to tell the story of what it feels like to be part of a major demonstration against a global summit. His aim is to illustrate what sort of issues activists argue about when planning such demonstrations. Through ethnographic writing, he narrates - in great detail - what it is like to participate in a marathon, two-day meeting, and to come out of it feeling that one has experienced "something profoundly transformative." He defines ethnographic writing as the kind of writing that describes the outline of a "social and conceptual universe", which, although it is theoretically informed, does not champion a single argument or a single theory.

At the time of writing this book, Graeber was involved in New York *Ya Basta!* collective and New York *Direct Action Network* (DAN) - both these groups are based in North America and are a part of the global justice movement. Graeber makes it clear that he does not pretend to be an objective observer in writing this book. "I did not become involved in this movement in order to write an ethnography. I became involved as a participant" (Graeber 2009, 12). Graeber further notes that when he criticises the movement, it is because he wants to refine and advance the objectives of the movement.

The first part of the book describes the meetings and events that led to the mobilisation and the protest against the "Summit of the Americas" which was held in Quebec City (Canada) in April 2001. One interesting meeting that Graeber describes is the spokescouncil that he and some of his comrades from *Ya Basta* drove to Quebec City on March, 23, 2001 to attend. Graeber explains that the local organisers in Quebec City - that is, *Convergence des Luttes Anti-Capitalistes* (CLAC) and the *Comite d'accueil du Sommet des Ameriques* (CASA), had planned the spokescouncil because they wanted to come up with the broad framework for the protest against the summit. Additionally, the organisers wanted "affinity groups coming from outside the province to give them advice. Also, they want to get some idea of what those outsiders are intending to do" (Graeber 2009, 64).

This particular meeting was held at a venue called Rene-Levesque on March 24, 2001, and was attended by about 200 activists. It was structured in such a way that it was to move from the general meeting to a breakout session in which a series of questions provided by organisers were to be addressed. At the end of the breakout session the representatives of different groups were expected to explain what their affinity groups were thinking of doing during the Summit which was to be held the following month (April 2001). This became a basis on which the facilitators constructed a list of different sorts of action such as blockades and street theatre.

Graeber explains that the rules governing the meeting were that anyone attending the spokescouncil could speak; however, only representatives empowered by their groups could vote. Being used to consensus decision making processes, Graeber and other American activists did not understand the issue of voting at first.

Graeber points out that it was explained to them that the process was going to be a "bit more formal than we're used to". This was partly because the meeting was more of a consultation process than a spokescouncil. Additionally, it was also explained to them that activists in Quebec City "have had, until very recently" no real experience with consensus decision making processes, and thus they were learning the process from scratch. It was further pointed out that Quebec City activists had moved in the space of few months from using a majority vote system to a semi-consensus system, "in which, if they fail to find consensus on the first go, they move to seventy-five percent super-majority vote" (Graeber 2009, 64).

A representative from the CASA presented to the spokescouncil a series of proposals that CASA and CLAC had developed for the protest against the Summit. She (the representative) explained that the final details of proposed action that came out of the spokescouncil could be ironed out on 19 April 2001 - the day before the Summit was scheduled to commence. Additionally, she proposed a torchlight parade to take place at night that same day. "...Our goal is not to be arrested before the 20<sup>th</sup>, but to welcome the Summit, as it were" (Graeber 2009, 65).

She continued:

On Friday the 20<sup>th</sup>, the Carnival Against Capitalism march will assemble on the Plains of Abraham at noon, and then people can choose where we go. ...On Saturday the 21<sup>st</sup>, we will participate in the big labor demo as an explicitly anti-capitalist contingent. ...Sunday the 22 will be the same: there will be space for different actions... (Graeber 2009, 66).

These proposals were then discussed by the representatives of affinity groups, and the representatives also submitted their own proposals. At the end of the spokescouncil, representatives were expected to take back to their affinity groups across North America a summary of ideas discussed at the spokescouncil in order to allow affinity groups to choose ideas that they felt comfortable plugging into. Graeber argues that the outcome of the discussions illustrate how "through such open-ended and sometimes apparently unproductive discussions, action plans really can take form" (Graeber 2009, 84).

