Dear PPW Comrades:

This is a brand-new paper that has all of the pitfalls of being brand-new. In the interests of posting this in time (or as much in time as possible) the citations are incomplete. I had set out to revise a little bit *a paper I presented in Manchester last year that I'd love to try to publish at some point. It was full of empirical detail about affordable housing activism in New York, though it also had--as a theoretical lens--the cultural-historical activity theory I reference in this paper. But that's about it. I went back in the paper, and about three and a half manic days later, I've emerged with a paper with no empirical case and all theory. I think I just had to get it off my chest. But now that I've done this, a three-day writing jag is a terrible thing to waste. I'm thinking of trying* Theory and Society *or Sociological Theory*, or even *Mobilization*. What, apart from clearer structure (though suggestions for this are welcome!) *does this paper need to get it to one of those places? And, crucially, am I making any sense at all? Does the theory need an illustration or can it stand on its own here?*

Thanks!

John

PS. I had internet connection problems this morning...sorry for this being up late, after all!

Deeper than Dilemmas:
Toward a Critical-Pragmatic Sociology of Movements

John Krinsky
City College of New York

Paper prepared for the Politics and Protest Workshop, November 12, 2015

Introduction

It is often amusing, in a strange sort of way, to be involved in social movements as a sociologist *of* social movements (and other things, as well). What's funny is the deep disconnect between social movement studies and the movements that are studied. For all of the ink spilled for the last forty years of social movement research, many of the findings and theories in the field would simply strike activists as fairly obvious, and would cause them less consternation than they do academic researchers. The key idea behind Political Opportunity Structures--that divisions among elites would provide room for social movements' expansion--would not be surprising.[1] Neither would the ideas behind frame alignment theory, i.e., that activists' preferred framing of issues faced by movements are more likely to catch on with others if they seem empirically plausible, and if they fit with the central stories that these others tell themselves. Even the findings that are less intuitive, for example, Piven and Cloward's warning that movements that formally organize—a property of the social movement form itself, according to Charles Tilly—are likely to become co-opted precisely via the same elite splits that allow for the opportunity to organize publicly, though widely read, is more honored in the breach.[2]

To be sure, there is work in social movement studies that is read, and that speaks to activists' concerns. Jo Freeman's essay, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness,"[3] is really more of a statement of a general sociological argument applied to the radical feminist movement of the early 1970s, which strove, in an effort to avoid hierarchy, to banish organized structure from its meetings. Freeman's essay has outlived that moment in feminism: it has been circulated online for almost twenty years among anarchist and autonomist activists whose organizing has been informed by feminism, but also by the kind of left-Michelsian fear of formal organization that animated Piven and Cloward's work in *Poor People's Movements*. Whether or not Piven and Cloward's work speaks adequately to the range of ways that movements can organize, and whether or not it is—or ever was—correct in its diagnosis of the failures of the US left (or of

[1] See Sidney Tarrow, *Power In Movement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[2] Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: How They Succeed, Why They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).
[3] Jo Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," available online at

movements in general), one of the things that makes it, and Freeman's article compelling is that they grow out of and address actual movements. In addition to being scholarly pieces, they are political interventions. Far from being compromised by their political stands, the works are classics in part *because* of them.

This paper aims at a more penetrating diagnosis of this problem. And it *is* a problem at least insofar as many movement researchers wish to make tangible contributions to the movements they study. Of course, this is not always the case, and nor should it have to be, not least because at least some researchers of social movements study movements with which they *disagree politically*. Indeed, the challenge of crafting a political and social analysis of social movements that matters is perhaps greater for scholars writing about movements with which they sympathize. All manner of issues arise, including what the demands are of solidarity (e.g., when *not* to publish), what is the viewpoint of the scholar as opposed to others in the movement, and whether publishing in an elite space is, in the end, an act of symbolic violence or a kind of epistemological usurpation.[4]

Many of these issues are significant and it can be difficult for scholar-activists to find the right balance within them. But by and large, the study of social movements does not even get to these problems. They are, in some sense, "external" problems—dealing with scholar-activists from the standpoint of their scholar-ness (if indeed, there is an "activist" side). This paper, instead, starts from an internal critique. It will address several attributes of current trends in the sociology of social movements that are obstacles to the formation of a political and practice-oriented approach. It explores why the sociology of social movements is so generally *apolitical*, and locates the problem in three areas: its methods of abstraction, its treatment of temporality, and its understanding of agency. The article will then briefly propose outlines for a sociology of movements, inspired by Marxism and by Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) in developmental psychology. In brief, the paper argues that the sociology of movements must shed its recent embrace of microfoundations; short-term, strategic temporalities; and ontological individualism in favor of a more open, dialectical approach that emphasizes learning and development among social movement subjects, as well as obstacles to their development.

Three Aspects of Apolitical Analysis in the Sociology of Social Movements

Jeff Goodwin and Gabe Hetland recently published a paper in which they document the "strange disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies."[5] After showing that capitalism appears in a decreasing frequency in articles on social movements in top journals dedicated to the topic, they argue why understanding the dynamics of capitalism still matters

---

[4] Cite SMS special issue

[5] Jeff Goodwin and Gabriel Hetland, "The Strange Disappearance of Capitalism from Social Movement Studies," pp. XXXX in *Marxism and Social Movements,* edited by Colin Barker, Laurence Cox, John Krinsky, and Alf Gunvald Nilsen (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

with respect to efforts to understand the development of the LGBT movement—a movement whose "cultural" referents are often taken as a signal that "material" determinants are somehow less relevant to its analysis. Of course, talking about capitalism is not the be-all and end-all of being political. But Goodwin and Hetland at least raise the issue of why it is that, from a subdisciplinary point of view, studies of social movements no longer take seriously the larger milieu of movements--and of the state-society relations produced by capitalism as whole--even as key issues of inequality and class have again begun to move toward the center of movement concerns. To abjure these discussions, moreover, is to avoid a problem that is frequently of deep concern to activists themselves--and at the center of both Freeman's and Piven and Cloward's conerns--namely, whether or not, by their actions, movement activists inadvertently reproduce rather than challenge the very patterns of social behavior they target. As increasing numbers of non-social-movement scholars have observed, a great deal of the morally driven civic engagement that has both fed and grown out of movements since the 1960s has been recuperated into contemporary capitalist governance and markets, whether in volunteering that enables "lean government," the development of niche "green" product marketing, or in class- and race-exclusive discourses of "women's empowerment."[6]

The failure of social movement studies to craft a *political* science, so to speak, is perhaps most ironic because so many of its practitioners are scholar-activists or reflect on years of activist practice. Here is not the place to understand the roots of this problem. Rather, instead, I will focus on three areas of social movement theory where recent trends toward finding "microfoundations" and "mechanisms" of political contention have pushed social movement studies into a technocratic and taxonomic mold.

