

What are social movements?

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What are social movements?

Gosh! That is quite a question.

I wish that I could point to an easy answer. Maybe there is one somewhere out there. But if there is, I am not aware of it. And, to be honest, if I came across one, I would be somewhat suspicious of it.

Is the campaign to rid the world of malaria a movement? And, if it is, what does it have in common with the anti-TIPP movement or the women's movement or the anti-racism movement or the trade union movement? When business calls for greater corporate responsibility does that make it part of, say, the social justice movement? And, if not, why not?

Is the term just a convenient short-hand for the "good guys", for "progressive social forces" and for activism whose aims "we" support?

I doubt that. If collective organising is the hall mark of movements, then Fascism is a social movement; the Nazi Party was a social movement; racism is fermented through racist social movements; neoliberalism is a social movement; the Tea Party is a social movement; UKIP is a social movement; and the Mafia, which began life as an organised protest movement against land reform, remains a social movement even though it has morphed into an organised criminal gang.

So is the phrase so all encompassing – or perhaps so over-used – that it has lost all analytical and political meaning?

Is it a fruitless task to try and understand "social movements" when, in the words of social scientist Nick Crossley, there seems to be no single characteristic that is

“sufficiently inclusive and sufficiently exclusive” to demarcate and identify them; when the easy dichotomies (such as “funded/unfunded” or hierarchical/non-hierarchical) do not help to elucidate (many movements are funded and unfunded, hierarchical and non-hierarchical at different moments in their history) ; when what movements seem to share in common is also shared by entities other than movements; and when “all those characteristics which are unique to some are not shared by all”.¹

But, frustrating as the task might be, I think it would be a mistake to throw up our hands and give up. Historically, social change (and, indeed, resistance to change) has always been associated with forms of challenge that go beyond single individuals and involve a coming together around a particular view of how the world should be: around what, through political and social contestation, comes to be seen as the “good society”. These moments in history – never completely settled: how could the question “What is a good society?” ever be settled – build upon each other, reacting to what has gone before, and it in these processes and the political spaces they create that I think one can find “movements”.

Understanding those processes is, in my view, key to effective organising for change, the more so at time (which I believe we are in) when contemporary forms of advocacy – notably through non-governmental organisations whose relationship to their political base is often weak or non-existent – are increasingly ineffective as a means of challenging unjust political, social and economic power.

So while it may be a mistake to seek an all-encompassing definition – and even undesirable (definitions provide ways of seeing but “they also entail ways of ‘not seeing’”²) – I thought it might share some observations about the movements with which I am familiar, as a way of explore what Wittgenstein might have termed “the family resemblance”³ between them, in order to try and draw out and understand their zeitgeist and what makes them effective.

1 Nick Crossley (2002) Making Sense of Social Movements, Open University Press.

2 Dieter Haller and Chris Shore (eds) (2005) *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives*. Pluto Press: London. Available at: http://www.untag-smd.ac.id/files/Perpustakaan_Digital_1/CORRUPTION%20Haller_Corruption-Anthropological%20Perspectives.pdf

3 Quoted in Nick Crossley (2002) Making Sense of Social Movements, Open University Press.

I should stress that I do not represent these movements. But I do feel part of them. And it the reasons why I (and lots of others) feel part of them that may give the best clue as to what they are and what they are not.

I should apologise in advance if what I have to say is somewhat sharply drawn. Twenty minutes is not a long time and the clicking clock makes it easier to paint in black and white, when shades of grey would be far more appropriate. I hope you make allowances for this. The world is always more nuanced that workshop presentations allow.

So here goes.

I would like to start with the word “**solidarity**”. By that, I don’t just mean empathy with some else’s cause or struggle. I mean something that goes beyond this, that is more active and that requires more commitment.

