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Activism and media

Book section

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Section Four: Introduction

Activism and Media

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Activism is a relatively new term, introduced in the mid-70s and referring to the ability to act and make or change history. 'It reminds us that the world not only is, but is made', as Gitlin (2003: 5) wrote to a young activist. However, what is implied here is theorized at the level of social change theory, social movement theory, or notions such as resistance, advocacy or protest (Kling and Posner, 1990; Tarrow, 1998; Goodwin and Jasper, 2003). In any case, agency and the makeability of society is central to any tentative definition of activism. As Jordan (2002: 23) points out, 'activism is generating the future of societies'. Activism, from this perspective, represents the practice of struggling for change and can be fueled by reactionary tendencies and aims, as well as progressive. The online participatory encyclopedia *Wikipedia* [1] is thus fairly on the spot when it defines activism as an 'intentional action to bring about social or political change'. It is appropriate to use Wikipedia here, as it is in its own right a form of media activism, driven by the copyleft Creative Commons ideals. Other forms of media activism include electronic advocacy, hacktivism, and culture jamming. But it would be reductive to only consider media activism here, excluding the crucial role of media and communication in activist strategies and processes of social change.

Although not the only form of activism, direct action or what Kluge (1982: 212) calls the 'immediate on-the-spot struggle', is nevertheless central to every historic struggle for new rights, as well as those for the extension – or the safeguarding – of existing rights (Mellor, 1920; Wallerstein, 1990). Whether it will be through (sometimes but certainly not always violent) protests and demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins, consumer boycotts, or non-violent civil disobedience, direct action is at the core of processes of social change. This, however, does not mean that activism is synonymous with direct action. There are also practices or forms of activism that are less direct action driven and operate more within the dominant political and judicial system. Examples of this are judicial activism – challenging the state and companies through the court, and lobbying – attempting to influence legislators or governments.

Processes of social change, activism and social movements, which in a sense can be seen as the institutionalization of particular struggles, cannot be viewed without taking into account the notion of revolution (Lenin, 1929; Robert, 1978; Wood, 1992; McLaren, 2001). The American, French, Russian, and Cuban revolutions have all in their own way radically changed society, not only locally, but well beyond the territories where they took place. Disrupting the vested hierarchies within society and other structures, not in the least economic structures, did, however,

come at a cost. The coercive and often very violent practices forcing the ruling elite to relinquish power and the bloody repression that usually followed revolutions, would be deemed unacceptable today.

In recent history, a delicate balance between on the one hand public pressure, confrontation, violence at times, and on the other hand the gradual pacification of the social, cultural, and political conflicts by the dominant economic, political, and judicial elites, was established within democratic societies (Harvey, 1989: 129; Rootes and Davis, 1994; Dahl, 1998). In this regard can also be referred to the 'Janus-head strategy' that activism increasingly adopts, 'combining strategic and partial incorporation with continued resistance and independent critique,' (Servaes and Carpentier, 2005: 10). For example, the adoption of ecological policies by most democratic countries or the legislative changes allowing same-sex couples to marry or adopt children, show that long-term struggles, waged by the green movement and the gay-lesbian movement, do ultimately (albeit gradually) result in societal change, at least within most democratic societies.

As these examples show, current struggles for social change relate to a much lesser extent to the dichotomies of labor and capital, of class, then was the case in past struggles (Hall, 2002). Some sociologists also point towards the general contentment of working classes in many Western countries (Galbraith, 1992), which might in turn explain increasing conservatism, exclusionism, xenophobia and fear of change amongst large parts of the working classes (Dahrendorf, 1987).

Issue-oriented struggles, identity politics and lifestyle politics, pose a very different – often moral or ethical – challenge to the dominant order than the classical conflicts between labor and capital did (Beck, 1994; Giddens, 1994). The pacification of these new more ethical conflicts is a complex and slow process, a balancing act of diverging interests, views, and convictions, more consensual then revolutionary. Social and cultural change has become even more so a process that involves changing attitudes, values and behaviors, hearts and minds of citizens (sic), after which the issues ideally permeate into the formal political agenda, leading to changes in the law.

As a result of these developments, and for other socio-economic and cultural reasons, violence has – at least in the West – largely lost much its legitimacy as a tool to resist or promote change. The recent fairly peaceful transitions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Lebanon (2005) are also proof of that, despite exceptions as the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia. This, however, has not led to a decline of direct action, on the contrary. Empirical research suggests that mobilization and protest by citizens, as well as civil society actors, is on the rise in advanced capitalist countries when compared to other periods in Western history (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998; Norris, 2002). Direct action – civic disobedience, demonstrations, protest-actions – is more than ever an essential tactic for any movement or activist to attract attention in the public sphere for the causes and aims they fight for. Political participation also partly shifted from involvement in political

parties and old social movements to engagement in civil society organizations, NGOs, specific campaigns, or a certain direct action (Norris, 2002).