Abstraction

Abstraction refers to the way in which analysts understand the scope and scale of their object of study. Abstractions are the means by which we take chunks of experience and social relations from a reality that is necessarily complex and huge. Science depends on abstractions, and they can be more or less useful at different scales and for different purposes, including political ones. Accordingly, different abstractions have their partisans. When Margaret Thatcher famously said, "There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first... There is no such thing as society,"[7] she did so in order to argue for a small-government approach to solving problems that individuals faced. To her, these were not *social* problems, as "there is no such thing as society." It is an argument for certain kinds of abstractions over others, one that locates problems at the level of individuals and those close to them, and one that argues, in effect, that larger-scale abstractions are not "real".

---

[6] Cites to e.g., Andrea Muehlebach, *The Moral Neoliberal*; Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*; Nancy Fraser…

[7] Cite this http://blogs.new.spectator.co.uk/2013/04/margaret-thatcher-in-quotes/

In the sociology of social movements--and across sociological inquiry--a growing trend has seen the search for "microfoundations" or building-blocks that, when combined, can describe larger wholes. The search for microfoundations of sociological inquiry is, at this point, both venerable and widely accepted, and has grown steadily--perhaps uncoincidentally--since the 1980s. While the particular microfoundations, or even conceptions of microfoundations, proposed by sociologists are not necessarily agreed upon and settled, there has been a growing consensus that the search is a worthy one. As Randall Collins writes: "Everyone's life, experientially, is a sequence of microsituations, and the sum of all sequences of individual experience in the world would constitute all the possible sociological data." Collins continues: "Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a "state," an "economy," a "culture," a "social class." There are only collections of individual people acting in particular kinds of microsituations–collections which are characterized thus by a kind of shorthand."[8]

Collins's influence can be seen more recently--and in social movement studies--in the work of James Jasper. Jasper has suggested that a great shortcoming of social movement studies is that it abstracts poorly, relying too much on the "shorthands" of macrosociology and too little on understanding the kinds of microinteractions that shape social movement strategizing. For Jasper, understanding microsituational "dilemmas" can reveal actors' strategies as they come together and fall apart as collectives and as they face choices that entail specific, predicable costs. For Jasper, dilemmas arise as "players" engage with each other in "arenas," which are usually face-to-face or physical settings (though they are occasionally institutional settings such as courts or the media which may or may not involve face-to-face interaction). Players are usually individuals, and are foundationally so. There are "compound players," which occasionally act *as if they were collectives*, but they are mere compounds of individual motivations and tradeoffs that compel participation. For Jasper, then, the "real" abstractions differ little from Collins's. And yet, to his credit, Jasper puts his finger on a wide range of dilemmas familiar to movement activists, and does so in an almost taxonomic way. For example, what Jasper calls the "media dilemma" entails the problem that political actors face in needing the media to get their message out, and, at the same time, being at the mercy of the media's framing—and distortion—of that message, which can be understood, in turn, by the actions of journalists, editors, advertising executives, etc.[9]

In a quite different fashion, some of the pioneers of macrosociological and meso-sociological analysis of social movements--those who argued that large scale social changes such as the rise of capitalist relations, urbanization, printing, wars, and bureaucratization prompted elite divisions, the centralization of states, and ultimately the democratization processes that created the modern social movement--became convinced that a

---

[8] Randall Collins, "On Microfoundations in Macrosociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 86, 5 (March 1981): 987.

[9] James M. Jasper, "A strategic approach to collective action: looking for agency in social-movement choices" *Mobilization* 9, 1 (2003), pp. 1-16; also James M. Jasper, *Protest: A cultural introduction to social movements* (New York: Polity Press, 2014).

different kind of microfoundation was important for satisfying social explanation of contentious politics. Doug McAdam, Sid Tarrow, and Charles Tilly's *Dynamics of Contention*[10] project proposed three levels of mechanisms that, when brought together in different combinations, produced robust compound processes, such as "identity formation," "de-democratization" and "democratization," and "scale-shift." For McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, there were "cognitive," "relational," and "environmental" mechanisms that have causal importance and can describe the "how" of social change.

Cognitive mechanisms "operate through alterations in individual and collective perception," including "attributions of opportunity and threat"; relational mechanisms "alter connections among people, groups, and interpersonal networks" and include crucial mechanisms like "brokerage" or the joining of two previously unconnected social sites; and environmental mechanisms are "externally generated influences on conditions affecting social life." For McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, then, the search for microfoundations differs from that of Collins and Jasper. While they believe that they can decompose larger episodes of political protest into constituent mechanisms, they do not suggest that "real" abstractions occur only on the level of interacting individuals. Indeed, for McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, the "actor" itself is an effect of social networks. They write that one of the "great paradoxes of contentious politics" is that "contingent assemblages of social networks create the illusion of determined, unified, self-motivated actors, which then proceed to act publicly as if they believed that illusion."[11] If anything, social interaction is prior to the individual here. Perhaps ironically, however, the *Dynamics of Contention* program also largely settles into a taxonomy of mechanisms, but ones that have less intuitive purchase and less of a clear, movement-experiential base than do Jasper's dilemmas.

