

# Conclusion

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# Conclusion

## **A New Deal for social welfare movements?**

As the worst global financial crisis for eighty years broke over the heads of national governments in 2008, some commentators lamented the absence of a social movement in a position to forcefully pose alternative solutions. Where were the forces today that would pressure governments and banks to mend their ways? Which mobilisations will prepare the conditions for an alternative to neoliberal social welfare in the way that struggles around unemployment, poverty, sickness, housing and education prepared the ground for the Beveridgean welfare state (see Part 2)? In the past, the labour movement largely preformed that role. It had focussed its efforts on the strategic power of the state as the medium for social reform. Through long and difficult struggles a major plank of its programme was realised with the foundation of the welfare state (see chapters 1 and 2). Its influence was further acknowledged in the post-war institutional collaboration between state, labour and capital known as corporatism (Harris, 1972).

In earlier periods of economic crisis, such as the 1930s Depression, class and state were the locus for emerging mass solidarities (chapter 4). Some contemporary commentators see an 'uncanny' parallel with the 1930s, with important historical lessons for today.

The Roaring Twenties that preceded the crash of 1929 was the first great age of consumer and corporate debt – and the last 10 years was the second. In the darkest days, people buried their money in coffee cans in the back garden, while workers from the northeast of England marched on London in what came to be called the Jarrow Crusade. (Parker, 2008: 75)

A further parallel has been drawn between the 'recapitalisation' of the banks in October 2008 and the New Deal in the US of the 1930s. In both cases the previously sacrosanct principles of the free market were unceremoniously abandoned. Another ominous parallel is the return of the spectre of mass unemployment. By 1933 anything between one-quarter to one-third of the US labour force were out of work (Galbraith, 1961). The resulting social collapse was graphically captured in John Steinbeck's novel and, later, John Ford's film, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Against this a new social movement of unemployed labour materialised. Twenty thousand veterans that had fought in the First World War marched on Washington in 1932 to demand that a service bonus be paid now that they found themselves in dire need only to be brutally attacked by the army.

With the election in 1933 of Franklin D. Roosevelt a series of progressive reforms known as the New Deal were implemented to help stabilise the economy and alleviate the suffering of the poor and the unemployed. As part of what is called Keynesian demand management, the New Deal created public works that allowed the unemployed to earn an income which they then spend and in this way help to reflate a depressed economy. Better this, the managers of state and capital thought, than their rebellion turn into a revolution. Political mobilisation and sit-down strikes against lay-offs also played their part in the creation of the New Deal. In many parts of the country the concessions represented by the New Deal further incited desperate people to help themselves. Unemployed Councils were set up all over America. As one writer at the time described unemployed activism in 1932:

If an unemployed worker has his gas or his water turned off because he can't pay for it, to see the proper authorities; to see that the unemployed who are shoeless and clothesless get both; to eliminate through publicity and pressure discriminations between Negroes and white persons, or against the foreign born, in matters of relief ... to march people down to relief headquarters and demand that they be fed and clothed. Finally to provide legal defense for all unemployed arrested for joining parades,

hunger marches, or attending union meetings. (quoted by Zinn, 2001: 394).

Hence the example of the American New Deal has a contemporary resonance. For instance, the pattern of financial crisis that has engulfed Argentina since 1995 has been followed with an ascending curve of protest and collective action among the unemployed (Garay, 2007).

Nevertheless, the forces that prepared the conditions for the New Deal or the Beveridgean welfare state do not represent a model for the revival of social movements everywhere and at all times. There remains an ongoing need for detailed empirical studies and rethinking of social policy in the light of an inter-related understanding of social movements, mobilisation and social reform.

### **The contribution of social movements to state welfare**

*Understanding Social Movements* has attempted to overcome evolutionary, ahistorical and inadequate accounts of the relationship between social movements and social welfare. Social movements have made a significant direct and indirect contribution to both how social welfare is understood and how state welfare is utilised. Welfare movements emerge to dispute or issue claims about some particular aspect of social policy. What all the campaigns, events, groups, protests and values share in common is that, perforce, they enter into a conflictual relationship with the state at different levels: local, regional, national level, and, as chapter 11 shows, global scales of analysis. In some cases, movement leaders can end up as a collaborator rather than an opponent of state policy. Such assimilation happened to labour leaders during the post-war phase of corporatism and, later, to movements around sexuality, gender or 'race' movements in the Equal Opportunities industry (see chapters 8 and 9).