The brilliance of Graeber's book lies in the fact that in addition to recounting the democratic processes that informed the demonstration against the Summit of the Americas, Graeber further puts those processes in their proper historical and political context. Also, it is worth noting that Graeber is a master storyteller---he easily transforms what may appear at first as an unremarkable story into an insightful and interesting reflection. Witness Graeber reflecting on the confrontation between the police and activists at the Summit:

In a major action, there's absolutely no way to grasp even a fraction of what's going on. There are a hundred tiny dramas happening at once, later to be given narrative form by participants. At any given time, you are probably seeing tiny pieces of a dozen---someone running off in what seems a random direction, someone standing engrossed, a cluster of people doing something you can't quite make out in the distance. Major events might be happening twelve feet away---behind a wall, under an escarpment---of which you have absolutely no idea; at least, until much later, when you start to synthesize accounts (Graeber 2009, 160).

Apart from discussing the Summit of the Americas, the book investigates other issues as well. For instances, part two of the book grapples with concepts such as "direct action", anarchism, direct democracy and "activist culture". Graeber's exploration of these topics is informative and insightful.

The one issue that I feel Graeber does not convincingly explore in this book is the culture of "summit hopping" associated with activists who organise and participate in demonstrations against global summits. Graeber writes that those involved in the movement agree with the critique that actions like Seattle (1999), Prague (2000), or Quebec City (2001), ought to be extensions of a project to build a popular, multi-issue, mass movement that is rooted within communities' struggles. "Even before Naomi Klein (2000) wrote her famous article in the Nation warning activists about the dangers of 'summit hopping,' of 'following trade bureaucrats as if they were the Grateful Dead,' all this was already a major item of debate" (Graeber 2009, 209).

According to Graeber, the demonstrations in Seattle and in Quebec City were meant to serve two purposes. On the one hand, these demonstrations aimed to expose the undemocratic nature of institutions like the WTO, IMF and the World Bank. On the other hand, the action against these summits was meant to showcase the living example of what it means to organise a street protest based on direct democratic principles and egalitarian decision making values. "The *Direct Action Network* (DAN), which forms much of the immediate focus of this book, emerged directly from this project" (Graeber 2009, 210).

However, Graeber does not thoroughly review how effective these demonstrations are in serving their purpose. It is only when Graeber discusses the issue of white privilege within movements such as DAN that one gets the sense that this strategy is somewhat ineffective. He writes that in the United States most communities of colour see an emphasis "on direct democracy as itself a form of white privilege". In

fact, Graeber points out that the New York DAN that he was involved in was considered “decidedly upscale” by other activists. He further admits that groups like DAN were largely white, and what in fact was particularly striking about these groups was the absence of African Americans. “For most of its history, NYC DAN had a single Black member, in an active core group of about fifty” (Graeber 2009, 244).

This lack of diversity in movements such as DAN reflects a disconnect between privileged, middle-class white activists and poor communities. Our movements have to encourage and cultivate diversity if we are interested in building a truly multi-issue, global justice movement. As a start, we could give the demonstrations against global summits a greater meaning and strength through reaching out to local communities by for example, organising events in which we spend a considerable amount of time clarifying issues, aims, and the logic of our political activities to new audiences who do not agree with our efforts (Albert 2002).

Ultimately, demonstrations against global summits will pose a serious threat to elites when they are rooted in dissident communities spread out in our societies. And, as Graeber has pointed it out, activists who participate in demonstrations against global summits agree with this view. The challenge however is to come up with ways to overcome the disconnect between middle class activists who tend to be the brains behind demonstrations against global summits and poor and oppressed communities. Graeber does not convincingly explore this particular issue in this book. And, in my opinion, this is the main weakness of the book.

Nevertheless, the book remains a very important contribution to the study of global justice movement. It is the most comprehensive account of what issues activists consider and argue about when planning street protests against global summits.

## References

Michael Albert. 2002. *The trajectory of change: Activist strategies for social transformation*. Boston: South End Press.

## About the reviewer

**Mandisi Majavu** is a Researcher at the Foundation for Contemporary Research, South Africa. Contact: majavums AT gmail.com.

**Hyde-Clarke, Nathalie, ed. (2010). *The citizen in communication: re-visiting traditional, new and community media practices in South Africa*. Cape Town: Juta. (240pp. R269.95 paperback)**

Reviewed by **Marian Burchardt**

In South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, citizen journalism and community media have become crucial in reconfiguring the landscapes of public communication, in providing “alternative” avenues of news production, distribution and consumption, and in enabling the formation of political alliances in the shadows of the pressures and demands of both markets and states. Made possible by new technologies, these developments challenge inherited scholarship on media practices as they often thwart these very time-honoured dichotomies such as public/private or production/consumption.