Elizabeth Armstrong and Mary Bernstein point to a more general kind of mechanism, one that produces the kinds of tensions that can push activists into action. These are found less *within* arenas of action than *among* them. Their "institutional approach" to social movements advocates the disaggregation of larger abstractions like the "state" into component institutional settings, and then understanding the "contradictions" among these settings as their routines and rules fail to mesh without significant friction and slippage.[12] A similar dynamic is found among political scientists who wish to understand discontinuous change in policy environments, changes that are often pushed by movements. This is a point to which I will return momentarily.

Each of these analytic strategies has something to offer the study of social movements. Skepticism about larger structures pushes us to try to understand the experience of political actors or "players" and their mutual composition of "arenas." Attention to cognitive, relational

---

[10] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[11] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 159.

[12] Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Mary Bernstein, "Culture, power, and institutions: A multi-institutional politics approach to social movements," *Sociological Theory*, 26, 1 (2008): 74-99.

and environmental mechanisms, while perhaps not too far from the standard political process model's concern with political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing, urges us to see these as always dynamic rather than static. And attention to inter-institutional "abrasion" allows us to see the ways in which larger political processes can create opportunities or threats to political actors as they navigate competing institutional worlds.

Only McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly allow for abstractions at multiple levels, but when they do, they do not suggest any connection among these levels or any particular reason we should prefer some abstractions rather than others, or the uses that some abstractions have over others. If we take the metaphor of Google Maps, we might be able to say something important about the conduct of contemporary urban life by going to "street view" and observing the cracks on the sidewalks. Perhaps we might even count them. If we were to zoom out to see an entire block, we might see building footprints that carry with them a history of housing development and building regulation. Zooming out further, we might see neighborhoods separated by boundaries such as railroad tracks or less physical ones such as zoning codes. In all of these, we could observe the city over time. No one level of abstraction is more "real" than the next, but each requires a different language of description, and they are all part of a whole.

Concern over the relation of parts--our abstractions--to wholes is a great deal of what makes action political. Margaret Thatcher's plea for understanding the centrality of the individual and families in social provision was less a call for not providing for the poor, but instead a call for the state not to do so. For her, there was no such thing as "collective responsibility," only the "collected" responsibility of the only entity she understood as "real" to each other. Similarly, movement activists worry a great deal about parts-to-wholes questions; the idea that sociologists cut up the world into hypostatized levels of abstraction as the only real entities must seem strange. Activists worry about dilemmas and abrading institutional rules, but they also worry about the *sources* of these dilemmas and rules, in large part so that they can change them, rather than be caught in them forever (this is no less true for governments and other ruling elites, who often try to effect social movements "from above"). A lack of concern about relations of parts to wholes raises the question of whether the taxonomies of dilemmas in Jasper's work holds anything but the virtue of recognition, enabling activists to understand their present situation in more general terms (which, in most cases, they already do). If Jasper's approach is taxonomic, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly's approach is technocratic. It allows for the compounding of mechanisms into larger processes, such that one might be able to say, "Look, we've got all the ingredients here for shifting the scale of this conflict to much larger groups of people except we really need a broker!". But their approach requires a technical manual, too, and says nothing about how the issues at stake may affect the mechanisms at work.

Temporality

We do not just abstract scale. We also abstract time. Historical sociologists and social historians, often working on the margins of the social movements field, and sometimes outside of it altogether, have had an ongoing discussion about how to understand temporality in the

study of political processes. Metaphors abound. Temporal abstractions include images of longer-term "cycles" and "waves" of contention, continuous trajectories of struggle, and discontinuous "events," "turning points," and "strategic pivots." And like Armstrong and Bernstein's inter-institutional contradictions, political scientists Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek describe institutions that "abrade" against each other, producing new avenues for change, punctuating earlier equilibria.[13]

Again, all of these images resonate to some degree, depending on what is being explained. As with abstraction in general, it should be seen as folly to insist that one kind of temporality is important and the others not. Sewell, for example, advocated strongly for "eventful temporality" in the 1990s. Events were crucial for understanding historical development, he said, because they were the focal points for longer strands of historical causality that, once entangled, spun history off in new directions. By the 2000s, however, he had come to understand that satisfying historical explanation has to take into account the longer-term stability of capitalist relations; the contradictory hyper-eventfulness of contemporary society and the longer-term preservation of the basic characteristics of capitalism is, for Sewell, what must be explained.[14] Similarly, Jeffrey Haydu argues that certain kinds of problems--we might even call them dilemmas--recur regularly, suggesting longer-standing, basic cleavages in politics and society. For problems such as "labor exploitation, patriarchy, environmental degradation, and welfare provision…a focus limited to generic mechanisms underlying contentious politics will give short shrift to each case's place in a distinct historical trajectory, its roots in a distinct cultural setting, and its inheritance of distinct movement legacies."[15]

Once again, the proponents of microfoundations generally do not have a lot to say about how we should conceive of time beyond a general approval of eventful temporality and a preference for the short-term and non-enduring. The focus on face-to-face interaction (or the equivalent in directly mediated interaction) suggests a decomposition of time as well as of the scale of interaction. Collins's "interaction rituals" are reenacted over and over so that the "chains" they form *appear* like social structures that endure by themselves, but again what is important to study--what is real, rather than apparent--are the short-term instances. Similarly, Jasper's dilemmas are choice points, and these have a sell-by date in real life. The opportunities opened up by dilemmas, even if they are both suboptimal, may disappear as other players make decisions that impinge on your own. There is no question that sometimes, even often, this is true. But without a way of dealing with longer-term social stability and change, politics becomes mere tactics and rhetoric; there are no stakes.