A further hallmark of social welfare movements is that they also contest the authority of expert knowledge (chapter 5). Again this is viewed as a particular characteristic of new movements. What this obscures is that many earlier

movement contested both the legitimacy and the veracity of authorised experts. Unemployed campaigns frequently dispute what counts as adequate social security and the institutional arrangements for redistributing resources (chapter 4). Elite educationalists were challenged by the broad movement for comprehensive schooling, within which the labour movement played a considerable part (chapter 7). On the other hand new social movements are also said to mobilise considerable expert forms of alternative knowledge in their own right (Law, 2008). This can take the form of protests on the basis of public health against scientific expertise, as in the case of research by two of us into recent campaigns against the public health hazards represented by mobile phone masts (Law and McNeish, 2007).

Again, there is nothing especially new in this. In the case of health, for instance, the NHS was only established after the ideological and legitimating conditions were established by the activities in the 1930s of radical medical pressure groups like the Socialist Medical Association and the Committee Against Malnutrition. Here medical experts used their knowledge and positions to advance the case for socialised medicine to alleviate unnecessary working class suffering. The Committee Against Malnutrition organised large public meetings in the 1930s while the Socialist Medical Association, operated mainly within the Labour Party as a pressure group, whose ideas would form the ideological and medical conditions for the creation of the NHS (Stewart, 1999). That it later changed its name to the Socialist Health Association in 1981 indicates the shifting emphasis after the 1960s, not least under the impact of feminism (chapter 5), from a medical model to a more socially-oriented model of health and well-being.

What appears astonishing about welfare movements is that their action alters the familiar arrangement of things. Reforms are enacted, professional practices are changed, bureaucratic procedures are simplified, new values are adopted, closure programmes are stopped, or resources are more fairly redistributed. Individuals are released from their fate to be passive, submissive, obedient, grateful objects of social policy to become more active, confident, articulate agents of political, institutional and professional change.

Welfare movements have an invigorating effect on state welfare. Such an open-ended approach to social movements means that the emergence of a radical culture of challenge to failing economic conditions cannot be precluded now as in the past, as was the case, *inter alia*, in Glasgow 1915 (chapter 6), in South Wales in 1935 (chapter 4), and in Seattle in 1999, Genoa in 2001 and Edinburgh in 2005 (Introduction and chapter 11).

Does this then lend support for Piven and Cloward's (1979) claim that poor people's movements only win reforms when they are spontaneous, innovative and disorganised, directed at tangible local targets? Our examples in this book do *not* generally support Piven and Cloward's central contention about the bureaucratic demobilisation of poor people's movements. In chapter 4, for instance, we saw how the NUWM constituted itself in a highly organised fashion, with conferences, rules, subscriptions, newspapers, and paid officials it remained a catalyst for protest in the form of the hunger march, pavement sleep-ins, building occupations, street battles, and vandalism. When the NUWCM dropped the word 'committee' from its name it tried to move away from autonomous activist led-branches of the early 1920s. But NUWM centralization was always partial and subject to the initiatives of the local activists (Flanagan, 1991: 167; Croucher, 1987: 104). In any case, the unemployed were impelled by events to collective action in their material interest to defend or improve relief levels without waiting on instructions from a centralised leadership.

In some ways, the example of unemployed protest supports the claims of 'resource mobilization theory' (chapter 3). First, the NUWM harnessed the material incentives that the unemployed had for engaging in collective action. The fight by the unemployed for adequate subsistence was clearly 'a politics of the belly'. It was rational for the unemployed to take whatever action they could to improve or defend benefit levels. Second, although the unemployed seemed to lack material resources, especially funds, in fact the leading unemployed activists, the 'movement entrepreneurs' if you like, possessed considerable organisational resources; many of them were experienced socialists, unemployed syndicalists and ex-shop stewards. Crucial here is the

active external role of left-wing cadres in providing organisational and ideological resources that 'the unemployed' did not spontaneously possess. Again, something similar occurred in the role of labour movement activists in anti-racism struggles and campaigns for health, housing and education (chapters 5, 6, 7, and 9).

In still other ways, however, RMT fails to capture adequately the vibrancy and idealism of welfare struggles. Of course such movements fought over immediate material needs. But, in so doing, they transcended the fight over this or that benefit cut, a mean-spirited regulation, or specific local grievances. These struggles were never purely strategic and instrumental. Every demand for social justice always contains an ethical dimension. As Matt Perry (2007: 5) acknowledges for the struggles of the unemployed:

Unemployed protest is in the first instance a struggle for recognition. The demand for adequate government provision for the unemployed was a call for respect and acknowledgement. It was based upon the premise that the unemployed suffered from a plight not of their own making.

