

## **Book Reviews: Interface Volume 3 (2)**

**Reviews Editor: Aileen O'Carroll**

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**Book review: Earl, Jennifer & Kimport, Katrina. *Digitally Enabled Social Change*. MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass.**

Reviewed by **Piotr Konieczny**

There is no shortage of voices in the ongoing debate on the online activism. From blogs to traditional media and academia, the use of new media by social movements have proven to be a rich, if controversial arena, with vocal arguments ranging across the two camps of "the Internet revolutionizes everything" and "nothing has changed". Earl and Kimport contribution to this debate is welcome, as they provide some much-needed empirical data, and insightful observations. This is, in addition to a helpful review of existing research and literature (Chapter 2), a welcome introduction for those who want to familiarize themselves with the most recent scholarly debates on the subject.

Definitions are crucial to understanding the matter at hand, and the authors provide a number, which help to avoid confusion. Early on, they introduce a notable distinction between instances of e-mobilizations (where traditional organizations use new media to facilitate offline action, mostly through information sharing), e-tactics (where traditional organizations use new strategies, primarily due to their low cost and high efficiency), and e-movements (a relatively new phenomenon where movements are organized and act entirely online). Subsequently, the authors discuss the rise of a new tools and strategies, or, in the words more familiar to social movement scholars, the raise of a new, digital repertoire of contention.

Several factors facilitate the spread of the new media: their diminishing cost, their increasing user-friendliness (technological affordance), and the ability they grant to people to collaborate in different times and location (the reduction of the need for physical co-presence). Those factors open the gates of activism to people who previously would not be involved, and increase the role and activity of individuals without background in activism and social movements.

This has an impact on the organizational structure of the social movements themselves. Numerous activist websites have only a solo organizer, and no organizational backing. Those solo organizers do not see themselves as activists, viewing their work as so cheap and easy as not deserving the "serious" label of activist. This showcases how things are changing (the "2.0 effects" in social movements), and is perhaps one of the most important arguments that the authors bring to the table. In the digital age, organization can increasingly occur without a formal organizational structure. Earl and Kimport argue that due to lowering costs of new media activism, resources are becoming less important, and the central role of such formal organizations is declining. At the same time, the authors are not exaggerating this trend, and they note that traditional organizations still have an important role to play, particularly in areas when costs are higher, or when organizing is dangerous.

Another important observation is that the boundaries between activists and supporters (for example, site visitors, and online petitioners) are increasingly blurred. Supporters have a looser set of connections and lower commitment, but can still benefit movements: knowing they can stop participation easily, they are also more willing to join in the first place. Through some criticism of the low-cost "clicktivism", Earl and Kimport show that many keep contributing in such fashion, and such low-cost activities can be a first step to more high-cost participation. Collective identity is harder to build online than offline, but the new e-tactics still work without a significant collective identity behind them. They can supersize offline activities (gather more people) or create web 2.0 effects (new, changed processes, for example - organization around non-political causes).

It is interesting to consider the implications of those arguments for social movement theory, particularly for resource mobilization advocates. The use of new media in e-mobilization seems to reinforce this approach, and the use of e-tactics can be a simple illustration of the changing nature of the repertoires of contention. However, the emergence of e-movements, with solo-organizers, and online supporters who are not official members of any movement, neither of whom calls themselves activists, presents a challenge for this and many other established theories. Earl and Kimport do not claim that the "Internet is changing everything", but they make a very strong argument for the fact that several key aspects of social movements are undergoing a transition that is more than just a back-end technology improvement: what is changing are not just the physical tools, or even the tactics, but the very goals, identity and membership of the movements.

With a helpful overview of existing research, good data and thought-provoking observations and arguments, the book is an important addition to the scholarly debate on the changing nature of social movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Well-written, without an overdose of academic jargon, and with helpful examples of what works and for whom, it is also a useful reading for the activists themselves, whether they are members of a larger organization, or lone-wolf website masters.