Agency

---

[13] Orren and Skowronek; also see Pierson
[14] William H. Sewell, Jr., "The Temporalities of Capitalism," *Socio-economic Review* 6 (2008): 517-537.
[15] See Jeffrey Haydu and …. ; also see Haydu

In their article on agency, Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische explicitly link agency to orientations toward time.[16] They argue that agency can be decomposed into action oriented toward repeated or reiterated patterns of past relationships and action, toward the future, and toward the present. They call these orientations "iterative," "creative," and "projective". They talk about agency as a "chordal triad" of these three orientations. As with a musical triad, the "same" chord can be played in three different ways, depending on the arrangement of the three notes from high-to-low. The emphasis and tone changes, but each note is always present.

There are several important potential contributions of this perspective, which draws heavily on American pragmatism. The first, is that it makes clear that agency always involves all three orientations toward time. There are situations in which one "note" or another in the triad is dominant, but one cannot reduce agency to a kind of present-oriented maneuvering. For agents, history matters, and so do projections of themselves and the world into the future. Second, as the tones of triad blend, it becomes clear that past-orientation does not *only* involve the recognition, selection and implementation of past patterns of interaction--often at a lower level of intentionality and consciousness--but also *memory*, which has collective aspects to it as well as projective ones.[17]

Emirbayer and Mische's schema of agency, while not quite as radically decentered as McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly's "contingent assemblages of social networks [which] create the illusion of determined, unified, self-motivated actors," is nevertheless quite relational, and ultimately adaptable beyond the abstraction of the individual. From this schema, one can think about a collective acting with triadic orientations toward time and switching these depending on the setting; one can also think about the ways in which, among larger collectivities, the emphasis on one or another notes of a triad is distributed among its component parts, or even that conflicts arise both within and among these orientations. Marshall Ganz's conception of "strategic capacity" in social movement organizations suggests this.[18] For Ganz, among a leadership group, deep networks among a population being organized are important for generating "salient knowledge" about their lives, and extensive networks are important for generating ways of "recontextualizing" this knowledge in creative ways; but without "motivation," neither work. For Ganz, strategic capacity is a distributed property of certain leadership groups that activates iterative, creative, and projective capacities of its members.

Emirbayer and Mische themselves emphasize the "projective" moment in the triad, and specifically reference Pragmatists such as Mead and Dewey. Quoting the latter, they write: "Experience in its vital form is experimental, an effort to change the given; it is characterized by projection, the reaching forward into the unknown."[19] Importantly, too, for Dewey, this

---

[16] Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What is Agency?" *American Journal of Sociology* 103, 4 (January 1998): 962-1023.

[17] See Emirbayer and Mische, p. 984, note 15.

[18] Marshall Louis Ganz, AJS article or book...

[19] John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey,* edited by John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 69, quoted in Emirbayer and Mische, p. 188.

projection is at once an effort to change one's "given" environments, but also, in the process, to change oneself. Relationally speaking, you cannot do one without the other.

It is rare for social movements scholars to spend too much time delving into agency; it is usually taken for granted. For the proponents of microfoundations, Emirbayer and Mische's overall model could be met with sympathy. It is compatible, at least in broad outlines, with abstracted subjects at almost any level of abstraction. Jasper's dilemmas--which can sustain some level of aggregation and "compound player," though how big is too big is not clear--emphasize the iterative and creative moments of agency, and take for granted, in a way, the projective one. For Jasper, actors in movement *of course* want to change the world. But what is not clear is why--what the relationship is between their projections and the "given" they are trying to alter. Even for the proponents of political process theory, the urge to theorize about movements-in-general, rather than specific movements of consequence with specific kinds of projects, meant that grievances were always "given," and their characteristics and the experience of their characteristics were relatively unimportant.

Politicizing Movement Learning

What would it mean to come up with an alternative view of social movement activity that could at once make analysis more useful--because more political--and avoid the constraining pitfalls of current approaches? As I have suggested, to do so would take a more catholic view of scalar and temporal abstraction, seeing them as properly methodological rather than ontological, and would understand that agency *is always already* collective and distributed, and especially so in movements, and geared toward the transformation of the "given," including of the acting subject itself.

Though long-neglected (along with capitalism) in social movement studies, Marxist theoretical traditions are both making a small comeback, and can be of assistance here. Further, they--along with other radical traditions--are actively informing a great deal of movement activity around the world today. Taking these traditions seriously could mark a step forward into greater relevance for social movement theory.

At first, this claim might seem odd. The caricatured versions of Marxism (embraced, sometimes, by self-proclaimed Marxists, a fact that muddies the waters!) portray a strongly teleological theory in which the "base" of social structure--and particularly the economic structures of capitalism--determine the "superstructure" of politics, making the activity of actual people a kind of historical pantomime that unfolds along a predetermined script. Indeed, if the actors speak in their own voices, they are almost by definition voicing a "false consciousness;" the only consciousness that is not false is consciousness of the revolutionary destiny--or imperative--of the working class.

In fact, Marxism of this kind has very little to say to movements, and many movement participants find Marxists of this type to be unbelievably irritating, if not damaging to their causes. The frequently lethal repression--on a grand scale--under Marxism-inspired

"really-existing socialism" hardly makes the case for a return to Marxism convincing to skeptics, and particularly to the strongly liberal proponents of microfoundational sociology.

Alternatives exist. Importantly, in the contemporary work of Bertell Ollman, Paul Paolucci, Kevin Anderson and many others, we can recover a non-teleological reading of Marx's method and developing political understanding.[20] Further, in older Marxist work from the fecund period after the Russian Revolution but before its Stalinist consolidation, we can find figures such as Antonio Gramsci and Lev Vygotsky, who offer ways of thinking about politics and learning that increasingly speak directly to the concerns raised above in relation to abstraction, temporality, and agency.

