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SUSTAINING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

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Abstract

This paper first reflects on the history and nature of social movement politics post 1968 within the broad theme of sustaining diversity in diverse ways. Secondly, it examines social movements in terms of holistic versus fragmentary politics, taking the peace movement/END in the 1980s as an illustration. Thirdly, it explores the issue of 'shifting goalposts', providing some speculations on the ways in which social movement objectives change over time, and the implications of this for the definition, efficacy and role of social movements in sustaining diversity. It concludes with a discussion of social movement politics today

Key words: social movements; politics; peace movements; diversity.

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INTRODUCTION

I should warn immediately that those who have come here hoping for research based engagement with the question of social movements and their role in sustaining diversity should abandon hope now. As I have tried to indicate in the reference to 'personal' reflections, my offering today is not going to be of that quality, but less academic. It will be more in the character of a mix of reflection, reminiscence and speculation : firstly, a brief historical reflection on the nature and context of social movement politics in the post 1968 period, indicating what I think are the main shifts that have taken place, and what they might imply for thinking about the role of social movements in sustaining diversity; secondly, some discussion of the contrast in the type of political agendas associated respectively with earlier and more recent movements using the peace movement politics of the 1980s in which I was personally involved as illustrative; thirdly, speculation on the shifts that take place in the objectives of social movements over time, the impact of these on what counts as a social movements, on how we think about their efficacy, and their role in sustaining diversity. And then, finally, if time – and this may have to be left to discussion – a note on the state of things, as I see it, today.

HISTORICAL SURVEY: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS THEN (I.E. POST 1968) AND NOW.

I'm going to presume here that in a broad-brush way social movement politics within Europe from the late sixties onwards refers to the group of left-oriented campaigns that came into being against the background of what – again very broadly – may be designated as the 'crisis of Marxism'; and in response to demands which orthodox socialist politics had been deemed either to ignore or be incapable of advancing. That is, we are talking e.g. of the feminist, anti-racist, peace and ecology movements which took off in the 1970s: movements synthesising particular forms of protest, but campaigning for their agendas outside the institutional structure of the political party.

At the time, these were often referred to as the 'new' social movements, the newness consisting in the fact that they pursued a left agenda while breaking with the more orthodox class-based mould of politics and its focus on class antagonism. (Where Marxism had privileged working-class agency and tended to view the other negatives of racism, sexism, abuse of nature, militarism, oppression of sexual minorities, etc. as waiting upon the eradication of class exploitations, the 'new' social movements refused to treat these as a laundry list to be tacked on to an essential core of class politics. Hence the way in which the analysis of power in the period became linked to Marxism's 'blindness' to those forms of oppression which, it was argued, could not be adequately understood in terms of class and the economy, but had their own origins, modes of domination and dynamic.

Moreover, insofar as they mobilised support from a broader spectrum of the population than the orthodox left, they brought into being a more trans-class form of political agency. For however ineffective they proved in advancing the core item of socialism (the removal of capitalism), they indisputably acted as agents promoting leftwing causes in the 1970s and 1980s.

Obviously I'm making a generalisation here, and I accept that even within the emergent social movements of the 1970s, there were significant differences of

style and emphasis, some were narrower, more 'objective' in focus than others, some more about themselves, i.e. about the oppressions of those they mobilised than others, and so on.

But relative to what came later, they did have - I submit - a broadly shared critique of capitalism, that is a quite radical conception of what was needed in the way of social change. And despite the divergence from orthodox class politics, and their opening up of a more pluralist conception of what needed to be done, they retained a commitment to a broadly humanist conception of selfhood and political agency; and a broadly modernist-foundationalist approach to thinking about society, power, and the nature of human emancipation.

And then came the challenge of postmodern relativism and pluralism, the shift to anti—foundationalism in social and cultural theory, and the subversion of the commitment to humanist conceptions of agency and political process. And all this had major impact on social movement politics, and not least because social movements, of their nature, had rather generalist agendas: antimilitarism, anti-racism, the emancipation of women, the conservation of nature, and so forth, which - precisely in virtue of their rather abstract and open-ended nature - were open to multiple interpretations and differing conceptions of subjectivity and historical process. .