### **About the reviewer**

Piotr Konieczny is a PhD student at the Department of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh. He is interested in the sociology of the Internet, in particular in topics such as the impact of wikis on individuals and organizations; decision making processes and organizational structure of Wikipedia; patterns of behavior among its contributors; relation between wikis and social movements; and teaching with new media. He can be contacted at [Piokon AT post.pl](mailto:Piokon AT post.pl)

**Ojas, S.V., Kumar, Madhuresh, Vijayan, M.J. and Athialy, Joe (2010) *Plural narratives from Narmada Valley*. Delhi Solidarity Group, Delhi.**

Reviewed by **Tomás Mac Sheoin**

In a recent piece on *Sanhati*, Madhuresh Kumar wrote of the 25-year history of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA, Save the Narmada Movement) that it

has seen worst of the state violence; undertaken strenuous and at times life-threatening peaceful direct actions in form of willful submergence in rising waters, fasts; waged struggle at local, national and global levels; participated in numerous Commissions, Court cases; received support and adulation from umpteen individuals and groups, faced the ire of some other sections; earned epitaphs and awards and also labels like "anti-national" and "anti-development".

The expanse and mere size of the movement made it the " 'mother' of new wave of social movements in 80s and 90s" (Kumar 2010). This volume's compilers share Kumar's opinion of the importance of the NBA, claiming it to be not only of national but also of global importance:

The unique strategies of political actions, mobilizations and effective use of Gandhian methods, along with its willingness to support and reach out to different movements across the country, made NBA one of the rarest of people's movements in the recent history of independent India, which is looked upon for inspiration and robust strategies across the globe.' (p. ii).

This significance is testified to by the large number of academic analyses of the NBA that are available, including monographs by Nilsen (2010) and Baviskar's classic account, perhaps the best of its kind published in the last two decades in India, though the NBA was not happy with it. (Baviskar 1995) Indeed traffic between the NBA and academia has been so large that not only has it been the subject of academic analysis (Bose 2004) but the NBA has requested a Scottish academic to draw up research protocols which, while they "seemed ethically sound to me... one of the NBA leaders saw them as a means of censoring that academic work with which the movement disagreed." (Routledge 2003: 67) However, while the story of this major anti-dam movement has been written "innumerable times" it has been largely written about "through the perspectives of the visible leadership". This volume is intended to correct this lack of perspective, by providing in an example of "history from below, an exercise in 'subaltern historiography' " (p.iii) including the views of the *adivasi* (tribal or ethnic groups claimed to be India's indigenous population) leadership not only on the struggle but also on the NBA.

The work under review, produced by the invaluable Delhi Solidarity Group (see <http://delhisolidaritygroup.wordpress.com/>) is the result of an initiative by the NBA, which involves an attempt to ascertain the meaning of the NBA and its struggle for the activists in the affected communities and villages, which will allow the NBA to evaluate its efforts in the opinion of local communities and rethink its strategies internally and externally. While critics might wonder why

it has taken the NBA leadership 25 years to get around to this task and why some such consultation with its *adivasi* cadre was not built into the operations of the NBA from the start, no-one can deny that this is a very welcome project to which much labour has been devoted: this volume contains 14 interviews - with four full-time NBA activists, six (either tribal, valley or area) leaders and four activists interviewed, with three of the interviewees being women, with eight of those interviewed being from Madhya Pradesh, five from Maharashtra and one from Gujarat,- and another 20 are in various stages of editing. As well as the four named compilers, another six comrades assisted with the editing. The book is the result of serious labour and much time: "Each of the life stories has been constructed by a freewheeling conversation individually over a period of six months in the language they were comfortable in. The original interviews have been translated from Pawari, Bhilali, Marathi, Nimadi and Hindi." (p.v)

A few small suggestions can be made in response to the compilers' invitation at the end of the introduction: the glossary could be in alphabetical order, a one-page chronology of the movement would be helpful and a basic description of the NBA's organisation and structure would help readers understand the differences in cadre interviewed in the book (whether Andolan full-timers, activists or leaders). Finally, while this might be difficult to arrange, interviews with *adivasi* leaders who left the NBA (such as those cited in Whitehead 2007) would prove an invaluable addition, not only to social movement analysts, but also to the NBA. In conclusion may I reiterate that this is wonderful work that these comrades are undertaking and they should be praised for it. May this work inspire others to undertake similar work: we will all be the richer for the growth of histories from below of social movements.

