

Call for papers volume 8 issue 2 (November 2016) Social movement auto/biographies

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The November 2016 issue of the open-access, online, copyleft academic/activist journal *Interface: a Journal for and about Social Movements* (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/>) will focus on the theme of social movement auto/biographies. Contributions on other themes, as always, are also welcome.

Social movement auto/biographies

[Walter] Benjamin called upon historians to be cognisant of debts and danger, debts owed to the dead who had struggled and sacrificed and danger in the present. This historian realises that *even the dead* will not be safe without historians' active intervention, that memory of losses and sacrifices will be lost or distorted in the interests of the presently powerful, and most importantly, that memories of past struggles, the flashes seized, can become inspiration for political movements in the present and future. (Kelly 1998)

Any humane, diverse, sustainable, democratic idea of civil society that we can imagine will depend on specific human actors, as well as its own cultural traditions and wider structures and processes. As Christian Smith conveys in his study of the US-Central America peace movement of the 1980s:

social movements do not consist simply of abstract structures and contexts, of impersonal forces and events. Social movements are, at bottom, real, flesh-and-blood human beings acting together to confront and disrupt. They are the collective expressions of specific people, of concrete men and women struggling together for a cause. Bringing our focus down to real, concrete human beings in this way raises a set of questions. Namely, exactly what kinds of people participated? Why did *they* tend to join or become recruited into the movement: What personal characteristics or circumstances may have predisposed them to become activists? (Smith 1996:168)

We might ask other questions, too. For example, what lessons can we draw in order to increase the active membership and effective leadership in such movements? What are lives shaped around movements like? How do the experiences of a lifetime feed into activists' practice at any given point in time? How do we see the relationship between movement participants' theoretical and

political writings and their biography (Mulhern 2011)? How do activist lives differ – across generations, across movements, across countries and continents – and how are they similar?

There are good reasons for writing about our movements auto/biographically. The genre is not an art or skill confined to the academy or professional writers. Neither is reading about them: in fact, biographies and autobiographies are almost certainly more widely read and written by movement participants than formal social movement research. There is no surprise here: one of the key problems for activists is often that of keeping going, in hard times and lonely times, and auto/biography is a powerful tool for seeing one's own life in perspective.

Furthermore, auto/biography can make the work of activists accessible to publics that academic, political or even journalistic writing on social movements can hardly touch. It should be remembered - including by activists themselves - that movement activity can seem exotic *and even suspect* to the public they hope to reach or claim to speak for. The popularisation of social movement politics remains a permanent challenge, but the success (and problems) of movement auto/biography in forms ranging from books and films to graphic novels and exhibitions reminds us how powerful a tool individual figures are for introducing others to movement realities.

Those who are entering movements, or thinking of doing so, may have little sense of what this will actually mean in their lives, without access to movement auto/biography; conversely, much practical knowledge is transmitted informally, even unconsciously, by reflection on past activists' lives (their mistakes and failures as much as their successes and good judgements). Many movement participants come back time and time again to the lives of one or two other activists to think through their own problems: or, as EP Thompson put it, to "reach back into history and endow it with our own meanings: we shake Swift by the hand. We endorse in our present the values of Winstanley..." (1978: 57).

Disrupting the form

Of course the reverse is also true: rightly sceptical of Heroes and Martyrs today, movement auto/biography has often sought to disrupt the idea of the individual as a symbol for the wider movement, and so experimented with new forms. Thus we have forms of "then and now" writing (eg Hedin's 2015 present-day encounters with the near-mythical figures of the Civil Rights Movement). We have biographies focussed on the gender and financial politics of the Marx family with all its private tragedies (Gabriel 2012), on the Gramsci women (Quercioli 2007) or for that matter an imagined life of Lizzie Burns (McCrea 2015).

No activist herself, Ada Lovelace comes to life in an alternate history graphic novel for contemporary feminist tastes (Padua 2015), while Starhawk's *Walking to Mercury* (1997) goes one further to imagine the biography of her fictional

revolutionary heroine, but based in the milieux of her own movement histories. The US movements of the later 20th century gave rise not only to predictable stories but to those which sought to highlight the movements' many contradictions, whether at the time (Mungo 1991, orig. 1970) or in retrospect (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014, orig. 2001).

The disruptive approach is not new, but needs to be continually recovered as a possibility: Thompson himself began with a biography of William Morris (2011, orig. 1955) that sought to bring together the romantic and revolutionary in a single trajectory (itself greatly revised after his break with the Communist Party), while his final work (1994) was an attempt to reread the life of William Blake through a juxtaposition with its possible roots in the obscure religious traditions of Muggletonianism. Sheila Rowbotham and Jeffrey Weeks' (1977) parallel lives of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis, too, neatly subverts the traditional unities. In this context we might also mention *New Left Review's Politics and Letters* (2015, orig. 1979), a sort of autobiography of Raymond Williams told through interviews.