Dialectics and Contradiction

Ollman emphasizes Marx's understanding of the world as a "totality"--a complex ensemble of relationships among people and between people and the natural world and cultural world we have developed, which includes past, present, and future relations. Accordingly, within this totality, there are contradictions: any relationship contains within it what it was, what it is, and what it will be; this is impossible under formal logic, but a key to dialectical logic. A totality is not static, but is always in motion, and the the direction of its relationships is shaped by the *potentials* contained within them for development, which, in turn, frequently clash with--or contradict--the present state of these relations. For Marx, "men make their own history...but not in circumstances chosen by themselves."[21] Not every potential is developed, but not every relationship is imbued with *infinite potentials*, either. Some contradictions are longer-lasting and deeper than others. Thus, interactions among social actors are not stochastic, independent events that only *appear* to be connected because we mentally connect them; many dilemmas recur precisely because they are manifestations of a deeper set of contradictions that characterize a system of relations beyond the arenas in which they appear.

Ollman notes further, that to grasp a changing totality is impossible. To analyze any of it requires abstraction, and we can--and Marx does--abstract on at least seven levels ranging from the intraindividual to the universal. Social analysis requires abstractions, but it does little good to be dogmatic about what level of abstraction is the "best." In fact, it is nearly impossible *not* to combine levels of abstraction in actual analysis: even Jasper, who is committed to drilling down as close to individual players as possible, is quite plastic about the abstraction of the arenas in which they interact. But, while it is less important to choose "a" level of abstraction, it is important to specify one's abstractions because there is a politics to it. Collins' *resolute* microfoundationalism resonates with Thatcher's neoliberalism. If there is no such thing as society, or social class, etc., it is exceedingly difficult to theorize exploitation, for example. Similarly, when Piven and Cloward adapt Roberto Michels's discussion[22] of the perverse potentials within broad movements for democracy--i.e., that when they organize formally, they

---

[20] Bertell Ollman, Kevin Anderson, Paul Paolucci
[21] Marx, "The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte"
[22] Roberto Michels, *Political Parties*

develop insular leadership that divert the movement's goals away from transforming undemocratic structures and towards accommodating them--they specified that they were writing about movements of the poor. The reason this is important is that in their specificity, they also linked their analysis to the failures of these movements in realizing the potentials articulated by their *projects*.

Of course, there is a problem with Piven and Cloward's application of Michels's Iron Law of Oligarchy: it is rather closed in terms of what potentials can be developed from poor people's organizations, even if it is an important cautionary tale. On the other end are Jasper's dilemmas, which allow for at least two choices to be made. They are like condensed moments of contradiction, but unlike Piven and Cloward, Jasper keeps them generic and unconnected to the actual projects of movement groups, and unconnected to longer-term dynamics (such as those of capitalist accumulation that Sewell finds critical to contextualizing events) that might give these dilemmas meaning.

Temporality and Consciousness

Haydu's "reiterated problem solving" or Yu-Sheng Lin's "reiterated dilemmas"[23] suggests an alternative: at least part of social movement agency requires learning over time from confronting similar dilemmas that are enduring features of a given political landscape. Thus, new potentials for development may become apparent, as models either from outside the collective actor's core networks are brought to bear on a given strategic problem (Ganz's heuristic processes) or syncretic ones developed from within them. Here, for example, we can see Jo Freeman's importation of basic organizational sociology in the early 1970s to radical feminist consciousness-raising groups in which she was active as a way to model a way out of the Michelsian assumptions of these groups, in ways still rooted in the group's own conception of its mission.

To say this also says something about consciousness, namely, that people do not always see their options clearly, and certainly do not see their best options--from the point of view of their own goals--clearly, either. A politicized social movement studies, in my view, has to be clear about this because we otherwise can slip into mere description and cheerleading, which might be nice and affirming but practically useless. But there are dangers here, as well. Specifically, we can lapse into the suspect language of "false consciousness." A much better alternative is Gramsci's conception of "contradictory consciousness," or the contradiction between what he calls "good sense" and "common sense."[24] For Gramsci, people often have a good sense of their own interests on a small scale, and based on their experience. They know that their boss abuses them, they know that they cannot afford the rent, and they know that they probably cannot afford the cable bill and their data plan, but go into some consumer debt to do so because this is the only way to stay connected with current events and friends in the old neighborhood where they can no longer afford to live. They also know that they angry about this,

---

[23] Cite Lin's SMS paper

[24] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* p. XXXX

and that the system seems rigged against them. The problem is that this "good sense" is often difficult to articulate because the language of "common sense" provides analyses and targets that are disorganizing and misleading. Accordingly, people operate with a mix of clear and magical thinking; their own informed intuitions and available, ideological articulations of political possibilities and justice. Political learning involves figuring out how to organize and articulate good sense into a renewed common sense. The problems lie in teasing out one from the other and in actually organizing alternatives. In any case, "good sense" cannot be imported from the outside--as a fully articulated Marxist catechism or anything else--as it is the sometimes-lived caricature of Leninism. Moreover, the strategic demands for the formation of a new common sense depends greatly on the organizational complexity of a given society, with more complex civil societies demanding a deliberate attempt to shift practices and discourse of the many, interwoven institutions whose complexity shapes our very sense of individuality and individual projects as well as what is politically articulable as collective actors.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

From the point of view of *learning* in social movements, one promising area of research is in Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), a branch of developmental psychology rooted in Marxism, and particularly in the work of Lev Vygotsky, an early 20th-century Soviet psychologist. Vygotsky, who drew on some of the same ideas as American Pragmatists such as Dewey, argued that the "higher mental functions"--i.e., beyond basic reflex, sensory, and enabling cognitive processing functions--were inherently social, both because they involved interaction with the world and other people in it, and because the relation between subject and object was always mediated by culturally available artifacts and tools, the most general of which is language. Vygotsky's student, Alexei Leont'ev, formalized this idea into a basic model of "activity"--a triangular relation of subject-tool-object in which the cogitating subject is itself given definition by its orientation toward its object and through the artifacts/tools it employs. CHAT is, at its root, a collective theory of learning. Based on a series of educational experiments and observations, Vygotsky argued that that learning entails *internalizing* representations of material social relationships, and forming concepts based on socially available mediations. Accordingly, what and how people learn will be distinct depending on their historical and cultural milieus, the social "scaffolding" that is available. Important, too, here, is the conception of agency: it is fully relational, but also congruent with the idea of a "chordal triad" of temporal orientations in Emirbayer and Mische's work, referenced above. The orientation to the object is projective; the necessary use of artifacts, creative; the foundation on rules, iterative. Drawing on Leont'ev's work, Yrjö Engeström has suggested several formalizing outlines of CHAT, including a nested triangle in which subjects, defined by their objects, act upon those objects via mediating artifacts, tools or signs. This triangle, in turn, rests on larger structures of rules and conventions, communities of interlocutors, and divisions of labor (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Activity System, from Engeström (1987)