Moreover, where analysis is restricted to the struggles of immediate milieu, say in particular benefit offices, hospital wards or urban spaces, it presents an incomplete and foreshortened picture. Protest is prematurely confined to only one stage, the most immediate and direct, neglecting the longer cycle of the wider and more circuitous route of the reform process. Movement influence has an uneven temporal dimension, from immediate struggles through to the effects that reverberate at a later stage when the whole set of circumstances have changed. Here the struggles of the 1930s and the 1940s helped to define ('Never Again!') the post-war political landscape. The struggle of the civil rights movements of 1960s and 1970s challenged the ideal of universal civil rights when so many groups were being denied equal rights – women, disabled people, national, ethnic and religious minorities. This was encapsulated by the Derry Housing Action Committee protesting against anti-Catholic discrimination in housing allocations in Northern Ireland, whose banner placed a question mark against the 1968 celebrations as the UN 'Year

of Human Rights?’ Meanwhile, as noted in the Introduction the world of today continues to feel the after-effects of Seattle (‘Ya Basta!’) as capitalism displays grave difficulties in maintaining itself as a system for organising socio-economic resources. By preparing the conditions for welfare reform, social welfare movements express epoch-making shifts in national social policy; in the 1940s this was on the basis of universal politics of social rights rather than discretionary charity (chapter 7); in the 1980s this was on the basis of a politics of cultural difference rather than discrimination (chapter 9 and chapter 11). Demands for social justice challenge the distributive mechanism of the free-market which had once seemed to be an inviolable law of nature. While the vast majority of welfare users are not politically active, neither are they exactly ‘free riders’, sitting it out at no cost to themselves while the militant minority inside a passive majority takes all the risks and pay the costs.

### **The mosaic of protest: State, Class, Identity**

This book has amply shown that no social movement operates in conditions of its own choosing. Movements are not simply a matter of voluntarism, of pure will exercised over inopportune circumstance. Movements are circumscribed and inhibited by a whole range of structural and institutional factors. Chapter 3 introduced the idea of a ‘political opportunity structure’ as one way of adjudicating the relationship between collective action and the political environment. A crucial factor is the nature of the state that movements face in the balance it strikes between coercion and consent. As we saw in chapter 1, accounts like T.H. Marshall’s the British state was gradually persuaded to grant its people, first, civil rights, then political rights and, finally, social rights. Clearly, the process of arriving at the classical welfare state was much more messy than this suggests. It had at its heart the struggle of ordinary people in urgent conditions of meeting the need for everyday necessities. Some of the historical contours of this struggle were indicated in chapter 2, although much more could have been said about the historically variable inter-relationship between mobilisations from below, the role played by intermediaries, and the changing nature of the state itself. That is a job not for a single book but for an



entire series of empirical studies of specific movements and theoretical reflection.

One way to compensate for the gaps and silences of the social movements that it proved impossible to accommodate in a single volume is to convey a sense of what is at stake in the debates over social movements. Each substantive chapter has sought to provide answers to the questions of how to theorise movements introduced at the end of chapter 3. You may have noticed that the chapter titles in Part 2 all begin with 'Fighting ...' while in Part 3 they begin with 'Contesting ...'. This reflects the subtle shift in vocabulary around new social movements, displacing the more confrontational language of the earlier movements with the vaguer discourses of the later ones. In the latter case, oppositional language and practices do of course occur. One of the main threads of our empirical studies has been the question of just how 'new' are the new social movements covered in Part 3 compared to the supposedly 'old' social movements in Part 2. Any attempt to hold on to a dichotomy of old versus new movements risks submerging the material aspects as the precondition of struggles over welfare provision. The redistributive politics of class threatens to be displaced with the cultural politics of difference and the economics of inequality by the politics of civil society (Powell, 2007). Contrariwise 'old' movements based on class, above all the labour movement, can be condescendingly dismissed as lacking a concern with identity, culture, dignity and recognition. Hence the 'moral protest' emphasised by new social movement theory, if not practice, can have an air of disdain towards supposedly amoral working class movements.

By neglecting the skein of class society, 'post-materialist' accounts of social movements seem to express what Bourdieu (1984) called the cultural capital of middle class theorists, elevated above the crude, undignified business of the crude fight for material necessities. It could be argued that post-materialism is a skilful mark of class distinction rather than an accurate reflection of the disappearance of class as a locus of political struggle. Perhaps as global capitalism retrenches under the impact of economic crisis and recession a less superior attitude will be taken to the strategic kind of

collective grievance emphasised by Resource Mobilisation Theory (see chapter 3).

