

Social movement auto/biographies

Peter Waterman, Lesley Wood, Laurence Cox

Social movement auto/biographies¹

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 writes in his study of the US-Central American 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 can 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?

The case for writing about our movements *auto/biographically* is as follows. This genre is not an art or skill confined to the academy or professional writers.

¹ This section draws on Peter Waterman, "Of saints, sinners and compañeras: internationalist lives in the Americas today". Working Paper no. 286, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, May 1999.

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. We should remember that movement activity can seem exotic *and even suspect* to the public we hope to reach or claim to speak for. The popularisation of social movement politics therefore remains a permanent challenge.

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). Knowing the history can help. As movement storytellers like Howard Zinn recognized, movement participants often return to the stories of individuals like Ella Baker or Che Guevara to think through their own problems. As activists, as EP Thompson put it, we "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

At the same time, movement auto/biography – rightly sceptical today of Heroes and Martyrs – 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 near-mythical figures of the US 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 the imagined life of Lizzie Burns (McCrea 2015). Moving beyond the individual as subject, this issue has David Van Deusen's account of the "autobiography" of the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective that tells us something about how lives shaped around movements shift and persist.

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 milieu 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 understood 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), generational roles, the national community, an authoritative state, life-advancing science, 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, apparently meets a current 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.² These can, in turn, feed back to mass audiences unreachable by written work - as well, of course, to the activists, organisers and educators themselves.

We may add to these arguments that suggested by Fernando Mires in the introductory quotations.³ The implication here is, evidently, not that the

² For an example of the use of (auto-)biographical materials by a creative artist, consider the novel by the Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska (1997) on the life of the Italian-US-Mexican photographer and international Communist activist, Tina Modotti. The English edition is half the length of the Spanish original, reported to have been a spectacular success on its publication in Mexico a few years earlier. Poniatowska reports in her acknowledgements the 350-page interview granted to her by another internationalist Communist activist, Tina's one-time lover and comrade, Vittorio Vidali, another Italian who had also been active in Mexico in the 1930s-40s. Hereby hangs another tale. For a more conventional biography of Modotti, see Hooks 1993.

³ It is worth noting, firstly, that Mires broke the silence on Chile just *before* the silence was broken, around Pinochet, in late 1998, secondly, that the silence was not broken by Chilean civil society alone but by 'a global civil society in formation'. Behind the breaking of the silence lies

historians should be silenced but that today the chorus should - and can? - speak. The words of John Kelly address the post-nationalist historian more positively. These two quotations imply 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, GLTBQ 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 plays, novels and films to bottom-up forms of commemoration and celebration. In this way too, auto/biography is a key part of how movements think about themselves.

And Angela Davis?

Davis is on our front cover, not only because she was an international icon of the Civil Rights/Black Power movement in the US of the 1970s, became one of the FBI's 'most wanted', was imprisoned and threatened with the death penalty, was lionised in Cuba and Russia, joined, became a leader of, and later broke with, the US Communist Party. As a feminist academic (now retired), she has remained a social activist, attacking the 'prison industrial complex' which [specially penalises Afro-Americans](#). She has also come out as a lesbian.

Even more recently she spoke in South Africa and gave the Steve Biko Memorial Lecture, 2016, where she identified with the student protest movement. She appears at various points in the bibliography of this special issue *Interface*. But more notably – for our purposes - she was reported as saying

“The revolution we wanted was not the revolution we helped to produce.”... As a new generation of activists begin to find their voices, Davis urged them [to] not only question the celebrated legacies of leaders like Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Biko's and even her own, but to devise a new language of struggle.

It is this socially-committed and self-reflective spirit that inspires this issue of *Interface*. This motto tops one of the contributions below.

In this issue

In our Call for Papers we looked for writing that responded to questions such as:

- Why do people become (life-long or intensely involved) activists?
- What are lives shaped around movements like?

the persistent activity of not only a Spanish judge but numerous internationalist activists, both within states and within civil society more generally.

- How do movements shape the lives of their participants (and vice versa?)
- How do 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 is helpful in other times, places and struggles?
- How can we understand the “politics of memory” as they relate to individual lives?

The themed section of this issue moves us forward.

Themed articles

The themed section of this issue opens with three very different approaches to activist auto/biography, but each situated in a very distinctive space. Thus the Social Library Conxa Pérez in Barcelona, situated in a squatted bank, draws its name from an anarchist activist whose life stretched back to pre-Franco cultural centres. The piece highlights her involvement in the Spanish Revolution, in enabling activist networking under fascism and in continued political involvement after the fall of the regime. Meanwhile Silke Roth’s reflections on the complexities of professionalisation in activist lives, which opens our themed section, focusses on an analysis of a quarter century in the Berlin women’s coop *WeiberWirtschaft*. She explores a typology of different roles played by women in founding and sustaining the organisation. Thirdly, David Van Deusen’s piece on Vermont’s Green Mountain Anarchist Collective constitutes a sort of collective auto/biography, covering the collective’s emergence during the global justice movement, its work around black bloc theorising and its long commitment to direct action through many different struggles.