Mediating Instruments

Subject

Object→Outcome

Rules

Community

Division of Labor
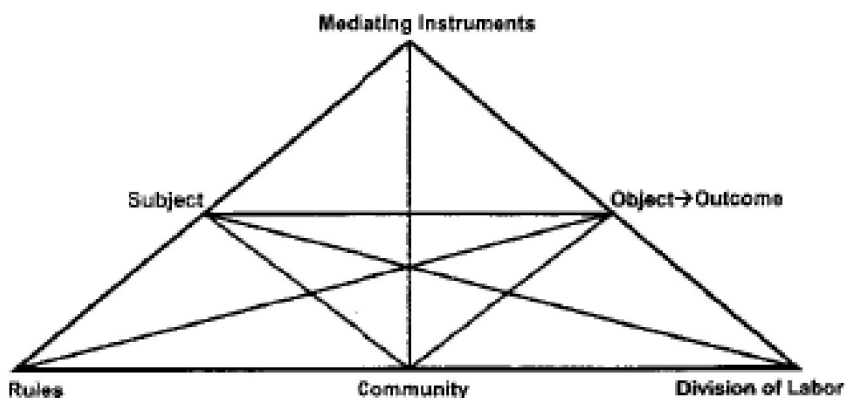
Importantly, however, the representation is a static one, while the theory suggests continual change. Engeström suggests further, that we can understand this change as a cycle, in which different sorts of contradictions appear in the system (Figure 2). In Engeström's *primary* contradiction, "business-as-usual" is transformed into a "need state," and one or another part of the "activity system's" internal contradictions comes into view. For Engeström, the contradiction of use-value and exchange-value in the commodity form comes into play here: in the workplaces he studies, for example, there are often contradictions at the level of the subject (questioning "Who are we?" or "Who am I?") as the intrinsic value of the work activity comes into conflict with the imperative to make money through that work, often for someone else. Thus, the primary contradiction between use- and exchange-value reverberates through the system affecting a contradiction within the subject as it directs itself to conflicting objects.[25]

In the secondary contradiction, the very questioning of the primary contradiction can reveal a web of contradictions, as subjects learn about the determinants of their perceived need, and multiple parts of the activity come into conflict. Rules, divisions of labor, the boundaries of communities, the identity of the subject, and the tools to approach an object all potentially clash, are found to be inadequate, or create double-binds. One would map these onto the lines connecting the components of the activity system in Figure 1. In the tertiary contradiction, new models for activity are introduced, including shifted goals, and these contradict earlier practice. And in the fourth contradiction, activities that may be "neighbors" run up against each other, as shared elements may require conflicting action.

[25] Yrjö Engeström, *Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research* (Helsinki: Orienta Konsultit Oy, 1987), online at http://lchc.ucsd.edu/mca/Paper/Engestrom/expanding/toc.htm

Figure 2. Activity Spiral, from Engeström (1987)
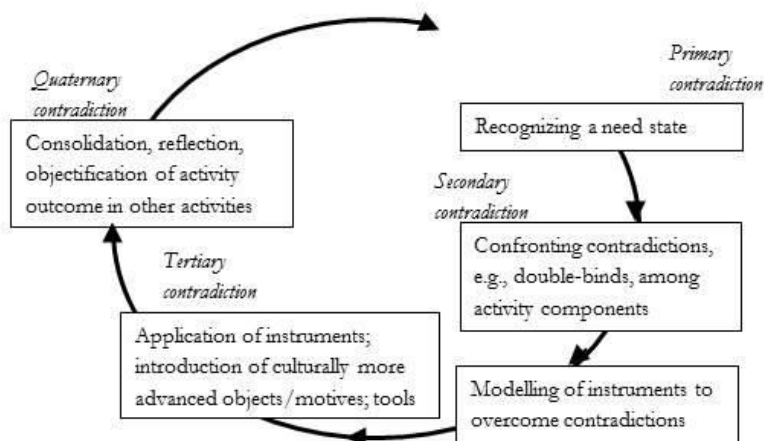
A CHAT-based approach emphasizes the ways in which activists collectively alter their understandings of, and activity on, their environments.[26] Several elements of CHAT are important, even without having to go into the nitty-gritty of the approach. Importantly, there is an emphasis on *development* and *expansion*, which means the mastery of new tasks at higher levels of complexity and relational effect. Expansion is driven by actors' confrontation of social contradictions at multiple levels of abstraction: sometimes they are intrasubjective as when subjects have incompatible goals. Sometimes, too, they are inter-institutional (where rules clash with each other, or where similar speech or other mediations, artifacts or tools can mean different things to different audiences, having contradictory effects); and sometimes they are more fundamental, as where "success" (e.g., saving a neighborhood from physical and financial ruin) can lead to failure (e.g., by making a neighborhood safe for speculative investment and unleashing displacement and gentrification dynamics), or at an even greater level of abstraction, where use- and exchange-values clash in the disposition of real estate. Often, actors are stymied. Addressing the problem of affordable housing activism, or "the housing question," Stuart Hodkinson writes:

> We seem to be going round in circles, pushing up against the same limits time and
> again. The relations of capital, labour and land under capitalism make housing