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**Scandrett, Eurig, et al. (2009) *Bhopal survivors speak: emergent voices from a people's movement: Bhopal survivors' movement study*. Edinburgh: Word Power Books.**

Reviewed by **Tomás Mac Sheoin**

Until recently academic analyses of the movement for justice in Bhopal have been conspicuous mainly in their absence. Compared with the burgeoning literature on another social movement in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh (MP), the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) (among many others, see Baviskar 1995, Nilsen 2010, Routledge 2003) by 2009, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the toxic gas leak at Bhopal, the literature on the Bhopal movement had hardly reached the sapling stage. Particularly conspicuous has been the absence of academic analyses by Indian authors, with the most useful contributions coming from activists (Ravan 1988, Sarangi 1994), while unfortunately the sober analysis prepared for the Fact Finding Mission to Bhopal (2004) has not been distributed widely. Thankfully around the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary a new tranche of literature began to appear, with Zvestowski (2009) looking at the transnational aspects of the movement, the Bhopal Social Movement Study (BSMS) (2009) providing a superb collection of oral and written statements by movement leaders, Mukherjee (2010) looking at women in Bhopal and Scandrett and Mukherjee (2011) looking at abstractions in the movement. To these should be added the very useful short articles written for an Indian website by various participants in the BSMS (Mukherjee 2009, Scandrett 2009a, b & c. and Shah 2009). The most important of these for understanding the movement is the BSMS.

I have previously praised the BSMS for providing a contribution to the literature on social movements. The editors make large claims for the study with which I heartily concur: they "believe that the insights which can be gleaned from the Bhopal survivors' movement will also yield lessons for other movements" (p26). The bulk of the book (168 of 216 pages) is made up of interviews with activists in Bhopal, supplemented by five essays by group leaders, three written in English and two translated into English. The book is the result of a research project which has amassed "over 50 hours of interviews, whilst basic data from rank and file have been gathered for 119 individuals. Film footage has also been collected from rallies, protests, public meetings and dharnas [vigils, sit-ins or encampments] which can be used to analyse participation" (p.25) The editors state "this study constitutes a crucial contribution to the record of this unique social movement and will be a support to the movement in its campaign for justice" (pp.25-26). The interviews provide the most complete self-description by members of a social movement that I am aware of: this is in itself a considerable achievement. <sup>1</sup>The editors plan to make the original interviews and their translations available on the web.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A recent publication by the Delhi Solidarity Group on the Narmada struggle, *Plural narratives from Narmada Valley*, appears to do the same thing, with one reviewer describing it as 'an

The volume is worthwhile not least for honestly showing the disagreements and tensions between groups in the movement and between various leaders. Here again the editors note "the differences and divisions between the groups appear to reflect the major dilemmas and tensions of any community action or social movement". (p.37). This means "The Bhopal survivors' movement is an encyclopaedic microcosm of the politics of protest and community organising, albeit within a particularly Indian context." (ibid). The disagreements in the movement over strategy and tactics, external funding, national or transnational focus, contact with state agencies and politicians echo similar disagreements in other social movements, while the movement also suffers from personality clashes and leadership power struggles that will be familiar to all participants in and students of social movements.

The BSMS should also be of interest to students of social movements not only because of its portrait of a movement, but also because the book can function as an example of politically committed research, taking part in the argument about what the study of social movements can (and/or should) do. (Barker and Cox 2002, Bevington and Dixon 2005, Cox and Flesher Fominaya 2009). The editors' argue that their work as provides useful knowledge for the movement and the oppressed classes in general:

For those of us who explicitly set out to do relevant research, the principal motivation is whether it is useful to the poor, the disempowered, the disenfranchised, the oppressed. Indeed, our aspiration is for research to be 'really useful' as distinct from merely 'useful', that is its usefulness must be judged by movements of the oppressed who are struggling for their own empowerment (p.14).

By documenting, reflecting back and contributing to the Bhopalis' struggle, we hope to contribute in some way to the wider, worldwide struggle for justice, through analysing and interpreting movement activity in such a way that it becomes more successful in putting limitations and restraints on the destructive activities of capital and ultimately undermine its logic (p.27).