This edited volume takes up the challenge of creatively thinking through the analytical issues emerging from these changes. Focusing on the fascinating case of South Africa, it draws attention to how these innovations in media practice and communication affect notions of citizenship in a post-revolutionary society torn between tendencies towards authoritarianism on the one hand, and the renegotiation of notions of movement activism on the other. The book is primarily targeted at scholars and students in communication and media studies. As the discussion is chiefly about South Africa, students, media professionals or activists dealing with this country will find it most interesting but it also contains valuable information and debates that will be of interest to people from other African countries. For scholars from industrialized countries the book will be extremely helpful in understanding how new media practices can have transformative impacts even under conditions of sometimes very limited internet access and resource scarcity.

The book is divided into two parts. The first section addresses the analytical concerns and empirical questions that emerge through the intertwinements of “new technologies” and citizen journalism, including the normative and political issue of how to reconcile citizen participation with journalistic quality and ethics. The second section discusses diverse forms of community media – radio, television and newspapers – and their economic, political and cultural underpinnings in post-apartheid South Africa.

The first section starts with a systematic review of existing approaches to new technologies and citizen journalism by Hayes Mawindi Mabweazara. He also synthesizes these approaches into a more comprehensive framework encompassing professional imperatives as well as social organizational, cultural and political factors that shape the possibilities and constraints in the deployment of new technologies (p. 23). Citizen journalism, as this and the following chapters make

clear, refers to diverse forms of audience participation, generation of contents by users for users, and possibly the devolution of all the different steps of news gathering, selection, editing, and distribution to ordinary, non-professional citizens. In reality, however, the practice of citizen journalism is contingent upon the perception of its functions and meanings by different actors in the media sector. In this context, the differences but also intertwinements of citizen journalism and traditional journalism as discussed in several contributions are significant: Amongst traditional media organizations there are tendencies to absorb citizen participation into classical formats (e.g. user blogging in mainstream newspapers) but clearly also inclinations to restrict citizen journalism's function to that of news gathering while professional journalists retain control over the entire process of selection, editing and presentation. The authors emphasize that this may undercut the emancipative potentials of citizen journalism in constructing counter-publics and in reconfiguring the interface of democracy and the public sphere by weaving horizontally instead of top-down organized webs of communication.

Mabweazara also points to the need of adapting existing, mostly Western, research agendas to African realities, particularly with regard to access to technologies and political conditions. The chapter by Dumisani Moyo on SMSing and citizen journalism in Zimbabwe addresses these such specificities in a particularly lucid way. Here, because of extreme poverty and the political repression of most mass media, SMSing became a primary means of building up a counter-public in the wake of the 2008 elections and the withholding of its results by the regime. Moyo also excavates the cultural significance of SMSing, which resonates with widespread forms of pavement debate through storytelling ("radio trottoir"). Instead of private information, SMS became widely shared news sources pointing to the public use of supposedly private mobile phones. What matters is that the notion of citizen journalism ties in strongly with specifically African cultural traditions of orality, in which the use of public places by ordinary citizens for face-to-face debates on politics often served to challenge print- or emission-based publics. Interestingly, in social contexts where traditional professionalized mass media rarely constitute hegemonic formations, citizen journalism may therefore be much less of a novelty than elsewhere.

Many of the authors take great pains to conceptualize the "alternative" nature of citizen journalism, defining alternative media as community-oriented, as opposed to mainstream media, as radical in content and counter-hegemonic, as part of civil society, or in a poststructuralist manner as rhizomatic. These discussions skilfully rehearse seminal scholarly interventions such as those by Bayley *et al.* As they appear in many chapters, they sometimes become redundant, which is a pity if one reads the whole book but helpful if one uses selected chapters for course work.

The same thing happens with the problem of defining community as it forms part of the concept of "community media" that is the subject of the second section of the book. Many authors struggle to identify adequate working concepts of

"community" within the psychological and sociological literature. This becomes a somewhat dry exercise at times, especially because of the tendency to assemble lofty criteria for community media only to find out that the cases under consideration rarely meet them.