Current social movements and activists no longer strive to achieve change through 'conquering' formal political power, such as the labor movement beginning of twentieth century or the green movement accomplished in 1980s. Subcommandante Marcos, leader of the Zapatista-uprising in Chiapas, stated in 1996:

> *We do not struggle to take power, we struggle for democracy, liberty, and justice. Our political proposal is the most radical in Mexico (perhaps in the world, but it is still too soon to say). It is so radical that all the traditional political spectrum (right, center left and those of one or the other extreme) criticize us and walk away from our delirium.*
> *It is not our arms which make us radical; it is the new political practice which we propose and in which we are immersed with thousands of men and women in Mexico and the world: the construction of a political practice which does not seek the taking of power but the organisation of society* (Marcos, 1996).

There is an apparent inconsistency in what Marcos sets out, as deciding on how society is organized, as well as enforcing or implementing those decisions, is very much at the heart of what politics and power is about. In effect, Marcos' argument is a manifestation of the Janus-head strategy, whereby a movement constantly applies outside pressure, while at the same time parts of that movement engage in a political process of dialogue. Both elements of the movement strive for the same goals, but with distinct political strategies. This interaction between dialogue and conflict is, in part, made possible because the movement has no ambitions to gain institutional power, become incorporated by the political system or overthrow its adversary.

This also had to be seen against the backdrop of the so-called end of ideologies or, as one author asserted optimistically, even the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992). While neo-liberal authors proclaimed the victory of capitalism and democratic rule, Giddens (1994b) pleaded for socialism to fully embrace the (corrected) free market and move beyond the left-right dichotomy to regain or retain political power. In a bid for the narrow margin of floating voters, party policies of dominant parties tend to converge towards the political center, thereby obscuring ideology (and power) from the public debate (Faux, 1999). Others argue against this and promote a radically pluralistic public sphere where political differences, tensions and conflicts of interest – still present in every society – are made explicit again (Mouffe, 1999).

Crucial to current 'non-institutional' politics, as Offe (1987: 69) calls it, is the need to strategically essentialize and defragment often disconnected struggles. In this regard, the anti-/alter-globalization movement can be considered as the first clear attempt to provide an ideological framework to structure and connect

a 'multitude' of current struggles (Held and McGrew, 2003; Hardt and Negri, 2004) and thus construct an alternative citizen-oriented discourse to the hegemonic neo-liberal recipes.

In recent years, with the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas-México as a catalyst, we have clearly witnessed a new surge in transnational resistance and the transnational organization of civil society actors (Holloway and Peláez, 1998; Guidry *et al*., 2000; Smith and Johnston, 2002; Clark, 2003; Della Porta and Tarrow, 2004). This is, of course, not a totally new phenomenon (Boli and Thomas, 1997; Keck and Sikkink, 2000). For instance the 'Socialist International' was a more or less successful – albeit fragmented – attempt to internationalize the class struggle. Another example of an early transnational movement was/is the movement for women rights – seeking to extend citizenship rights for women and later fighting for the equal treatment of woman in society. From the 1970s onwards the green movement – also operating at a transnational level – has managed to strike a chord in many countries. The increased ability of civil society to transnationalize its practices and discourses of resistance, aided by information and communication technologies, should not be exaggerated. Even though transnational or international initiatives are increasingly relevant and crucial to counter the dominant neo-liberal paradigm, and to have an impact at the international level of governance, the national, local initiatives and local direct actions are equally important and often also more effective in getting results. Many of the issues being addressed today are, however, often transnational in nature or at least requiring a transnational resolution (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002).

Media, in this context, can be understood both as a medium to communicate, propagate and interact, as well as a battlefield – a 'symbolic arena' – for the struggle to signify, where meanings making sense of the world and ideas of what citizenship entails – from a national, but increasingly also from a regional or global perspective – compete.

In order to grasp the complexity of the panoply of civil society actors, as well as their very different strategies and aims, analytical distinctions such as online/offline, alternative media/mainstream media, new media/old media, need to be overcome. For direct action to be successful, it is important to have own means of communication and self-representation, but it is equally important to use the mainstream media in order to communicate beyond the cosy circle of likeminded sympathizers (Gitlin, 1980; Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993).

The Internet and its effect on activism have received a considerable amount of attention in recent years amongst scholars (Hill and Hughes, 1989; Meikle, 2002; van de Donk *et al*. 2004). Many civil society organizations are, however, conscious that the use of the Internet is burdened with many constraints, of which access and fragmentation are the most obvious. As such, they diversify their media strategies to also include more traditional forms of media such as print or radio (Cammaerts, 2005).

Activism can, however, not be confined to the media-realm. Establishing trust amongst activists, collaborative arrangements between organizations and diverse forms of direct action need the offline, as much as the online. As often, it is the interaction between the two binaries of the dichotomy that is most relevant and crucial towards organizing, mobilizing and debating resistance.

Notes for Section Four: Introduction

[1]   See http://en.wikipedia.org/activism.

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