The introduction's section on movement-relevant research begins with a call for research to be critical, through the use of critical thinking in the work and about

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attempt to write a subaltern history of the NBA'.  
[http://www.tehelka.com/story\\_main49.asp?filename=Ws040511BOOKS.asp](http://www.tehelka.com/story_main49.asp?filename=Ws040511BOOKS.asp)

<sup>2</sup> Note 2 on p. 48 states that "Full, anonymised transcriptions of interviews in Hindi and translations in English will be available in print in various locations and on-line from Queen Margaret University archive on <http://edata.qmu.ac.uk>." However while this material is indeed posted at this university site, it could not be described as immediately available: see [http://edata.qmu.ac.uk/cgi/search/simple?q=Bhopal&\\_action\\_search=Search&\\_action\\_search=Search&\\_order=bytitle&basic\\_srctype=ALL&\\_satisfyall=ALL](http://edata.qmu.ac.uk/cgi/search/simple?q=Bhopal&_action_search=Search&_action_search=Search&_order=bytitle&basic_srctype=ALL&_satisfyall=ALL) where both sets of items relating to Bhopal are described as "Item availability restricted". An attempt to access the material leads to a request for a sign-in and a password without any information as to how to obtain such. The FAQ on the page results in a 404 File not found response, while the User menu appears intended for those in the institution submitting material, rather than for some poor outsider trying to access material. I am unaware of any depository for the printed materials,

the work, including whose interests it serves. This comes from a debate on whose interests social movement research serves, inspired perhaps partly by the revolt of the research "objects" (Kriesi 1992) and partly by the return of politics to the literature on social movements: "Therefore, in order to have an ethical response to a social world which is structured according to injustices, a world which can allow thousands of the poorest in a poor country to be killed and maimed in a single night in pursuit of profits for shareholders in one of the richest countries, it is necessary to find a way in which that research contributes in some way to challenging these injustices." (p13)

These then are what used to be called *engagé* scholars: they are members of that tendency among social movement scholars who are in solidarity with, if not outright partisans of, their research subjects. This is a growing group, with a strong representation in studies of the anti-globalisation movement, and is not unconnected with the adoption of the traditional anthropological method of participant observation. The editors give a useful description of how to set about producing this really useful knowledge: the two Indian researchers spent ten months in Bhopal from the end of 2007, during which time they successfully gained the confidence of all factions of the movement in Bhopal. Pages 14-26 provide a useful description of the study's methodology that will be an invaluable reference point for any methods course.

The diversity of voices presented is the glory of the book. It presents a wide variety of views on political activism. Compare what Rabiya Bee, first chairperson of BGMUS, (Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan) has to say (p.68):

My friends still ask me to join the movement again but I cannot lie or deceive people so I will not last in the movement in its current state. When we started we were innocent, we did not know how this can be used to make money or gain power. Six years down the line we realised that this was a pimp market.

with Nawab Khan's celebration of the power of the women of Bhopal (p.195),

When women took the lead they shook companies and governments. During the *Jhadoo Maro Dow Ko* (beat Dow with brooms) women attacked the Dow office in Bombay and they also demonstrated at the high security Bombay International Airport. Nobody had attempted that but women from Bhopal have done it.

Now compare Nawab Khan's account with the account given of the *padyatra* (long walk) to Delhi and their reasons for participation by either Razia or Ruksana Bee (the interview is an "amalgam" of their responses):

We got the idea of doing a *padyatra* [march] to Delhi from a big chairman from some political party. We can't remember his name but he came from Delhi and suggested the *padyatra*. So we talked to all the women, and they agreed to go for the *padyatra*. I thought that if I joined it I might get a good, permanent job. Also Rasheeda Bee, our leader, would put pressure on us. She said if we did not join the *padyatra* and did not do what she said, then we would not be able to come and work here any more. So out of fear we did it. (p.182)



However the work is not without problems. There are some surprising factual errors. AP Singh, for example, is described (p.49) as founder and convenor of the original campaign group to form in the aftermath of the disaster Zahreeli Gas Kand Sangharsh Morcha [Poisonous Gas Episode Struggle Front, commonly referred to as the Morcha] and on p. 45 as the Morcha's "leader", while in fact the leadership was shared with Anil Sadgopal (of Kishore Bharati) and V. Jha, a local lawyer.<sup>3</sup> The constant description of the BGMUS as a "union" rather than an organisation might imply to readers that it's a trade union, while in fact it never registered or operated as a trade union: indeed an interesting question for analysis would be why this was so. The introduction by the editors (48 pages of a 216 page book) isn't as good as it could be: something basic like a timeline or chronology (rather than talk about a timeline) giving the history of the movement would be very useful to those who aren't conversant with the details of the movement's long history, though in their defence they state "even such a seemingly straightforward idea as a chronology of events is contested" (p.27): of course, just because something is contested doesn't mean you don't do it. I suspect in their effort to be neutral and fair to everyone in the movement, the editors have forgotten their obligations to those outside the movement who will actually buy the book.