---

[26] John Krinsky, "Changing minds: cognitive systems and strategic change in contention over workfare in New York City." *Social Movement Studies* 7, 1 (2008): 1-29; John Krinsky and Colin Barker, "Movement strategizing as developmental learning: Perspectives from cultural-historical activity theory," in *Culture, social movements, and protest*, edited by Hank Johnston (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) ; see also Chik Collins, "Vygotsky on language and social consciousness: underpinning the use of Voloshinov in the study of popular protest," *Historical Materialism* 7, 1 (2000): 41-69.

alternatives difficult and politically tenuous. Yet, the experience of state housing as well as the precarious life of private homeownership and renting, along with the perceived impossibility of total systemic change, makes any alternatives seem desirable and worth pursuing in the here and now, regardless of their impact on capitalist social relations. It is a dilemma captured perfectly by John Holloway's (2010: 83) invitation to 'crack capitalism': 'Our only option is to fight from the particular, but then we clash against the force of the whole'

CHAT allows us to ask the question of *why* we keep "going round in circles" without eschewing the higher-order explanations that microfoundationalists reject out of hand. As with Gramsci's contradictory consciousness, CHAT argues, instead, that within social contradictions can be found *immanent or potential* forms of relationships that can become the basis of new ones, and that development entails changing social activity in order to realize them on a wider and more consequential basis.

Jasper objects that CHAT's

Marxist roots require ideas like 'immanence' and 'totality' which, unlike most of the theory's entities, can only be inferred and not observed. (Immanence is an activity's potential for self-transformation, something we can only surmise, I believe, if we also have a grand theory of history.) Finally, due to its structural components, CHAT is a theory of activity (of groups), not of action (by individuals). 'To make sense of human actions,' say Krinsky and Barker (2009, p. 216), 'we need to locate them within the larger activities of which they are a part.' If human action is meaningless unless or until it is aligned with a collective activity, we lose some of our ability to see individual actions at odds with the group, or to see the ways in which actions can pursue individual and collective goals at the same time. We still need an improved theory of meaningful human action before we can have a better theory of group action.[27]

Herein lie the dangers of resolute microfoundationalism and ontological individualism. Even proponents of a microfoundational approach to social movements (and sociology more broadly) argue that the larger aggregations that we use to guide our thought and interactions, even if mental constructions, are *useful*, if not for sociology, then for everyday life. But they do not go far enough. The problem is that these mental constructions--these abstractions--also require different kinds of language for their

---

[27] James M. Jasper, "Social movement theory today: Towards a theory of action?" *Sociology Compass* 4, 11 (November, 2010), p. 972; on the issue of the individual vs. collective in CHAT, which I do not take up here in detail, see Anna Stetsenko and Igor Arievitch, "The self in cultural-historical activity theory: Reclaiming the unity of the social and individual dimensions of human development," *Theory and Psychology* 14, 4 (2004): 475-503.

description. No one or the other has absolute ontological priority, either. As even mainstream psychology has found, what Vygotsky calls "higher mental functions"--all those functions that allow us to interact with each other--develop in the context of social interaction. Individuals--and even our conception of individuality--are as thoroughly social and historical as our experience of groups and the intrapsychological role strain that multiple group memberships may prompt is individual.

It is precisely in understanding the subject at *different levels of abstraction* that the contradictions and complementarities of specific activities--the complex of subjects, objects, tools, divisions of labor, reference communities and repertoires and rules--can become most *empirically* apparent. The presentation of Marxism as "a grand theory of history" is meant to be self-invalidating, and is meant to be as self-evidently invalid as larger scale political projects for transformation. Yet, it seems that in order *not simply to get stuck in dilemmas and contradictions, we require a theory that helps us to abstract to scales of interaction that expand our impact*. Deciding that no theory of history is necessary—the adjective "grand" aside, as it does not capture the essential dialectical nature of Marxist theory—comes with consequences. It means, in particular, two important things: First, that we have difficulty in judging what might be an *advance* for a movement or segment of a movement, even as we might also understand the potential costs of this advance relative to collective projects; and second, that we have trouble understanding why certain dilemmas recur.

Immanent Critiques

As with most formalized representations of theory, Engeström's has come in for criticism. One is that that progress of development in Figure 2 is both obvious and too linear. Other critics express concern over the limitations of the triangular representations of activity systems as too neatly bounding far more complex realities, and with the conception of activity systems as a unit of analysis. Another is that Engeström's "Developmental Work Research" approach to CHAT focuses too much on secondary and tertiary contradictions and tends to underplay the central political-economic contradiction with which the analysis begins. Thus, in its practical application, it loses its critical edge and becomes coopted as a management technology to enhance work performance in firms. In other words, critics often charge that it is not Marxist *enough*. Similarly, others, like Stetsenko, worry that the "subject" is already too well defined, suggesting that the dialectical interplay between subject and object begins simply to resemble the play of parts in a mechanical system.

Tiina Kontinen, however, proposes not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, but rather to take up the cues of James Avis and Jean Lave, who suggest the compatibility of Gramscian ideas with those of CHAT, and to revise key practices and concepts in Engeström's approach. She argues that Engeström's placing the "primary contradiction" of the use- and exchange-value of the commodity at the start of the cycle of expansion suggests a Marxian view

of base and superstructure that may be too limiting and that can appear to be mechanical rather than dialectical. On one hand, she notes that other contradictions may form the "need state" more immediately and not be reducible to the commodity relation. On the other, she argues that Gramsci's innovation as a Marxist was to focus on struggles over the "superstructure" and to understand that superstructure and base were a *dialectical unity* and only "methodologically" distinct. Accordingly--and this, I think, is central to cycles of expansive learning--struggles over and the resolution of secondary contradictions have the potential to *change* the primary one, even if it is *not* redefined.