In practice, alliances are formed between direct action protest, the 'movement entrepreneurs' as social movement theory calls them (chapter 3), socialist groups and working class communities. Chapter 10 demonstrated such an alliance in the case of the anti-roads protest in the so-called Pollok Free State. Chapter 9 situated the case of anti-racism struggles within the changing political, cultural and economic conditions of working class life in post-war Britain, including the galvanising role played by members of small left-wing parties like the Socialist Workers Party in initiating the Anti-Nazi Leagues and Rock Against Racism. Chapter 11 showed how in the case of Seattle and the 'global social justice movement' an often fragile alliance can be built between labour activists and environmentalists, between Teamsters and Turtles in that vivid case. In our introduction we also briefly discussed the past decade or so of popular protest in France in order to indicate the confluence of forces contending around state welfare and how they cooperate, learn to frame their grievances and adopt tactics from each other in struggle.

At the other end of the debate, particularly on the question of poverty where crude materiality predominates, resistance to professional power and expertise can often take forms that stand apart from the contentious politics of formal social movement organisations as we have conceived them. Like the Equal Opportunities apparatus, a poverty infrastructure has also emerged that encompasses intermediaries, professionals, bureaucrats and functionaries. Pressure groups like the Child Poverty Action Group form part of a pressure group lobby that attempts to highlight the unacceptable levels of impoverishment and deprivation in society and influence government policy. Within health, a blurring of boundaries is also apparent between user-groups and voluntary sector organizations (see chapter 5 and Barnes et al, 2007). Others like Benefit Rights Workers and Citizen Advice Centres advise and represent the interests of poor people in negotiating their way through the quagmire of benefit rules and regulations to claim entitlements. Such intermediaries necessarily substitute for the self-activity of their clients.

Institutional changes in entitlement processes, especially the removal of discretionary powers, have altered the political opportunity structure for claimants themselves to organise collectively.

### **Protest unbound?**

Some have largely discounted the unemployed or the labour movement of the twenty-first century from ever again mounting any challenge to mass unemployment, insecurity or diswelfare (cf Bagguley, 1991). Since the 1970s institutional restructuring and bureaucratic centralisation have all but closed down the spaces that provide a focus for discontent and make possible mass solidarities and cultures of challenge. Claiming on an individual basis at a remote distance from decision makers has made self-organisation much more difficult compared to the 1970s let alone the 1930s (Bagguley, 1999). The Claimants and Unemployed Workers Unions active in the 1970s stressed their autonomy, participative structures and ideological opposition to the forced take-up of low paid employment (Jordan, 1999); characteristic of new social movements perhaps but also self-consciously modelled after the NUWM of the 1930s. Moreover, their alternative culture and radical nature can be exaggerated. Many Claimants Unions were preoccupied with the day to day business of advocacy and casework without combining with agitation and direct action as earlier movements had done.

But even the ideological and organisational space for this type of culture of challenge to market orthodoxy has been curtailed over the past thirty years. After all, and notwithstanding the massive Anti-Poll Tax campaign, Bill Jordan (1999: 217) has argued: 'Public protests or campaigns are rather easily suppressed; if miners and printers failed, why should unemployed people believe they can succeed, especially in the absence of support from trade unions or political parties?' Instead of looking to the structures of the welfare state for redress through their own organised collective action, the unemployed can find individual solutions to their predicament by opportunistically working in the informal economy while claiming, strategic separation of couples, begging, petty crime, and busking rather than complying with state parsimony and regulation.

Such everyday 'weapons of the weak' appear to some activist-academics like Jordan and Piven and Cloward as a form of resistance which frustrates the market-led policies of the state. They invert the negative connotations of the 'underclass' discourse and valorise the recalcitrant quality of the more informal cultures of the poor. This has been given further theoretical ballast in Hardt and Negri's (2004) idea of 'the multitude'. Instead of confronting the authority of the state directly through collective organisation, resistance by the 'multitude' is preoccupied with micro-level, guerrilla tactics of 'nomadic' struggle of anonymous masses on the move, above all migrants, that can swarm the chaotic, lumbering structures of the Empire and subvert it at any point. Such a curiously intangible and vague notion as that of 'the multitude' did have a short-lived appeal for the some among the Seattle generation. In such ways, direct action can sanction an abstract voluntarism, glamourising the theory of the deed, over praxis, the political process of mutual reasoning that comes from the close interweaving of theory and practice.