Further problems relate to issues of hierarchy and power and the book's methodology. Given that the editor's preface (p.3) states "The vast majority of the work has been carried out by two research assistants, Dharmesh Shah and Tarunima Sen" it seems unfortunate that they are not given priority in the list of authors which instead gives the non-Indian academic (Scandrett) first position, followed by the Indian academic (Mukherjee) and only then followed by the two Indian researchers. Here again, while the introduction is credited to all four and written in the editorial "we" the "inputs" (as they're described on p.17) of the Indian researchers are inset in a different typeface. I actually counted the lines they're allocated: Dharmesh has 105 and Tarunima has 55, a total of 160 lines in an introduction of 1206 lines.

Another problem is that the book is top-heavy: there are too many chiefs and not enough Indians. If this is the story of Bhopal from below, the editors may not have gone low enough. Of the 18 adults interviewed for the book, 16 are leaders while only two are rank and file supporters.<sup>4</sup> This is then the story of the Bhopal movement as experienced by its leaders. Some of the large amount of blank space in the book could have been usefully devoted to interviews with the

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<sup>3</sup> This is a problem that is not confined to this book. The most recent edition of 777, the newsletter of the Bhopal medical Appeal (which funds the Sambhavna Clinic), which I have seen, claims that Sambhavna managing Trustee (and core BGIA member) "Sarangi set up a relief and campaigning group, Zahreeli Gas Kand Sangharsh Morcha" (Winter 2010, p.16) Though I've drawn this error to the attention of Mr Sarangi and a board member of the BMA, at the time of writing the error has not been corrected.

<sup>4</sup> P23 provides a possible explanation for this focus on leadership, but then also undermines it: "The rank and file, generally, were less well informed about overall movement strategies and historical events, but their perspective on their involvement was essential."

rank and file. We might also note that, as a consequence of the bias towards leaders and in line with the male leadership of an overwhelmingly female movement, ten women are interviewed and eight men.

The book is primarily material for analysis, rather than itself analysis.<sup>5</sup> As the editors note,

The Bhopal campaign, like many mature social movements, is diverse and these groups often take different tactical approaches to, and adopt differing interpretations of events based on varying ideologies. It has always been the intention of this research to reflect this diversity without favouring one or other perspective and certainly without fuelling any disagreements. (p12)

In the editor's preface, he admits the existence of "strongly expressed and often contradictory claims" in the book, making clear the study's neutral position by stating "We have certainly not attempted to adjudicate between claims". (p.2)

To illustrate this it's worth looking at one contentious issue – funding. On p. 97 Rehana Begum, previously married to Jabbar of the BGP MUS, and now working for MP state emporium [a state government organisation that sells produce produced in the state by a variety of organisations] head office, says:

Now the *sangathan* [organisation] accepts money from the government. The *Swabhimaan Kendra* is the training scheme set up by Jabbar under the *sangathan*... The women who have been selected for training are supposed to receive Rs. 1,500 from under the government scheme... but the organisation only pays [the trainees] Rs. 500 hence making a commission of RS. 1,000 per trainee.

But these charges are not raised with Jabbar: in Jabbar's own contribution he says the following:

Now we have *Swabhimaan Kendra* affiliated to the *sangathan*, which provides training mostly for gas affected women, and a few men, in tailoring, embroidery, weaving, computer skills and so on. We get a little money from the Government for this training but we provide much more than the minimum level of training

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<sup>5</sup> Given this, it is a welcome development that some of these authors have now proceeded to an analysis of the movement (Scandrett and Mukherjee 2011) Unfortunately, while there is much of interest in this article, the analysis remains at the ideological level: the article concentrates on three abstractions or frames, "environmental justice, which privileges the condition of being polluted; class struggle which emphasises the poverty of the gas victims; and gender, which highlights the fact that survivor activists are predominantly female" (p.199). The first of these is associated with the International Coalition for Justice in Bhopal, the second with BGP MUS while the third is associated with no organisation. (The authors have interesting things to say about this on pp.203-204.)