Here I would like to share a story. A decade or more ago, I became involved in a struggle against a dam in the Kurdish part of Turkey that was being funded by British tax payers’ money. I visited the region, which at the time was (as it sadly is again) a war zone. The repression of the Kurds was intense. I met with many in the Kurdish movement to ask their views on the dam and, critically, whether or not they were seeking support from those, like myself, who were outside of the region.

The response of one Kurdish leader has stuck with me. “We are opposed to the dam”, he said, “but we do not have time to work on it; our people are being detained, arrested, tortured and abused. However if working against the dam assists you in your struggle for democracy in your country, you have our support.”

Note he did not say, “I can’t work on this because I do not have the funding to do so”. Nor, “I cannot work on this because I am a human rights activist and this is an environmental issue”. Nor “I cannot work on this but let’s keep in touch in case you ever happen to be working on something that I am working on.”

No, his was a silent invitation to recognise and explore the commonalities in our struggle, to look beyond the specifics of a particular campaign to the role it might play in a broader struggle, and to acknowledge the different political space in which we both operated but to find ways in which we could use those differences to assist each other.

It was a response based on the politics of solidarity. It was an invitation to me to look beyond constituency building – here is my cause, will you support it? – to building relationships that would enable us to take on each other’s causes precisely because, at the end of the day, they were one and the same. And it was on this basis that we travelled forward together.

I think that view of solidarity as a two-way process of mutual assistance, mutual learning and expanding mutual struggle is one important family resemblance in the movements with which I identify. And I think it contrasts with silo-ised forms of campaigning that stress instead a “keep-off-my-turf” organisational “branding” or which see campaigning simply as proselytising for one’s own cause without attention to the causes of others.

I think this is important because solidarity, if it is to mean anything, is a politics which stresses long-term relationship building over short-term, opportunistic and instrumentalist alliances. And this demands an approach to organising that pays attention to history, to understanding where people are coming from politically and where they seek to go, to building trust, and to constantly challenging those imbalances of power (particularly within movements) that thwart or constrain open debate on these issues. Process is critically important, as is making the time to build such relationships. This does not mean that there is no place for contingent alliances or constituency building around “one’s cause”. But it does mean that the goal of such alliance and constituency building is rooted in a broader objective than simply a quick “win. And the starting point of a conversation is unlikely to be, “We have this campaign. This is where you sign up. This is what you have to do to support us”. The starting point is more likely to be, in the words of an Indonesian colleague, “Why are you crying?”

Here two other second family resemblances comes to mind, encapsulated by the words “**discovery**” and “**liberation**”.

To take “**discovery**” first. The movements I work have much to say about the policy changes that are needed, locally, nationally and internationally, to unsettle oppressive power relations, whether in the home or between social groups or in the workplace. But their response to injustice does not start with policy prescriptions because injustice is not seen exclusively as a policy issue. When the cry of injustice

goes up from a crowd, they do not hear a demand for bullet points that can be presented to a busy politician. This comes later. What they hear (from my experience) is an expression of a consciousness in the making. What's happening to us? How does it happen? How does it work? Who is doing this to us? How are they making alliances against us? What alliances should we make?

This is a dynamic process of discussion and enlightenment. A process which involves an expansion in the awareness of oppression. And though rapid responses are often needed, care is taken to try and ensure that those responses do not get in the way of, but open up space for, the process of discovery that has been triggered.

The 'policy demands' that emerge (as they invariably do) from justice-as-discovery are not demands that are shaped by an abstract notion of 'justice'. They arise from the pressing need to build alliances and to expand political space. They are born not of 'politics as the art of the possible' but, of politics as 'the art of the impossible'.⁴

This does not preclude making policy demands that are directed at reforming existing institutions: but the interventions needed are those that are intended to change, not take for granted, 'the very parameters of what is considered "possible" in the existing constellation'. To transform what is said to be impossible (abolishing formal slavery, for example) into the possible and then into reality.