What is much more interesting are the ways in which the notion of community is rendered political by its deployment in political discourse and practice. Brilliant Mhlanga discusses the fascinating case of the SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation)-sponsored community radio XK FM targeting the ethnic and linguistic minority groups of !Ku and Khwe in the Northern Cape province through vernacular programming. This is community radio in the classical anthropological sense (community as coextensive with "culture" and language) and these "communities" appeared to be satisfied with the existing forms of community participation precisely on these terms. Simultaneously, this was no community radio at all as none of the structural criteria (ownership, decision-making, public participation in content generation) was met. In the contribution on community newspapers by Thalyta Swanepoel and Elanie Steyn, the political and structural meanings of community almost evaporate as it is equated with locally or geographically limited readership while the great majority of the community newspapers under consideration are owned by big media corporations. Little mention is made of how such newspapers may contribute to the challenging of power relations.

This volume fills a crucial gap in scholarly literature on alternative media and gives a remarkably comprehensive overview of contemporary transformations of South Africa's media landscape. It also seems, however, that its own shortcomings point to greater gaps in research practice. One major problem is the apparent lack of a methodological agenda. A fair share of the contributions that are based on empirical research are rather descriptive and the sociological and political significance of some of the new media practices (e.g. the staging of "cellphilm" festivals) do not always become clear. Furthermore, it is surprising that the perspectives and voices of the otherwise celebrated "ordinary" community members or citizen journalist figure less prominently than those programme directors. Many of the chapters approach the subject by describing details of South Africa's media architecture and how regulations enable or limit participation and resistance; while this is important they sometimes fail to reach down to actors they really wish to address. This, in turn, makes it difficult for the reader to grasp the political dimensions of these media transformations and, by implication, their role in facilitating social movement activism.

As most authors rightly state, for most alternative media groups the end of apartheid in 1994 came as a watershed leaving them not only with little resources and foreign funding but equally importantly with questionable legitimacy. As other civil society activists and social movements, they were and still are caught up between the agenda of social transformation and liberation and the problem of



redefining their relationship towards the democratic government. This dilemma is exacerbated by the fact that organizations that are close to the government such as the ANC Youth League or COSATU visibly retain their movement character and movement politics. The fact that they are part of both the state and of civil society makes it possible for them to criticize government and at once sustain it while blurring the boundaries between power and resistance.

If activism is thus at home at both sides of the state/civil society divide, however, what are the consequences for constructions of the public sphere and of counter-publics? How are citizenship journalism and alternative or community media deployed by those activists who operate in the interstices between state-led social development, "governmental activism" and the ongoing racial divisions in terms of economic power and media ownership? Unfortunately, these questions are only touched upon in this volume. This means that it is less valuable for those who want answers to these questions but extremely valuable for those looking for an analysis of media practices in terms of context information and for analytical tools to engage in further research themselves.

## References

Bailey, Olga, Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier. 2008. *Understanding Alternative Media*. Berkshire: McGraw Hill and Open University Press.

## About the reviewer

**Marian Burchardt** works as a researcher at the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of Leipzig/Germany, from which he also received his PhD. He has studied sociology, media studies and political science, has been a visiting scholar at the New School for Social Research in New York City and Stellenbosch University/South Africa and has worked as a consultant and project manager in international development. From 2006 onwards, he has spent more than 13 months of field research in South Africa focusing specifically on civil society mobilizations and activism around issues such as HIV/AIDS, gender, and sexuality but also religion and secularism. Two of his most recent publications are "Ironies of subordination: Ambivalences of gender in religious AIDS-interventions in South Africa" (*Oxford Development Studies*, 38.1) and " 'Life in brackets'. Biographical uncertainties of HIV-positive women in South Africa" (*Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 11(1), Art. 3, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs100135>). Contact: marian.burchardt AT uni-leipzig.de.

**Kuhn, Gabriel (2010). *Sober living for the revolution: hardcore punk, straight edge, and radical politics*. Oakland: PM Press. (304pp. \$22.95 paperback)**

Reviewed by **John L. Murphy**

Ian MacKaye of Washington D.C.'s *Minor Threat* sang in 1981's "Straight Edge": "Never want to use a crutch/ I've got the straight edge." This assertion turned an admonition: abstaining from not only intoxicants but from harmful sex and a non-vegan diet that fuelled a capitalist dependence upon a destructive system. Anarchist-activist Gabriel Kuhn's anthology gathers sXe (I will employ this shorthand for "straight edge") international contributors from bands, scenes, and labels. He interviews participants, includes manifestoes, and compiles an introduction situating this movement emerging from 1980s hardcore punk.

Five sections comprise this collection. This review will follow Kuhn's presentation of these chapters.