Hence the way in which the so-called 'new' social movements came to seem rather dated in relation to the form of their subsequent evolution, and the distinction that emerged within this 'new' formation itself, between older and newer movements, or between older and newer forms of existence of social movement politics. In this connection we can note a number of more recent developments

- Firstly, on the issue of fragmentation, it became clear over time that the 'goods' associated with the 'new' movements (peace, female emancipation, etc.) were less clear-cut and consensual than at first assumed. (The influence of the self-critiques conducted by the movements themselves of their own humanist, white, middle-class,

liberal-enlightenment conceptions of subjectivity and emancipation was all-important in opening up this more diverse conception of progress and liberation.)

- Secondly, there was a proliferation of movements of a more 'subjective' kind, movements concerned with registering the presence and/or contesting the cultural representations of their specific constituencies. In other words, 'identity politics', as it is somewhat confusingly called, has emerged as a more distinctively postmodern wing of social movement politics in Europe. Strongly influenced by poststructuralist theories of power and bio-politics, notably Foucault, these movements have focussed on the role of discursive formations in the construction of subjective categories (the 'pervert', 'deviant', welfare 'dependent' etc.) and their strategies have included some imaginative discursive challenges to this power: strategies that have challenged the essentialist approaches of earlier 'new' social movements. One might note here the tensions between their Foucaultian emphases and the universalist humanism of the peace movement; or between the naturalism of the green movement – nature as site of authenticity, etc – and the anti-naturalism of much current theory of gender and sexuality.
- Thirdly, there's been a growth of very practically oriented voluntary and self-help groups directed to immediate and specific needs. Social movement politics is here functioning as a kind of alternative welfare provision, and its emergence as compensatory support system must be theorised against the background of neo-liberal erosion of state provided services, even if in many cases the movements involved are concerned with 'identity' issues as well: not just with assisting e.g. battered women, single parents, AIDs victims, etc. but with shifting cultural perceptions of such groups.

Now even if we were only to attend to these kind of developments, we would be facing a question about how diverse social movements can become, how divided in their aims before we have to re-think the idea of 'new social movements' as cohering around some radical left alternative. But this

question becomes all the more vexed if we take account (as we surely should) of the many citizens initiatives of the Centre and Right which have been active of late (e.g. fundamentalist-religious campaigns, anti-abortion groups, and the like). And indeed, why not include here the uglier – racist, anti-semitic, chauvinist-nationalist – formations of our times?

In short, given the contemporary scale and pluralism of social movement politics, we surely can't continue to valorise something called 'new social movements' without concerning ourselves with the mutual compatibility of the differing aims and identities for which they are speaking.

Claus Offe has suggested that the criterion of a social movement is that it 'talks to the enemy' and in a language which the opposition can accept. But while this may be a helpful line to pursue, it would still include many movements directly at loggerheads with each other (the pro-and anti-abortion lobbies, for example, both talking to each other and in the self-same vocabulary of rights).

For all these reasons, I would suggest that 'new social movements' has become a vexed appellation: the name of a plurality of actually or potentially abrasive groupings as much as the honorific title of a democratic and cohesive alternative to the 'closure'/'totalitarianism' of orthodox socialist theory and practice. At any rate, I think it would be a mistake to celebrate this 'pluralism' without attending to its tensions, and the 'beyond the fragments' problems it poses for left critics. (The programme advanced by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau under the concept of 'Radical Democracy' can be viewed as an attempt to theorise the potential for some kind of synthesis and hegemonic project linking these divergent groups without 'essentialising' the grounds of its emergence or its normative claims.)

HOLISTIC VERSUS FRAGMENTARY POLITICS: THE PEACE MOVEMENT/END IN THE 1980S AS ILLUSTRATIVE.