There are also problems of evidence for some of the paper's assertions: thus on p.206 the authors refer to the BGP MUS's "class-based internationalism" and describe BGP MUS leader Jabbar as "an internationalist": there is (as far as I can see) no evidential basis cited in the paper for scaling up the "class-based" frame they impute to Jabbar and the BGP MUS to the international. Finally, their conclusion that "in the Bhopal survivors' movement, different abstractions have led to divisions" may be a case of putting the (ideological) cart before the (organisational) horse. Meanwhile, another publication by all four (Mukherjee et al 2010), which I haven't seen due to the volume's £60 price tag, also appears to be concerned with theory.

which the Government expects. So we are able directly to contribute to peoples' economic rehabilitation.' (pp.82-83).

In his contribution Jabbar also attacks those who accept foreign funding. Thus while Jabbar is given space to attack other groups' funding, he is not confronted with and allowed to answer Rehana's charges regarding his own funding. But neither this specific allegation nor general questions about Jabbar's acceptance of money from the Indian state or his relationships with Indian politicians are raised in the study. Thus Jabbar is allowed criticise the acceptance of foreign funds by other organisations but is never required to justify his own acceptance of funds from the government, or to explain what the difference in these are.

Another issue related to funding, of major importance to Indian movements, is the issue of foreign paymasters. On p. 60 in a paragraph that comes close to felon-setting AP Singh writes,

Many agencies and networks emerged to support Bhopal in Delhi, Mumbai and in other countries, and a huge international funding effort is channelled towards these ends. This process was started after a meeting of international funding agencies and NGOs on November 25<sup>th</sup> 1985 and concluded with the decision to create an international funding network for Bhopal and activist groups working for Narmada Valley in M.P. This helped Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA –Save Narmada River Movement) to come into existence in 1987. I am concerned that some of the Indian organisations in this network may be connected with Naxalite movements in M.P., A.P., Orissa or Maharastra [Indian states]. If so, it is possible that international funds collected in the name of Bhopal had been diverted to such other organisations.

Regrettably the editors have not pressed AP to provide some - or indeed any - evidence for this remarkable revelation.

I don't want to underestimate the real difficulties in posing such questions to interviewees: given the difficulties involved in getting the confidence of interviewees in the first place, if difficult questions were posed it's quite possible the interviewees would walk away. Yet for social scientists to generate 'really useful knowledge' for a movement they must go beyond simply providing a means of self-presentation to the movement. After all, the work undertaken by this study could reasonably have been undertaken by any adequately trained ethnographer or social scientist: it did not require any specific social movement study skills<sup>6</sup>. The requirement for a critical approach does not exclude the statements of movement leaders and activists: failure to maintain a critical attitude can mean the hunter gets captured by the game, in an academic version of the Stockholm syndrome. Furthermore they need to go beyond the analysis of statements, abstraction and ideological positions to actions and practices, to

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<sup>6</sup> Though, to be fair to these editors, the one previous attempt by an ethnographer (Fortun 2001) could not be considered a success, no doubt partly due to her lack of Hindi. But here again Fortun can be praised for providing a space for a variety of voices in her volume: no less than 100 pages of the volume's 354 pages consist of quotations of partial or full documents or interviews.

examine what movement organisations do and have done and to analyse their campaign strategies and tactics.

What is arguably the most valuable gift a social movement researcher can make to a movement is a critical analysis of that movement, examining strategy and tactics and evaluating which were successful. Here is where the editors possess specialist skills – though their study of other social movements and the literature on social movements – which they can place at the service of the movement. This involves taking a critical attitude to what the movement activists say and examining their practices also. This would involve examination of specific campaigns and require critical judgement or “adjudicating between claims”. This analysis is necessary to learn lessons from the experience of the movement. Basic to this is a critical attitude to both the statements and the activities of the movement. And here is my basic problem with this work: in their concern to accurately reflect the positions of their interviewees and be sure the interviewees’ voices are heard without distortion or interference – laudable aims in themselves – they have allowed the interviewees to determine the direction of the interviews, without a concern to confirm or question the veracity of their statements. The same problem also applies – perhaps even more than in the interviews – to the written contributions.