## **Introduction**

Kuhn notes his decision to expand sXe coverage beyond white, male, American contexts which dominate conventional media. Radicals tend to dismiss the movement as dogmatic, exclusive, and privileged. Kuhn emphasizes the "politically conscious" challenges within sXe, defining radical as those who actively pursue social change for free and egalitarian communities, and who "maintain a clear distance to politically ambiguous ideologies". (p.14) These include "religious groups or belief systems". He omits sXe members from Christian, Hare Krishna, or Islamic communities, although a few contributors allude to these outside Kuhn's self-imposed frame. The total absence of Buddhist contexts disappoints, given American advocates and authors "hardcore Zen" Brad Warner and "dharma punx" Noah Levine have earned prominence among dharma-practitioners who grew up alongside sXe. However, Kuhn acknowledges his focus aims at politics, not sobriety or culture.

## **Bands**

Ian MacKaye logically begins the interviews. He tells how his lyrics to "Out of Step" set the scene: "Don't smoke, don't drink, don't fuck, at least I can fucking think," were not directives, but "anti-obsession," while they were followed by "But at least I can fucking think" (pp.34-35). That is, the choice remains for the punk to think through the ramifications of this pledge. The second line's subtlety may have been lost on many, yet MacKaye's example remains a guiding force through

his inspired, "all access" approach to overcome barriers of age, income, and expenses for concerts with his band *Fugazi* and through Dischord Records. He defends a "free space" for unconventional ideas as a "constant, ever-flowing river" that persists as a river channels its energy endlessly. (p.24)

MacKaye's distrust of dangerous sex matches his disdain for alcohol and drug abuse. These encourage selfishness, blurring awareness of the present moment. They also diminish willpower, break down defences, and weaken potential for positive change. But, as a movement, sXe contained its own dogmatic danger. MacKaye analyzes how movements falter by creating a "higher calling" which mimics the pursuit of power and the imposition of violence upon dissenters. These "triggers" ignite nationalism and persecution; as more of a "*Minor Threat*" they foment prejudice between punks. This intolerance within sXe sparked a backlash from the hardcore scene, as violence among supporters and deniers led to sensationalist treatment from political activists and the mainstream media.

Articulating sXe as "straight" for MacKaye builds a basis for a life, not a lifestyle. The straight line equals common equality. Food, water, air remain, with sex as the imperative for survival. Converting these needs with wants, advertising sells out the communal, organic solidarity formed by sXe, with its slogan "Live as you desire the world to be!" (p.43) Such idealism compels others to follow MacKaye.

Liner notes to the Swedish band *Refused's* 1998 album *The Shape of Punk to Come* remind the listener: "It's never been safe to live in a world that teaches us to respect property and disregard human life" (p.66). *ManLiftingBanner*, a Dutch communist band, presents here the clearest allegiance to a standard political philosophy. Many contributors cite them as a major influence. Frederico Freitas of Brazil's *Point of No Return* agrees with *Refused's* Dennis Lyxzén: the European and Third World traditions of resistance impel many sXe supporters outside America to connect with established progressive forces. While the U.S. by WWII lost its radical mass, Freitas and Lyxzén by their thoughtful if idealized manifestoes hearken back to a proletariat integrating contemporary working-class and communally organized opposition struggles.

## Scenes

This evolution offers a counter-reaction to three earlier sXe stages. The 1980s individually-centered reaction which *Minor Threat* jumpstarted, the "wolfpack" street crews of Boston and New York City, and the VeganStraightEdge 1990s trend all, for Freitas, lack militancy. Bruno "Break" Teixeira from Portugal's *New Winds* seeks a similarly leftist link to class-based politics now, while Robert Matusiak from Poland's Refused Records contrasts the Russian and German tendencies among a sXe minority reverting to race-based extremism with a community situated in co-operative enterprises and non-profit employment.

This internal shift for the committed activist has led to charges by radicals and punks of sXe elitism. Jonathan Pollack's pro-Palestinian direct action involvement in *Against the wall* ensures him, as an Israeli, a prominent position of opposition.