Veteran activist Peter Waterman has contributed three, very different pieces to this section. The first, “Of Icons, Of Myths and Of Internationalists”, calls for a demythologised approach to activist auto/biographies, arguing that we should approach them not as icons but as companer@s. Secondly, his critical dialogue with Dutch specialist on worker self-management Gerard Kester explores both the latter’s life and his autobiography, as well as debating the issue of self-management. Finally, his “rough guide” and annotated bibliography for movement auto/biographies covers both a wide range of primary texts of this kind as well as useful secondary resources including sources and methodological reflections. Our book reviews this issue include both Kester’s review of Azzellini on self-management and Featherstone’s review of Waterman’s autobiography.

Indira Palacios-Valladares’ article looks at the biographical impact of high school and university occupations in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. While occupations can be biographical high-points, enthusing participants and developing political community and commitment, they can also prove exhausting and breed feelings of disillusion over time. Finally, Laurence Cox’s

reflections on researching the biographies of Irish people involved in the pan-Asian, anti-colonial Buddhist revival of the late C19th and early C20th discusses the practical challenges and research strategies involved in transnational biographical research. It also notes the way in which this research relativises organisations, encourages greater attention to failure and opens up a wider sense of historical possibility.

General articles

This issue's general section opens with two educational experiences. Paddy O'Halloran's article explores the black student movement at "the university currently known as Rhodes" in Grahamstown, South Africa. Focussing in particular on the Black Student Commons occupation of 2015, O'Halloran asks about the relationship between student and subaltern political praxis and about the possibility of decolonising the university and reconstituting it as a site of protest. Meanwhile Alessandro Mariano, Erivan Hilário and Rebecca Tarlau's article on Brazil's Landless Workers Movement explores the movement's extensive education and training programmes. Highlighting the core principles and practices in the movement's pedagogy, the piece discusses the "itinerant schools" within MST land occupations as well as the movement's national political training school, showing the links between the movement's pedagogical practices and the social order it strives towards.

Staying with Brazil, Simone da Silva Ribeiro Gomes' Portuguese-language piece discusses the "June days" of 2013 in Brazil in terms of the legitimacy of violence. She discusses both legitimacy as a mode of analysis and the rhetorical manipulation of this language by the state and demonstrators. In Italy, Pamela Pietrucci's discussion of the trial following the disastrous L'Aquila earthquake of 2009 challenges the Anglophone discussion of the trial as a witchhunt of seismologists. Noting how state pressure led to official reassurances of safety that cost many lives, she highlights the power of local counternarratives.

Adam Kingsmith's piece discusses humour as a subversive political performance as well as part of a repertoire of contention. With particular reference to Radio Alice in the Italian 1970s and the contemporary hacktivist collective Anonymous, Kingsmith argues that while humour can be contained or controlling, it can also point towards substantial dissent. By contrast, David K. Langstaff's "What could it mean to mourn?" argues for a understanding of how personal grief and trauma are tied to participation in radical movements. He suggests that this enables a radical politics of grief and mourning which critiques the violence of modernity and enables new forms of gathering resistance.

Luca Sebastiani, Borja Íñigo Fernández Alberdi and Rocío García Soto's Italian-language analysis of the Spanish right-to-housing organization PAH explores its organisational form, its effectiveness in underminin hegemonic discourses and its technological strategies. They argue that its internal dynamics form a point of

junction between its affective practices and its capacity for social transformation. Rudi Epple and Sebastian Schief's article explores the field of force between the Swiss women's movement and various countermovements around the cantonal Offices for Gender Equality. Using coincidence analysis, they show that it was the struggle between these movements which determined the implementation or otherwise of Offices, while identifying the importance of "taboo" breaking for countermovements.

Lastly, John Hayakawa Torok's event analysis looks at the combination of labour solidarity and antiracism in Oakland's 2011-13 decolonize / "Occupy" experience. Drawing on his own participation and the city's longer history of radical struggles, he explores the radical politics of the Oakland encampment and its afterlives.