To encapsulate the problem: to understand and analyse the movement in and around Bhopal, ideological analysis (framing/abstraction – whatever you want to call it) is necessary, but insufficient: the abstractions need to be placed in the context of actual practice/activity/mobilisation/power structures of the groups, to see if the latter confirms the former, Thus if BGPMUS is really a class-based organisation, with a class struggle frame, this should be obvious in its organising as well as in the statements of its leaders. To get to the heart of the matter, our academic analysts have listened to the movement's leaders, but have not been sufficiently critical in their listening and analysis. While this book is a superb achievement, we still await a critical history of the Bhopal movement if lessons are to be learned from its experience. The BSMS is a useful building block for such a history.

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**Wainwright, Hilary (2009). *Reclaim the state: experiments in popular democracy*. London / New York / Calcutta: Seagull (2nd edition).**

Reviewed by **Laurence Cox**

A new book by Hilary Wainwright is usually a significant event: *Beyond the Fragments* (with Sheila Rowbotham and Lynne Segal, 1979), *Arguments for a New Left* (1994) and the first edition of *Reclaim the State* (2003) all set down significant markers for the social movement left, along with her more specifically trade union-related work from the Vickers workers' report in 1978 to her recent (2009) study of union-led workplace change in Newcastle. Over the last four decades she has been a continually thoughtful and thought-provoking interlocutor for movement activists in a very wide range of contexts, from *New Left Review* and popular planning in the Greater London Council to *Red Pepper* magazine and the Transnational Institute progressive think-tank. The rewritten *Reclaim the State* does not disappoint.

"Detailed attention to the creativity of practice is one of the most fruitful sources of new theory", she writes (p. 14); a position developed in detail in *Arguments for a New Left*, which argued for a politics that respects the tacit knowledge held by ordinary people and articulated in social movements. *Reclaim the State* explores how this can be used to remake the state in its own shape - perhaps not quite in the revolutionary sense Marx argued for in his account of the Paris Commune, but nonetheless in significant ways: like Warren Magnusson's (1996) *The Search for Political Space*, the key context is the city or region where popular movements have gained sufficient power to reshape the local state significantly.

### **Ambiguous histories**

Chapters 1 - 4 of the new edition cover the history and theory of popular movements in struggle towards a participatory democracy: the significance of the present conjuncture in terms of new movements, the ways in which neo-liberalism has co-opted much of the language of participation, her approach in writing the book and a recapitulation of the *Arguments for a New Left* position. These chapters certainly make the case, but there is a difficulty of presentation which is perhaps unavoidable: given that a decent account of participatory democracy has to cover normative political theory, distinguish real from fake participation, account for knowledge and power from below, discuss movement struggles and their (partial) realisation in different kinds of local state arrangement, there is no straightforward way to tell the story for the uninitiated.

The book really takes off (for this reader) with the empirical chapters, which Wainwright discusses in terms of the exemplary case of Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting; attempts at remaking the public sphere in (and

despite) "New Labour" Britain; and a series of shorter discussions of radical municipalities in continental Europe. These chapters recapitulate the stories explored in the first edition, but with an additional six years' experience - by no means all encouraging.

The 2004 defeat of the Workers' Party in the Porto Alegre local elections has led to a weakening, fragmentation and professionalisation of the city's famous participatory budgeting process - leaving it certainly as a historical experience and inspiring model, but increasingly weakened in practice.

In Luton, southern England, the success of the radical Exodus collective in pioneering a community takeover of the verbally participatory schemes of New Labour "regeneration" on the Marsh Farm council housing estate led to constant assaults by local government aimed at restoring the power of consultancy and commercial development but the slow achievements of the "organized and strategic activity of the residents" (p. 228).

In east Manchester, local attempts at "redistribution, regeneration and public and community-led public service reform" (p. 277), again putting pressure on the abstract simulation of participation cooked up by central government and this time drawing on long-standing trade union traditions, cooperative organising, environmental and religious groups, achieved some gains but again against a background of state-led pressure for privatisation and commercialisation.

In Newcastle, more dramatically, plans for the gentrification of an old working-class area led to a powerful alliance of community groups and trade unions under the leadership of the public sector union UNISON, which developed strategic alliances, contested the contracting-out of key services and pushed participants to understand the struggle in terms of international conflicts over neoliberalism; a process chronicled in more detail in her *Public service reform - but not as we know it* (2009).