As a political idea, the Straight Edge of ebullient refusal to the decadence of our times is not that of an ascetic anchorite in the badlands of western civilization or of religious purity. The need to extract oneself from society, so prevalent in Straight Edge, is fuelled by the desire to see and live in a different reality; a desire that can't subsist in the clubs, cafés and drug culture of mainstream society. Both my Straight Edge and my activism are strongly rooted in this passion, and neither is dependent on whether we will reach this different reality or not. (p.112)

As this anthology progresses, interviewees and contributors seek to stand apart from the commodification which, as punk became marketed as fashion, weakened its oppositional stance. Pollock muses how "the farther you get from cleancut looks and fancy clothes," the more interesting the movement becomes. That is, sXe itself may represent conformity amidst punk's supposedly purer (non-)conformists, so the move away from puritanical commitment may signal the imminent realization of values which transcend music or style: to transform.

Catalyst Records' Kurt Schroeder speaks from another confrontational stance, the vegan aspiration. He admits many adherents come from America's middle class. This context may weaken vegan sXe acceptance by European or Latin American radical fellow-travellers drawn to socialist or leftist aspects. Yet, all two dozen contributors appear to thrive on vegan diets and radical ideologies. This skews the political message in Kuhn's edition to the already converted. However, this affirmation of connections between sXe and radicalism provides an encouraging collection for those seeking exactly this compendium.

## Manifestos

While *Refused* and *Point of No Return* in their extensive liner notes produced manifestoes in all but name reprinted earlier in this anthology, a separate section matches three lengthy pamphlets with their authors, who reflect years later upon the impact of their messages. Under the aegis of Alpine Anarchist Productions, XsraquelX repels conservative punk reactions to veganism with DIY ethics grounded in personal choice rather than ideological duty. By its exclusivity, xSe risked reduction into a "fascist mentality" constrained by moral codes which refused any deviation. She argues for an "antifa[scist]" decision of absence as "an actual and symbolic mode of promoting a life of responsibility and shunning dependency" on capitalism. (p.158) Feminism, minority and animal rights, and environmentalism accompany "like-minded social action" for Antifa sXe communities.

For the CrimethInc. Ex-Workers' Collective, an "intoxication culture" looms as the

class enemy. Yet, Kuhn wisely prefaces this entry with the collective's explanation that it originally had added a "hypertrophied appendix," which was "a sort of sendup of primitivist historical revisionism, though based on kernels of truth." They left it out of this reprinting "for fear it could be taken too seriously outside its original context." (p.164) A sense of humor too often lurks far outside this edition. While many entries remain worthy for their unstintingly committed determination, the moral tone at such an elevated register, over hundreds of pages of similar-sounding justifications, may weary the less ardent.

Therefore, "*Wasted Indeed: Anarchy and Alcohol*" manages to convince more than its stolid comrades by its lightly self-deprecating narrative. "Like the tourism of the worker, drink is a pressure valve that releases tension while maintaining the system that creates it." (p.166) Pithier and wittier than previous entries, this statement argues for abstinence as a fulfilling, truly engaged response to life's possibilities. "No war but the class war—no cocktail but the molotov cocktail! Let us brew nothing but trouble!" It does so as a slight caricature of leftist sobriety, to highlight its self-righteous dangers of insecurity ("they cannot rest until everyone in the world sees that world exactly as they do"). It concludes amidst gentle satire with sincere encouragement, "as a reminder for all who choose to concern themselves that *another world is possible*." (pp.170-71)

## Reflections

Nick Riotfag's queer advocacy gains in-depth coverage; he narrates the difficulty of creating safe spaces for non-drinkers within environmental gatherings, co-op meetings, and anarchist settings. He supports "Take the straight out of straight edge" campaigns, as gays confront homophobes and reactionary punk enclaves. Similarly, Jenni Ramme from Poland's *Emancypunx* sets herself apart from mainstream feminists who work within capitalist and corporate settings. She rejects integration. She seeks utopian space beyond the state or the conventional network of the firm, the market, the press, or the broadcast.

Mainstream media will never see underground culture as anything but new, fresh meat to make profits. They are part of a capitalist and consumerist culture of blood-sucking zombies. They take without giving anything back. This is not a base to build radical movements on. (p.226)

While Andy Hurley now drums for *Fall Out Boy*, a successful American "emo" band adopted by the mainstream, he retains his credibility with anarcho-primitivist advocacy influenced by Kevin Tucker's "feral edge" post-civilized and John Zerzan's anti-leftist, pro-wilderness perspectives (Marshall 2010). Hurley rejects leftist participation in politics and power. Kuhn gently prods Hurley, the most mainstream of those included by his current band's allegiance, but the most radical by his drift away from communal solidarity in the pursuit of self-reliance. This interview sidles towards thoughtful, if admittedly incomplete, explanations

of Hurley's responses to a set of complicated compromises. For all its open-endedness, this concludes this section with a relevant portrayal of how an activist works towards his own truth.