Now let me re-frame some of these points in terms of the seminar series theme of 'sustaining diversity'. And crudely, here, I want to distinguish between two conceptions of diversity: diversity in the sense of expanding the range of political and cultural engagement and representation within a given society or social formation, and diversity in the sense of sustaining a holistic conception of otherness to the status quo; diversity as pluralism and resistance to any singular vision of the 'good', versus diversity as radical critique and resistance to one-dimensional positivism.

And, again, rather crudely, I want to suggest that while the fragmentation of the older 'new' social movements and the emergence of social movements as vehicles of 'identity politics' has clearly sustained 'diversity' as pluralism of representation and purpose; the earlier 'new' social movements were more forceful in sustaining diversity as a radical vision of otherness – as projection of an alternative 'social imaginary'.

And in this context, I'll say a word about the peace movement, and END in particular, in the 1980s, when I myself was a chairperson of it - as illustrative of the kind of social movement that, by today's standard, had a hugely ambitious, large-scale, radical, 'making history', agenda: - sustained diversity of outlook in that sense, but was not so caught up in sustaining diversity at a more subjective level.

END was essentially a breakaway movement from CND, provoked by NATO's decision in December 1979 to respond to a Soviet upgrading of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe with its own nuclear modernisation – Cruise and Pershing II missiles to be deployed in Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy. As the name suggests, it was a movement summoned by the threat of 'theatre' war in Europe resulting from the siting of cruise missiles on both sides, and its call was for a 'nuclear-free Europe from Poland to Portugal'.

It was launched in 1980, with the European Nuclear Disarmament Appeal (the key authors were E.P Thompson, Ken Coates, Dan Smith and Mary Kaldor) which was distinguished by

- (A) Its emphasis on non-alignment.
- (B) Its 'beyond the blocs' position: disarmament was seen, not so much in terms of getting rid of the hardware but in terms of transcending the opposition between Soviet and NATO power blocs, and overcoming the division of Europe.
- (C) Its strategy of 'detente from below'.

Though a British initiative, it rapidly came to command widespread support elsewhere in Europe, and by summer 1980 had been endorsed by an impressive list of supporters, mainly in Western Europe but with a smattering from the Soviet bloc, among them former Hungarian Prime Minister Andras Hegedus and Russian dissident Roy Medvedev. Several other East European intellectuals signed later.

The END conventions

The END conventions (spearheaded in END UK by Ken Coates, and organised through the END Liaison Committee) were attempts to bring together all supporting groups from across Europe in a major peace conference, and these took place from 1982: Berlin (1983), Perugia, Italy (1984), Amsterdam (1985), Evry, France (1986), Coventry, UK (1987), Lund, Sweden (1988), Victoria-Gasteiz, Spain (1989), Helsinki, Finland/Tallinn, Estonia (1990) and finally Moscow (1991).¹

¹ During these conventions, especially in Perugia and Amsterdam, there was an intensive cooperation with the Dutch Interchurch Peace Council (IKV) and their secretary-general Mient Jan Faber and Wim Bartels. Bartels was also the president of the International Peace Coordination Centre (IPCC), a cooperation of 'like-minded' movements, which linked their commitment of the struggle against nuclear weapons and the support of independent, dissident peace-initiatives in Eastern-Europe. Despite this intensive cooperation there also existed some kind of rivalry between the END network and the IPCC. Since most peace movements were present in both, it seemed both networks were doing very similar work

END in the UK

A further split with END UK took place when Thompson, Kaldor and others in the END group in the UK disagreed with Coates's interest in winning the support of political parties and trade union leaders, and in 1983 there was a parting of the ways. Coates and his Nottingham-based Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation concentrated on the convention process, leaving Thompson and Kaldor as dominant figures in the UK END group. From then on, the UK END group was very much a separate entity from the conventions, although it took part in them and was represented on the Liaison Committee.