Which brings me to "**liberation**". For this is a politics that is not imprisoned by an acceptance of status quo. It seeks to go beyond "reformist reforms" to "non-reformist reforms". It is not constrained by a concern with ensuring a seat at the High Table because it recognises that pursuing "the art of the impossible" may often be better served by eating elsewhere.

Above all, it is a politics premised on another world being possible – and on making that world happen, not just through debate and discussion but also through what Ghandi called "living the change you want". Through insisting that the question "Why are you crying?" is asked as much to colleagues as externally. Through open-ended experimentation with new forms of organising and internal decision-making that better unsettle, bypass, undermine and change existing political, social and economic frameworks. Or through finding ways to build on those flashes of mutual

4 Žižek, S. (1999) *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso.

recognition when people who may previously been opposed or indifferent to each other come to see something of their own struggle in someone else's, and vice versa.

Such “**experiments in power and democracy**” (to use Nick Crossley's phrase) are another family resemblance. But there is fifth that I would like to mention: **friendship**.

The activism that is the hallmark of movements is an activism that emphasises patience, listening, and respectful dialogue as the basis for collective action. As such, it is activism that pays considerable attention to building relationships of trust. Indeed, without trust there can be no “we-building” that lasts.

But trust does not come about simply because one shares the same views. It is a deeper phenomenon, nurtured through shared face-to-face experiences, shared moments of joy and dissolution, shared moments of stress and relaxation. It comes about through growing friendship. Indeed, in my case, it is not institutional links that make it possible for me to work on the issues I do in the ways that I do: it is the many friendships that I have built over the years around the world.

It therefore comes as no surprise to me that grassroots activists frequently report that what they find most inspiring about their activism is the friendships it has sown and nurtured. For it is these friendships, rather than political tracts, that have given them the courage to transform their ways of seeing themselves and their relationships to others. It is these friendship (perhaps comradeship is a better term) that have seen them through moments of crisis. That have provided the means of healing when tensions arise. That – to respond to the point raised by Rob Bell in his email – have maintained the links between and within movements even as they morph and shape shift in response to emerging political challenges and opportunities. That have provided the means through movements expand and seep into the “crevices of our lifeworld”.

Movements, then, are not flummoxed by the notion of friendship as the political tool of the moment (to use the expression of a Mexican activist friend).

On the contrary, they recognise that to judge the success or failure of a campaign just by whether or not it was a “win” is to miss the point. For transformational change

is not just about transforming formal institutions or policies: it is about transforming how we relate to each other.

What does this mean for funders? Well, four thoughts come to mind. I am not a funder and do not know how relevant these will be: my apologies if they seem brash or gauche.

First, do no harm (if that is ever even possible). In many subtle ways, an emphasis on outputs and “wins” can get disastrously in the way of “slow politics” that process demands.

Second, be open to supporting open-ended processes that aim to facilitate dialogue within and between movements, or to create safe spaces where movements can (as it were) get to know each other.

Third, seek to understand how groups seeking support approach issues like solidarity, alliance building and the like. Who do they work with? How do they decide? How instrumentalist are they when it comes to reaching out to others?

And, fourth, don't get too hung up on measurement. Think perhaps of the many processes, most of them entirely outside the (barely) measurable world of institutional campaigning, that transform society. Think, perhaps, of something like not using “man” when we actually mean all of humanity, including the 50% who are women. This came about through conversations over the kitchen table as much, if not more, than high profile campaigns. And that is the point of movements. They reach into our lives precisely because they involve us as members of society, not as members just of right-minded (or not so right-minded) groups.

I am nearly at the end of my time. But if I could make just one last point, it would be this: solidarity, consciousness-in-the-making, the politics of the impossible, experimentation and friendship are not the luxuries of effective organising. They are its bread and butter. Process cannot be set aside. And, in my experience, it is only within movements that are grounded in actual struggles that this is recognised, not just in theory but in practice. And that is what, historically, has made them the greatest threat to abusive power. And the reason why movements are so important.