The final empirical chapter discusses a range of continental European experiences: the Norwegian trade union's model municipality experiment; participatory democracy in Italian towns; and participatory budgeting in Seville. The book concludes with an analysis of the political potential of non-state sources of popular power; a restatement of the importance of democratic knowledge; and an argument for the continuing significance of participatory democracy.

### **Reclaiming or remaking the state?**

The book's title was originally intended both "as a challenge to New Labour - and a provocation to my anarchist friends". Her debate with John Holloway (2011) about *Reclaim the state* and his *Crack capitalism* (2010) explores somewhat different arguments, where (to this reader at least) Holloway's critique of politics and Wainwright's defence of state-as-politics left the space of social movement politics *beyond* the state almost untouched, as though to be



political and organised is to be part of the state. But another organisation is perhaps possible...

My feeling on closing *Reclaim the state* was that Wainwright's case is unproven. Those who *have to* fight these struggles necessarily do so, and those she chronicles are doing so well and against great odds, winning at times and losing perhaps more frequently. But for those who can make choices as to where to fight their battles, the book does not convince that the local state is a wise battleground. If a single-country revolution is unsustainable, then a single-city one is even less likely to succeed against the pressures that the national state can bring to bear on any substantial challenge to local power relations; something recognised by the Newcastle anti-privatizers in their focus on national and international alliances and analyses (p. 292).

She argues that "Today's experiments place a far greater emphasis on institutional design and sustainability" (p. 376), as against those of the 1960s and 1970s; but as the book itself demonstrates, one thing is sustainability on paper and another is the ability to actually sustain radical changes to even local power relationships in a hostile national and international context. It may indeed be the case that local transformation can *only* survive in the context of wider revolutionary struggles.

This is not to argue with Wainwright's powerful demolition of the top-down approach of Stalinism and Social Democracy - something which the university-educated left (to say nothing of Left establishments) have much to learn from - or with her arguments for grounding organisation in popular knowledge - for which she is an exceptional spokesperson and perhaps the best current theorist. Indeed the book would be an excellent read to recommend to anyone who still believes in exclusively electoral forms of democracy on progressive grounds.

It is rather to radicalise this argument, *contra* both Wainwright's desire to reclaim the state and Holloway's silence on the question of organisation, to ask how movement politics can remake popular organisation in the image of popular knowledge rather than in the image of the state. To return, perhaps crudely, to the question of democracy: states as we know them are in most cases elite political formations loosely modified to co-opt popular movements (democratic movements, independence movements, socialist movements, feminist movements). A genuinely democratic state would not look like a radical version of present-day Britain; in keeping with Wainwright's *Arguments*, its form can hardly be outlined in advance other than to ground it in workplaces, communities and movement alliances rather than units of top-down administration.

### **Respecting each other's struggles**

Having said this, it should be clear that the kind of grassroots struggles for power chronicled in *Reclaim the state* are a necessary *part* of this kind of democracy, and the inability of schematic forms of thought to recognise them is itself unhelpful. As Wainwright notes, its realities are complex (and not easily

summarised) and often "below the conventional radar" (p. 403). If participatory democracy cannot be achieved at the local or regional level alone, and a war of position will not of itself deliver transformation, neither will a war of manoeuvre which fails to build on many such wars of position within many different institutional and extra-institutional fields, and which attempts to radicalise them and connect the dots.

Translated into everyday political practice, that position which rejects community-based struggles and attempts at participatory democracy *a priori* because of their insufficiently revolutionary character (once from a socialist point of view; these days equally frequently from an ecological or autonomist point of view) is as limited as the position of community activists who fail to make the connections and alliances beyond their own sphere of work. It is demanding, bruising and exhausting; but no more so than that of many other popular movements whose support is needed if gains in one community are to survive.

The besetting sin of twenty-first century Northern politics, perhaps, is its weakness at alliance-building and the tendency to fetishise particular methods and spheres of action. Genuine popular democracy has to start from *respect for each other's struggles* - not uncritical respect, but taking each other's battles seriously, as a basis for critical debates geared towards alliance-building and practical solidarity. *Reclaim the state* is an important step in this direction, shining an unusual and penetrating light on an area of political life all too often ignored by activists in other movements.

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