END in Britain was much more politically influential in the 1980s than its membership (a mere 500) might suggest, and this was largely due to the prominence of many of its supporters, the brilliance of the END Journal (edited by Mary Kaldor) and perhaps above all to the writing and oratory of its key figure, E.P. Thompson. Its non-aligned stance helped to win it support in the Labour Party (which, believe it or not, had adopted a non-nuclear defence policy in 1980). Sixty Labour MPs had signed the END Appeal, and for a while Roger Cook was on the UK END Coordinating Committee. But its hostility to the Soviet Union was a constant source of abrasion with CND - although most ENDers were also in CND, and the two always cooperated in the end on major events. It was also, of course, supported by the Green Parties then emerging in Western Europe, and there was much overlap between them

Détente from below

But the main, and arguably the most difficult and important work was with dissidents in the Soviet Union and its east-central European satellite states. Although the END Appeal had won some support from dissidents in the Soviet bloc at its launch, most were hesitant about the western peace movements, which they felt were parroting Soviet slogans and had no sympathy for people living under communist dictatorship. Václav Havel expressed this view forcefully in his essay 'An Anatomy of a Reticence' (1985).

Nevertheless, thanks largely to the persistence of END and like-minded activists from other countries, who kept up a constant stream of correspondence with dissidents in the Soviet bloc and visited them whenever they could, by the mid-1980s a fruitful dialogue had been established. END had working groups for each Soviet bloc country. The Czechoslovakia group exchanged views with and visited Havel and his colleagues in Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia ; END was also active in supporting the much harassed Prague Jazz Group; the Hungary group had exchanges with Gyorgy Konrad, Miklos Haraszti and a small group of young peace activists in Hungary; the Poland group had the same with Adam Michnik , Jacek Kuronand and many younger activists; the East Germany group the same with Bärbel Bohley, Ulrike Poppe and others who were later to be the core of Neues Forum. END also set up exchanges with the Moscow Trust group (note here the delegation to Moscow which I led as Chairperson in 1987, at the invite of the Soviet Peace Committee, with a view to getting it to agree to members of the Trust Group being allowed visas to come to the END Convention in Coventry. The group was quite high profile, included Ian McEwan and Jonathan Steele - and the negotiations very problematic.)

This was typical of the fraught, and difficult and often frustrating activity of conducting 'détente from below' while remaining non-clandestine in operation, and remaining in dialogue with the official peace groups – not an easy line to tread, and often distrusted on both sides

What role did END/ non-aligned/ optic have in influencing the politics of the Cold War, bringing about its demise ?

That the CIA and the KGB would both accuse each other of funding END can arguably be viewed as reaffirming the wisdom of pressing for a process of 'citizens' detente' and for the adoption of a non-aligned position within the Western peace movement.

This was to prove of critical importance, both in the impact it had on the politics and strategies of the latter, and in the space it opened up for trans-bloc dialogue between it and the independent peace initiatives

and dissident groups in Eastern Europe. This was no easy dialogue to sustain, demanding as it did a keen sensitivity to differences of political priority and to the divergent conditions under which the various peace groups in both halves of Europe were at that time working. The story of its ideological complexities is yet to be told. But when it is, it will be clear that, without the END effort, certain lines of East-West communication which contributed to the dramatic changes of the late eighties would not have been opened up.

Of course, it is true that glasnost and perestroika came in response to domestic crisis. But it is also true that its defence and foreign policy initiatives were informed by peace movement thinking, and that the climate of reception of these both within and without the Soviet bloc had been altered by exposure to the pressures of the non aligned anti-nuclear campaign in the West.

In this limited sense the END campaign can certainly be said to have played a significant role in shaping the historical disposition of the late 1980s. But if this has not been much recognised, it is partly because of the historical theft of the peace movement's contribution by more mainstream politicians. To make a kind of Tolstoyan point: when social movement agendas come to fruition, the politicians of the day will turn round and embrace them as if these agendas had always been their own. Thompson made this point late on in his life when he wrote. 'This is the most serious political work I have ever done or will ever do in my life. It won't last long. If we succeed a little, the politicians will move in and take it off us.'

What is more, the 'third way' position that united the official peace movement groups in central and eastern Europe with the West European groups has itself been squeezed out and ceded to the inrush of capitalist entrepreneurialism;

In other words, the grass-roots initiatives, whose various eco-pacifist and market-sceptical groupings played such a crucial role in the 'velvet

revolution' were very quickly deprived of influence in the aftermath by the all too familiar machinations of professional power politics.