Against uni-directional explanations of social reform and mobilisation, an important lesson of this book is that the possibilities for resurgent social movements should never be entirely discounted. The very process of organising can open-up spaces of resistance where perhaps none seemed to exist before (see chapter 4). This is what gives movements their astonishing or miraculous character (see Introductory chapter). Even where conditions seem unpropitious movements can emerge; it is only retrospectively that they appear to be an inevitable outgrowth of their times. Even in the 1930s social movements differed radically from each other according to the national context. In Germany, all independent social movements were physically annihilated after the Nazi's came to power in 1933. In France, the radicalisation of protest in 1936 brought lasting reforms to the social security system that even now right wing governments like Chirac and Sarkozy challenge at their peril.

In contrast to the more favourable political climate of New Deal America, the unemployed movement in Britain faced a deeply hostile national political

environment. The NUWM were demonised by the press and even the official labour movement, which sought to demobilise the unemployed. Activists braved considerable personal risks, including imprisonment, police violence, victimisation, and loss of benefit. The gains that were made for millions of people in these years were a direct result of the action of the active unemployed minority itself rather than sympathetic politicians. This hostile national political context in Britain indicates the limits to the idea of a 'political opportunity structure' introduced in chapter 3 as a necessary precondition for collection action. In the face of widespread political hostility, determined collective action by a sizable militant minority of the unemployed itself helped to reshape the political context. Importantly, they were only able to effect this due to a localised focus on Boards of Guardians and PACs. The local state, in other words, provided a tangible political opportunity structure for recurrent mobilisation at a level beneath the centralised national state (see chapter 6; Bagguley, 1991).

But by the first decade of the twenty-first century, so the argument goes, declassed new social movements on the one hand and the market-driven politics of the neoliberal state on the other hand has left a vacuum of political legitimacy for collectivist politics. Class, it is claimed, has been de-centred from its former position at the centre of the political universe (see chapters 3 and 11). Since the late 1960s, the working class has been comprehensively restructured and fragmented by upward social mobility, service sector employment and the international division of labour. In response to the earlier crisis of the mid-1970s the state has progressively removed from the free play of market forces much of the apparatus of national protectionism and social welfare. Into the breach stepped the new social movements, expressing concerns with trans-class or 'post-materialist' problems of identity, culture, feelings, values and ethics, or 'militant particularism' (chapters 3 and 11). Moreover, standing in between the state and social movements are the incorporated but dependent forces of pressure groups, lobby organisations, partnerships and organised policy forums (Barnes, et al, 2007). While we warned against making a fetish of rigid definitions in the Introduction, intermediate social and political forces between the state and welfare users

ought *not* to be considered social welfare movements. For us they lack the oppositional politics of contention that are the hallmark of any social welfare movement.

### **Where now?**

*Understanding Social Movements* has shown the continuing relevance of social movements to struggles over welfare. It has done this *historically*, allowing a richer sense of the discontinuities and similarities between old and new movements. The proliferation of movements contending around welfare rights in recent decades – over gender, environment, ‘race’, disability, sexuality - should not be either entirely subsumed to social class but neither should their intimate relationship to class society be gainsaid. The book has also *theoretically* outlined competing perspectives for *understanding* social movements and social welfare. How movements emerge, organise, endure, and decline has a certain pattern to it, perhaps best captured by Tarrow’s idea of a ‘cycle of protest’ (chapter 3). Here the material dimensions of grievance and organisational resources remain indispensable preconditions for the incentives and means of welfare mobilisations.

We have also presented *empirical* evidence in the substantive chapters of Parts 2 and 3 on social welfare movements. As the case studies repeatedly show even the debate between US and European theory (chapter 3) can become too one-dimensional for understanding the dialectics of mobilisation. Ideas, values and recognition *and* material interests and organisational resources are important grounds for mobilizing around the claims of entitlement that citizenship embodies. This is far from the politics of the symbolic gesture that is supposed to characterise distinctively *new* social movements. Social welfare movements are always related to concrete struggles over immediate demands for resources in one form or another. Social movements and the contentious politics of social welfare will be continually replenished by renewed patterns of economic recession and new rounds of mass unemployment and welfare austerity. It is therefore imperative that social movements are more adequately absorbed into our understanding of the essentially contested nature of contemporary social policy.

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