## Reflections

Global networking within the social margins, prominent in this cross-cultural sub-cultural anthology, flows through Argentinian-Israeli Swedish resident Santiago Gomez' punk and anarchist-vegan efforts. His footnoted, lively essay interprets sXe as "intuitive resistance". He moves from Melville and Turgenev to Tolstoy and Lenin within the context of hardcore; he cites Zapatista liberated zones which have banished alcohol—without appearing pedantic. His ironic sense shows as he quotes Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* (the scene when followers pick up and immediately imitate, and then debate, the accidental discarding of Brian's single shoe, or is it a sandal?) to illustrate how *Minor Threat's* two lines from their lyric for "Out of Step" became adopted as a creed.

Tellingly, Gomez segues into a reminder of how the "X" on the back of the hand used as a signifier of sXe started not out of a devotion to sobriety, but a nightclub's stamp that the patron was simply too young to legally drink. He sketches out a nuanced position, that sXe has faltered by its anti-intoxicant and animal rights definition while neglecting the larger struggle against all capitalist exploitation. Gomez does not retreat from his own ideological agreement with abstinence, but he reminds his audience that the imperative fight against oppression endures.

Three veteran activists end this collection with their own rallying cries. Mark Andersen brings the entries back to their Washington D.C. origins with his own account of inner-city community organizing at Positive Force House. He champions collectives as a logical foundation for incremental change. He rejects superior attitudes formed by snobbish sXe members, and sets out revolutionary progress as coming from not only the process—"profoundly aided by the clarity and health that drug-free, meat-free lifestyles can bring," but the victory. This triumph waits, Andersen wraps up this volume, by reaching out beyond sXe.

This anthology does preach to the choir. Those outside the sXe community will find no explanation of how the music sounds compared to hardcore (a "crust" punk's recollections comprise a bit of variety, albeit marginal), even if sXe lyrics urge a nobler practice. Kuhn gathers those with whom he agrees; the book's main intention is to reinforce leftist and radical ties to sXe. Within these parameters, the collection succeeds, for what will likely remain a small, but committed audience seeking social and political change by principled transformation of their own appetites and desires and by communal solidarity.

## References

- Levine, Noah 2004. *Dharma punx: a memoir*. San Francisco: HarperOne.
- Marshall, Peter 2010. *Demanding the impossible: a history of anarchism*. Oakland: PM Press.
- Murphy, John L. 15 September 2010. " 'Sex, sin, and Zen': 25 years hardcore as punk bassist, sexual seeker, and Zen student." *PopMatters*: <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/129943-sex-sin-and-zen-by-brad-warner/> (accessed 2.5.2011)
- Murphy, John L. 1 April 2011. "Noah Levine's 'The heart of the revolution.'" *New York journal of books*: <http://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/review/heart-revolution> (accessed 2.5.2011)
- Warner, Brad 2003. *Hardcore Zen: punk rock, monster movies & the truth about reality*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

## About the reviewer

**John L. Murphy** coordinates the Humanities sequence at DeVry University's Long Beach, California campus. He earned a Ph.D. from UCLA in British and Irish literature. His research interests include religious, literary, and musical currents in cultures of resistance and reinvention. He can be contacted at jmurphy2 AT devry.edu.

**Nilsen, Alf Gunvald (2010). *Dispossession and resistance in India: the river and the rage*. Oxford: Routledge. (242pp. £80 paperback)**

Reviewed by **Lesley Wood**

In the early 1990s, the struggles of Indian villagers protesting against the mega-dams that would flood their land and destroy their homes, electrified the world. Images of people with only their heads above water as the floodwaters surged around them compelled action. Along with documentary films, and attention was directed towards the campaign by award winning novelist Arundhati Roy in her essay, "The Greater Common Good" that was later included in her edited collection *The Cost of Living*. By the mid 1990s, this movement had become global, and when it succeeded in pressuring the World Bank to withdraw its funding from the Sardar

Sarovar Dam, it became one of the paradigmatic examples of a local struggle, gone global. However, the celebrations of victory became muted, and the world's attention drifted when the dam projects continued to be built.