END had some efficacy, arguably in creating the cultural climate that allowed Gorbachev to make the critical overtures that led on to the removal of the theatre weapons from Europe, and to the launching of glasnost and perestroika. But very little efficacy in sustaining its radical 'third way' position, economically, socially, environmentally beyond the end of the Cold War. (Cf EPT on the one foot falling, but not the other.)

What END has done, however, in its small and much less influential way, is to have continued to press for this perspective. In 1989 it turned itself into European Dialogue, a pressure group for encouraging the development of democracy, social justice and the expansion of civil society throughout both halves of Europe, which is still on going....

THE 'SHIFTING GOALPOSTS': SOME SPECULATIONS ON THE WAYS IN WHICH SOCIAL MOVEMENT OBJECTIVES CHANGE OVER TIME; THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DEFINITION, EFFICACY AND ROLE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN SUSTAINING DIVERSITY

Another – more philosophical – approach to thinking about social movement efficacy and survival is what I have referred to here under the broad heading of the 'shifting goalposts'.

Assessing the efficacy of social movements (especially those with rather broad emancipatory agendas – feminism, anti-racism, a 'green' future, etc.) always begs the question of the criteria we are using to judge their progress – what counts as progress in the realisation of their agendas....

For example, how do we assess progress in a social movement such as feminism, particularly where this relates to its impact, not so much on institutional and legal changes, but on the changes brought about in human relations, especially relations between the sexes?

Since progressive movements seldom seem to advance their emancipatory causes in a form which is thought to coincide with the visionary aspirations by which they were at a prior stage legitimated (and this, I think, may be particularly true in the case of sexual emancipation), the question arises as to whether later gains can, in any sense, be said to realise, rather than confound, earlier aims. And if they can, by what criteria might we want to claim this to be the case...

(And this raises the more general question - to which the deconstructivist turn in social theory has made us more alert – of how we formulate a view of 'progress' which can give due recognition to the cultural relativity of the conceptions we bring to it.)

Clearly, it would be a mistake to dwell too exclusively on the dislocations between progressive aims and the actual achievements of progressive movements at the cost of recognising the extent to which they can be fixed on

finite and absolute goals. The campaign for the abolition of slavery may have continued into the anti-apartheid and anti-racist movements, but it would be misleading to identify these later initiatives with the anti-slavery campaign itself, or to suggest that the latter had not been targeted on fairly precise – and now largely (though alas not as yet fully) realised objectives.

In this sense I would say that the more ‘open’ the goals of a social movement, the more space there is for the goalposts to shift, the more mutations in the way they talk about their aims and agendas.

For example, take the role of ‘heterosexual utopianism’ in C19th feminism, that is, the claim that the emancipation of women would bring about regeneration of humanity as a whole, and untold sexual bliss and harmony between the sexes. This was a central claim of nineteenth century feminist rhetoric and it was only really in the early C20th that those sympathetic to feminism, and feminists themselves, began to register the idea that ‘heterosexual happiness’ might have been more complicated than advanced by the forms of thinking about sexuality and sexual identity which had been introduced by feminist enlightenment. So we have early feminism being promoted by ideas about what it would achieve that came to seem in very notable contrast with the separatism and even demonisation of heterosexuality that marked second stage feminism. In much of second wave theory, heterosexuality has been presented as symbolic of patriarchy, oppressive of gay and lesbian sexuality, a disciplinary norm that may secure reproduction of the species, but does not speak to any preordained biological desire, and may run athwart it.

So what do we say on this ? That earlier feminism did not realise its goals of heterosexual reconciliation ? Or that it got the goals of feminism wrong ? Or do we say, no, actually some of their goals of heterosexual reconciliation have been realised, only realised along lines that the earlier discourses of feminism never registered, and which we no longer conceive as part of utopian aspiration ? (cf in this connection, J.S. Mill’s vision of heterosexual bliss in his *Subjection of Women*, a vision that most feminists today would find unbearably saccharine, patriarchally condescending, and limited in its

understanding of both the gender division of labour, and erotic pleasure - for more on this, see Kate Soper on 'Heterosexual Utopianism' in *Radical Philosophy* no. 69, p. 12.)