Book reviews

Finally, we have book reviews of Michael Knapp, Anja Flach and Ercan Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (Patrick Huff); Kerstin Jacobsson (ed.), *Urban Grassroots Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Bojan Baća); Dario Azzellini (ed.), *An Alternative Labour History: Worker Control and Workplace Democracy* (Gerard Kester); Peter Waterman, *From Coldwar Communism to the Global Emancipatory Movement: Itinerary of a Long-Distance Internationalist* (David Featherstone); Robert Ogman, *Against the Nation: Anti-National Politics in Germany* (Ina Schmidt); Lorenzo Bosi, Niall Ó Dochartaigh, and Daniela Pisoiu (eds), *Political Violence in Context: Time, Space and Milieu* (Andrew Kettler) and Shaazka Beyerle, *Curtailing Corruption: People Power for Accountability and Justice* (Valesca Lima Holanda).

Mandisi Majavu

We are sorry to lose our long-standing book reviews editor, Mandisi Majavu. Mandisi has been a stalwart of what can often be a difficult task, and has consistently ensured that the reviews section reflects the true spirit of *Interface*, with activist as well as academic pieces, a wide range of regions of the world and movements represented, and reviewers with very different backgrounds. Something of the cheery cacophony that is writing from and for movements has always come through in the sections he has curated. Mandisi's co-editor, Bjarke Skærlund Risager, is continuing his good work and bringing his own distinctive contribution to our reviews, as can be seen in the list above. Mandisi's latest book, *Uncommodified Blackness: the African Male Experience in Australia and New Zealand*, has just been published by Palgrave.

References

- Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne (2014, orig. 2001) *Outlaw woman: a memoir of the war years, 1960-75*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press
- Gabriel, Mary (2012) *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the birth of a revolution*. NY: Back Bay
- Hedin, Benjamin (2015) *In search of the Movement: the struggle for civil rights then and now*. SF: City Lights
- Kelly, John D. (1998) "Time and the Global: Against the Homogeneous, Empty Communities in Contemporary Social Theory". *Development and Change*, Vol. 29: 839-71
- Hooks, Margaret. 1993. *Tina Modotti: Photographer and Revolutionary*. London: Pandora
- McCrea, Gavin (2015) *Mrs Engels*. NY: Catapult
- Mulhern, Francis (2011) *Lives on the left: a group portrait*. London: Verso
- Mungo, Ray (1991, orig. 1970) *Famous long ago: my life and hard times with Liberation News Service, at Total Loss Farm and on the Dharma Trail*. NY: Citadel
- Padua, Sydney (2015) *The thrilling adventures of Lovelace and Babbage: the (mostly true) story of the first computer*. London: Pantheon
- Poniatowska, Elena. 1997. *Tinisima*. London: Faber and Faber
- Quercioli, Mimma Paulesu (2007) *Le donne di casa Gramsci*. Ghilarza, Sardinia: Iskra
- Rowbotham, Sheila and Jeffrey Weeks (1977) *Socialism and the New Life: the personal and sexual politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis*. London: Pluto
- Starhawk (1997) *Walking to Mercury*. NY: Bantam
- Thompson, EP (1978) *The poverty of theory: or, an orrery of errors*. London: Merlin
- Thompson, EP (2011, orig. 1955) *William Morris: romantic to revolutionary*. NY: PM
- Thompson, EP (1994) *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*. Cambridge: CUP
- Williams, Raymond (2015, orig. 1979) *Politics and letters: interviews with New Left Review*. London: Verso

About the authors

Laurence Cox is senior lecturer in sociology at the National University of Ireland Maynooth. He has been working on a series of biographical pieces about early Irish participants in the pan-Asian, anti-colonial Buddhist revival of the late C19th and early C20th and has been involved with a number of oral history projects in working-class Dublin, most recently on the movement against water charges. With Lesley Wood he is currently working on an activist-led oral history of Peoples Global Action. He can be contacted at [laurence.cox AT nuim.ie](mailto:laurence.cox@nuim.ie)

Peter Waterman (London 1936) worked twice for international Communist organisations in Prague before becoming an academic (1970). After rejoining from the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague (1998) Peter has published various monographs, (co-)edited compilations and numerous academic and political papers – the latter almost all to be found online. Since retirement he has also had invitations for teaching, lectures, seminars and consultations from universities and/or movement-oriented bodies worldwide. He is now editing a third compilation of his scattered writings, under the working title, 'From Left Inter/Nationalism to Global Social Emancipation: An Era of Disorientation and Reorientation'. He can be reached at [peterwaterman1936 AT gmail.com](mailto:peterwaterman1936@gmail.com).

Lesley Wood wants a world where water protectors and migrants were honoured, instead of people like Trump. She is Associate Professor in Sociology at York University. While working with Laurence on the Peoples Global Action oral history project, she is thinking about temporality and social movements. Her most recent book is *Crisis and Control: The Militarization of Protest Policing*.