A product of deep engagement with and sympathy for the movement, Nilsen's work is grounded in his interviews with movement actors and his analysis of movement documents. These different sources combine to give us a sense of both the victories and the failures of the movement. But this isn't simply a history of the movement. Instead the book uses this material to make a particular theoretical argument.

As is evident from the title, Nilsen uses Marxist scholar David Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession" that characterizes the period of neoliberal restructuring since the 1970s to frame his discussion of the movement. Using this concept – which emphasizes how wealth is siphoned from the poor through the taking of their lands and resources. Nilsen looks at the underlying political economy of the distributional biases of the Narmada dams. But he carefully and usefully maintains agency for the activists struggling to resist these process by highlighting the importance of movement learning processes. He argues that while the historical context influences pre-existing assumptions and internal dynamics which create movement strategies and repertoires, these are modified by ever-changing and particular practical experiences and learning, resulting in particular movement infrastructure and strategic repertoires.

He describes the cycles of struggle that the movement endures as cycles of learning – citing Vester's (1978) approach. This emphasis on learning and struggle is a central theme in the book, and it emphasizes how through challenging the state and other authorities, activists are engaging in reflexive, 'conflictual learning' and building 'counter-expertise'. Through these processes, the movement builds an infrastructure that takes them from local campaign to transnational movement, and back again. They both produce and are produced by the particular political and economic bases of post-colonial India. And as such, are at the root of why the Narmada Bachao Andolan ultimately failed to achieve its goals.

These cycles of learning, cycles of struggle underlie the movement's changing answers to a number of strategic questions that face many movements.

The first is the question of the state. How much should social movements direct their attention to the state?

In answer to this question, he accounts the story of how in the late 1980s, urban activists helped local villagers to begin to resist the corrupt practices and 'everyday tyranny' of state forest officials. They helped to transform the consciousness and confidence of these locals by providing them with knowledge about their constitutional rights, the state apparatus and electoral processes. Through showing the malleability of these political processes, they were able to build a "militant



particularism" and "rightful resistance", and build an organization, campaigns, schools and environmental regeneration campaigns.

But this emphasis on the state runs the risk of "jury politics", that in the end may mean the movement places too much hope in state structures and processes. This quandary around emphasizing the state is one that many movements face. Nilsen takes a balanced approach to this by showing how real victories were possible through making claims on the state. In the end however, because the opposition challenged the basic modality of the post-colonial, neoliberal Indian state, the campaign was doomed. He suggests that the political economy of state power constrains the strategic viability of jury politics.

The second question the book addresses is the question of populism. What are the advantages and drawbacks of using national symbols and myths in organizing? The author describes a high point for the movement in 1989, when tens of thousands of people from across India met in Harsud for the National Rally against Destructive Development, held on Indian Independence Day. Unlike other stages of the movement – this was no "jury politics". Instead, the rally signaled a total challenge to the postcolonial development project. It was a moment where the movement had built alliances that suggested a capacity for expressing a new hegemony. The rally was an attempt to redefine Indian independence that included a version of development that valued social justice, environmental sustainability and participatory democracy.

However, this populist strategy has some drawbacks. Nilsen shows how the narrative of "we the people" obscured difference amongst castes and classes that were important to recognize. He shows how such differences undermine the potential of this movement as a large scale, radical struggle. Much of the time, the ideas and analysis of the movement is not considered relevant or related to the day to day lives of many of the most affected communities, for which the campaigns speak. This problem of what he calls limited downreach is widely recognized in a range of movements. Despite the successful building of alliances and the creation of a national movement, in order to truly create an alternative, movements need to go deep and emphasize militant particularisms and local rationalities.

For those uninterested in the details of this important struggle, this book may seem a bit long and detailed. But anyone, whether activist or academic, who is interested in the questions of movement success and failure would benefit from seriously considering Nilsen's main argument. Because he shows the ways macro-structural processes shape the form and potential of different movement infrastructures and capacities, he offers us a framework that is applicable to both organizers and analysts trying to understand movement success or failure. In sum, this is an important and useful book.

## References

- Harvey, David. 2003. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roy, Arundhati. "The Greater Common Good" in *The Cost of Living*
- Vester, M. (1978) *Proletariatets Opståen som Læreproces: Fremkomsten af Antikapitalistisk Teori og Praksis i England 1792–1848*, Kongerslev: GMT.

## About the reviewer

**Lesley Wood** is an Associate Professor at York University in Toronto. Her email is ljwood AT yorku.ca.