Movement auto/biography today

In a number of countries, auto/biography has experienced a boom as a genre. This might be theorised as responding to a crisis of identity or a generalised loss of social meaning, in the world of neo-liberalised, globalised and networked capitalism, and its undermining of such (now-traditional) structures, aspirations, life-cycles or relationships as lifetime wage-work, social welfare, the family (nuclear or not), the national community, an authoritative state, life-advancing science, and empowering education.

The auto/biographical genre, with its traditionally chronological and narrative form, its varied possible combinations of the public and private (and questionings of such), its ethical messages or dilemmas, therefore, meets a real social need. It can provide vital feedback and raw material for interested activists and researchers. In literary form it can deliver raw materials for further processing by artists and academics. Conversely, in some communities, non-literary or cross-disciplinary (and often visual) forms can also constitute independent possibilities *for* auto/biography. These can, in turn, feed back to mass audiences unreachable by written work - as well, of course, to the activists, organisers and educators themselves.

There is also a necessary and constructive dialectic between the actor/witness and the historian/researcher (who today can increasingly be the same person). In many countries, history from below, oral history, women's history, local history, indigenous history, queer history, working-class history, black history – the history of struggle, in other words – proceeds through auto/biography to a great extent and has become a very democratic form of writing, feeding into other kinds of popular, movement-linked intellectual production from bottom-up forms of commemoration and celebration to plays, novels and films. In this

way too, auto/biography is a key part of how movements think about themselves.

Auto/biographical submissions

Even more than in most issues of *Interface*, auto/biography lends itself to creative formats and we encourage authors to explore formats that will best bring out the strengths of their contribution and encourage readers. Activist auto/biography is documented in very concrete specifics, but aims to show that the experience and practice involved matters beyond its particular time and place. In particular, we ask authors to reflect on how best to do this for an audience most of whom will come from different countries, be involved in different movements and use different political vocabularies. Obviously, in the space of a journal, many forms of auto/biography will simply be too long, and we encourage authors to use this constraint as a way to think about form.

We are also, of course, interested in submissions *about* movement auto/biography. Here we are interested in questions such as:

- Why do people become (life-long or intensely involved) activists?
- How do aging, changing family situation, caring responsibilities and other aspects of social reproduction affect “biographical availability” and different periods of activist lives?
- How do movements shape the lives of their participants (and vice versa?)
- How do life experience and biography shape practice and theory?
- How do activist lives differ, and how are they similar?
- What can we learn from a particular life that will be helpful in other times, places and struggles?
- How can we understand the “politics of memory” as they relate to individual lives?
- How have different or alternative media played a role in constructing and transmitting auto/biography?
- How have mainstream representations contributed to distorting images of activist lives – or damaging the individuals concerned?
- ... and more!

All contributions should go to the appropriate regional editors – see the editorial contacts page (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/editorial-contact/>) - and use the appropriate template. Please see the guidelines for contributors (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/guidelines-for-contributors/>) for more indications on content and style. The deadline is May 1st, 2016.

General contributions

As always, this issue will also include non-theme related pieces. We are happy to consider submissions on any aspect of social movement research and practice that fit within the journal's mission statement

(<http://www.interfacejournal.net/who-we-are/mission-statement/>). Pieces for *Interface* should contribute to the journal's mission as a tool to help our movements learn from each other's struggles, by developing analyses from specific movement processes and experiences that can be translated into a form useful for other movements.

In this context, we welcome contributions by movement participants and academics who are developing movement-relevant theory and research. In addition to studies of contemporary experiences and practices, we encourage analysis of historical social movements as a means of learning from the past and better understanding contemporary struggles.

Our goal is to include material that can be used in a range of ways by movements — in terms of its content, its language, its purpose and its form. We thus seek work in a range of different formats, such as conventional (refereed) articles, review essays, facilitated discussions and interviews, action notes, teaching notes, key documents and analysis, book reviews — and beyond. Both activist and academic peers review research contributions, and other material is sympathetically edited by peers. The editorial process generally is geared towards assisting authors to find ways of expressing their understanding, so that we all can be heard across geographical, social and political distances.

We can accept material in Afrikaans, Arabic, Catalan, Croatian, Danish, English, French, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Italian, Latvian, Maltese, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish and Zulu. Please see our editorial contacts page (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/editorial-contact/>) for details of who to send submissions to.

Deadline and contact details

The deadline for initial submissions to this issue, to be published November 2016, is May 1st 2016. For details of how to submit pieces to *Interface*, please see the "Guidelines for contributors" on our website. All manuscripts should be sent to the appropriate regional editor, listed on our contacts page.

Submission templates are available online via the guidelines page (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/guidelines-for-contributors/>) and should be used to ensure correct formatting. *Interface* is a completely voluntary effort, without the resources of commercial journals, so we have to do all the layout and typesetting ourselves. The only way we can manage this is to ask authors to use these templates when preparing submissions. Thanks!

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