So, today, we might say that men and women, thanks precisely in part to feminism, have— to invoke Žižek's phrase — together 'gone through the fantasy' of a Millian imagined harmony in order to arrive — dare one say it — at a higher, or more emancipated, communion and enjoyment...

To look at the issue of social movement progress in this kind of optic, is to suggest that it is not so much that an emancipatory movement — in this case feminism — gets it wrong about what it will achieve in the way of improvement (in the case of early feminism, achieve in the way of improving communion between the sexes, etc.) — but that at the outset it is incapable of foreseeing the particular social/emotional forms in which any improvement will come about. It is not so much that it is deluded in the goals it advances at a particular stage, but that its vision of progress is limited by the historical and culturally relative conceptions brought to the goal itself.

To sum up: I am suggesting here that when looking at the ways in which the actual achievements of social movements like feminism seem to confound the aspirations and self-legitimizing discourses with which they are initially launched, one can adopt one of two perspectives:

- (1) The first approach charts the limitations and misconceptions of earlier aspirations relative to a truer understanding of aims and objectives that emerge at a later stage
- (2) The second approach directs us to the changing contents wherein the formal and open-ended categories of a progressive movement such as feminism may find themselves historically realised

The first approach sees society as containing inherent barriers to emancipation that have to be overcome/removed; the second sees the supposed barriers as being dialectically transformed through the advance of

the social movement itself i.e. there is a continual changing or re-perception of the goalposts.

Both approaches may be said to register, if not resolve, the dilemma of bringing the insights shed by a social movement such as feminism to bear on its own self-representations. The one does by directing attention to the 'real content' of its agenda which is ideologically veiled by utopian discourse; the other by looking to the changing content wherein the essential 'truth' of utopian discourse finds itself realised.

Both have their points of strength, but also their weaknesses. The first provides a clearer criterion by which to demarcate between more or less progressive developments within the movement, but is vulnerable to having that same logic turned against its own claims to know the truth of the feminist agenda. If the idea of reconciliation between the sexes misrepresented the 'truth' of feminism at an earlier stage of its advance, what guarantees that more separatist conceptions of these ends will not in turn be exposed as ideological misconstructions of its purposes at a later stage in history? The second approach avoids this problem by fixing on the imprecise and open-ended nature of the goals of feminism, but arguably only at the cost of being so elastic about criteria that it comes close to allowing the aims of the movement to be realised in any and every development it induces.

Recast in terms of the question about sustaining diversity, we might say that the goalposts are shifted to accommodate the diversification of aims and agendas as these arrive on the historical scene – but always at risk of so diluting the original goals of the movement that any more radical set of aims is merged in the actual – we end up with a rather uni-dimensional positivism of approach.

CONCLUSIONS

I haven't time to say much in conclusion, other than that I have been struck by the one-dimensionality of present culture, the falling away of any sense of an holistic alternative to current society. There is a new kind of naturalisation of the market economy, and the disappearance of any concept of 'ideology' is symptomatic here...

But there are other changes that some see as more encouraging, perhaps most importantly the use of the Internet. And the political scene can change very dramatically and unexpectedly, as for example in Eastern Europe in 1989.

My own sense is that the key role for social movement politics today is to be 'ends-questioning' rather than 'means-contesting'. The divisions across the spectrum of the main parties of official Party politics are disagreements about how best to achieve a broadly similar and agreed set of goals ('higher living standards'; 'a competitive economy', 'national security' and the like). Social movements by contrast have to challenge the very criteria by which such goals are defined and thus to call into question the cross-party consensus about prosperity and the 'good life'.

They need to inject questions about *what* it is that is wanted into political debates largely dominated by questions about *how* to secure a presupposed set of goals.

The really valuable thing for SMs to do is to introduce a new 'political imaginary': to envisage alternative ways of living and register these culturally. For example, as illustrated by my arguments about 'alternative hedonism' as utopian 'realism'.