

Review:

Laurence, Cox (2018) *Why Social Movements Matter: An Introduction*, Rowman and Littlefield International Ltd, paperback, 150 pages, ISBN 1786607832, 9781786607836, £19.95

Why *do* social movements matter? Cox draws on his own extensive experience as an activist and academic to argue for the enduring importance of social movements in our lives. This accessible book urges us to build alliances across the particularisms of specific movements and learn from the 'struggles of others' to help us to 'keep stepping out' into the streets and, ultimately, to help us keep going.

Cox begins with connecting to the personal, emphasising the human and everyday nature of movements, as well as the human qualities common in people who participate. He also explores the human needs met by movements and describes how we 'make and remake ourselves' in the struggle. I found his idea of movements as 'collective self-creation' (p10) particularly powerful; this idea of questioning and resisting the forces that want us to remake ourselves in line with corporate or marketing agendas. Cox argues that movements are processes of education and emancipation, that this is an educational process of learning to question power relations or cultural norms, and to take action, or resist. The learning happening in movements is collective and interactive; it is praxis.

One of the central arguments in the book is the concept of learning 'from each other's struggles', a process of 'collective learning across time...as they make themselves in struggle', so transmitting learning from one generation to the next, across movement alliances, across history, time and place. Cox also talks of the disconnection rampant in our societies, and how capitalism

alienates and disconnects us. He argues that involvement in movements, building alliances and learning from the struggles of others can reconnect us to each other as human beings.

Cox then takes the lens out further to take a wider, global, and historic look at the role played by social movements in shaping our history and constructing the world we live in today. As he says 'just how far the world we live in is the product of collective struggle is a necessary starting point for understanding our own world and the effects of our own past actions, to think through how we remake it in our present struggles, and to see more clearly what it means to be human'. (p17) By setting the historical scene, from the Haitian revolutions against slavery in 1798 to the revolutionary wars of the nineteenth century, the dismantling of Empires by the radical Left in 1915/16, the new social movements of 1968 and the role of right-wing populism, Cox situates the entrance of neoliberalism and the need for a 'movement of movements' and collective learning between movement actors to tackle the new challenges we face in late capitalism. Later in the book he also talks about the difference between movements from 'below' and movements from 'above', describing the dangers of co-optation, commodification and conservatism. (p80)

The book explores in detail the relationship between social movements and formal political parties, with a focus on the relationship with the institutionalised Left. Here he argues that parties that are willing 'listen and learn, rather than propose eternal truths' (p55) will be more effective in the long run. He also points out the anomaly that the Left originated and emerged from movements, yet now somehow stands as separate; morally and structurally superior. In order to move past this alienation, Cox encourages those who come from the Left to 'learn to understand their own knowledge and practice more deeply as the sedimented product of earlier popular

struggles, and to translate it back for present generations'. He urges the Left to think about what it genuinely offers social movements, and for movement actors to reclaim the left as their territory (p59). I enjoyed this 'sedimentation' metaphor; how the layers of movement experience and knowledge persist throughout history, like layers in peat or soil.

Cox also talks about the importance of a way of thinking and theorising that is continually linked to practice and collective action. In fact, one of his chapter subheadings is, 'Human action as a way of thinking' (p74). He argues that Marx's most transformational thinking is around 'praxis orientated thought' (p74), and that our thinking and theorising about movements must always centre collective action, practice or collective agency.

In the chapter 'Movements and the Mind', Cox looks explicitly at the complex relationship between social movements and the university, including the experience of activist academics of which he is, of course, one. He points to some thorny issues: how academia can be parasitical of movement knowledge, and the need to tread carefully and be aware of power dynamics. He goes on to say, 'our task is to question the fields we are in and their wider social purpose; to seek to reclaim academic territory for movement purposes' (p105).

Cox concludes by reflecting on the way forward and argues for the need to find connectivity with other struggles, to 'look elsewhere, outside ourselves and our own lives' (p107), and to recognise that our liberation is tied with the liberation of others. We are asked to find 'a better sense of we', and to hold tightly to the confidence that comes from that. He also speaks of, and has great respect for, the remarkable human tenacity to keep picking ourselves up. He talks of his own struggles to keep going, to keep stepping out the door and into the street and into movements: 'Often enough, the challenge arises in

the middle of daily life, and it really is a question of recognising it, thinking politically and taking appropriate action rather than doing what we are expected to do. It is, in other words, the challenge of actually being ourselves in that moment, and not who other people would like us to be'. (p113) This misleadingly slim book packs in a lot and will be of interest to community workers and educators, people involved in local campaigns who might or might not call themselves activists, and those of us who navigate the complex boundaries between movements, universities and research.

Kirsten Maclean

PhD Candidate

Centre for Health Policy

School of Social Work and Social Policy

Strathclyde University, Glasgow