Engeström and Sannino respond that turning attention to collaborative learning with social movements might meet some of the critical objections already outlined. Engeström, Kajamaa, Lahtinen and Sannino further distinguish among types of movements based on on their dominant modes of interaction (digital, print, face-to-face), organization (centralized, decentralized), and form of their objects (demands on the state, demands for justice, etc., direct reworking of power relations).[28] They suggest that the objects of these modes of social movements may operate at different scales and with different degrees of cohesion and ambiguity (where ambiguity sometimes enables cohesion)[29] Importantly, they link the form of movements to larger political-economic changes, but eschew the reductionism that ignores longer-term movements such as peasant movements in Latin America that seek to gain land and enable social reproduction on new terms, in favor of digitally mediated "networked" social movements such as the Occupy and "squares" movements in 2011. In other words, they emphasize the uneven landscape of capitalist development and its political effects. Indeed, by distinguishing among these dimensions of collaborative activity--including in the movement setting--Engeström and his colleagues invite investigation of the different kinds of collective responses to larger political-economic forces, without prejudging which specific forms of response are most radical and without requiring them to make the stark contrasts--which rarely hold up to empirical scrutiny--among types of movements (e.g., "old" vs. "new," vs. "new new" social movements).[30]

Thus, we can see that activity systems can be represented as networked and nested across scales of interaction. For analysts of social movements--as well as, potentially, for social movement activists--the heuristic of activity systems can be a useful tool in assessing where contradictions are, and therefore, where and why conflicts are likely to arise both within and across related activities. Beyond this, other concepts should and could be mobilized to describe the learning process. Among those in the Vygotskian framework that may be useful are the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) and the dialectic of internalization and externalization. The former speaks to Vygotsky's conviction that children did not conform to neat stages of

---

[28] See Smock (2005) for a different, but related typology of organizing in the United States, and Krinsky (2007) for a continuum of coalitional collaboration linked to the study of social movements.

[29] see Star 2010; also Stone 1997, PAGE).

[30] Katz (2004) distinguishes among resilience, reworking, and resistance as modes of engaging the challenges of social reproduction.

development depending on their ages, but could surpass their stages with the help of a more able peer or adult. The difference between what a child can do on her own and what she can do after having been supported by a more able peer or adult is the ZPD. In recent work on the January Revolution in Egypt, Brecht de Smet clarifies Vygotsky's understanding of instruction further:

> Vygotsky emphasized that instruction is only effective when it is 'proleptic'; when it anticipates or imagines competence through the representation of a future act or development as already existing: "[...] the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it; it must be aimed not so much at the ripe as at the ripening functions. [...] instruction must be oriented toward the future, not the past" (Vygotsky 2012, 200).

> Meshcheryakov (2007) distinguished between two forms of proleptic instruction: *autoprolepsis* and *heterolepsis*. *Autoprolepsis* is a form of self-instruction, whereby a child casts itself in the role of a future, more developed self. A classic example from ontogenesis is that of a child playing adult roles, projecting itself in a more advanced stage of its own trajectory. *Heterolepsis*, on the other hand, is the interpellation of a potential capacity of a child by another agent. For example: a parent speaking to her young child as if it were a more mature conversation partner, even though it has not yet (fully) developed the capacity to engage in such a dialogue. The potential development of the child is called into being by the proleptic instruction of the parent.

Relatedly, then, the dialectic of internalization and externalization in Vygotsky's work is important for understanding, as well, why sociological microfoundations are difficult to sustain. Vygotsky argues that concepts--or any higher mental functions--form originally as social relationships ("external") and are only subsequently "internalized." But rather than being internalized wholesale, and slotted into an existing cognitive architecture, as say, "norms" in Parsons and in some variants of moral psychology, these social relations--interpsychological relations--construct and reconstruct the intrapsychological terrain; this, in turn, changes the subject's orientation to social relations, and so on, down the line.

While Enegström's approach is heteroleptic--he uses his framework in consulting on work practices to create ZPDs in workplaces--his heuristic framework outlined above can combine the two: it can equally be applied to trace the autoproleptic actions of a movement group--often what gets cast as "prefigurative politics" in social movement studies--as it can to help organize (proleptically) self-inquiry in movement settings.

Applications

Space does not permit an actual demonstration of the usefulness of the theoretical approach I have put forward. This will have to be a project for another day. In lieu of this, and by way of conclusion, a few words on possible applications and results are in order.

Scalability

Though not originally intended for this purpose, Engeström's heuristics, and the theories upon which they are based, allow us to investigate movement phenomena at multiple levels of analysis. If we take activity as defined by its object--and here, it is important to think of the object itself as a "project," i.e., a goal that is more or less well-defined, but subject to adjustment--we can investigate the ways in which subjects define themselves in relation to their objects and how they approach them with tools and cultural artifacts at hand, and with what rules (formal or informal, including repertoires and logics of appropriateness of speech and action), and what kinds of divisions of labor. This can scale up or down, but it will not be a simple matter of aggregation. Indeed, while typically different language is needed for different levels of abstraction, the heuristics from CHAT--both the triangles and the cycles--can act as something of an analytical bridge without requiring smaller-scale abstractions to simply aggregate into larger-scale ones. At the same time, there can be "nesting" of activity, as compatible activities conceived at different levels of abstraction (e.g., keeping my home, fighting gentrification, decommodifying housing) may imply quite different compositions of subjects.

Keeping Time

CHAT analyses also do not have predetermined time-scales and can be shot through with multiple temporalities. In fact, the presence of a primary contradiction is usually understood to be more long-lasting than secondary, tertiary, and quaternary ones. Where the primary contradiction generating the "need state" is something as basic as the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value, it may never be resolved; it may even be difficult to apprehend--it does not become an *object* of activity--because of the many secondary, tertiary, and quaternary contradictions that develop as the activity develops, and may change as the activity changes. To take the example of housing, again: we take the commodification of housing for granted, by and large, but doing so creates the need to purchase housing, either through sale or rent. If we are in a position in which housing becomes difficult to afford--as many people are in larger, urban housing markets--the contradiction between housing as an exchange-value and housing as a use-value--creates a need state, or a problem to be solved. How the *object* of the activity ensues is defined, and how, consequently, the activity unfolds, can happen in multiple temporal registers. Getting a public rental subsidy, for example, does not change the primary contradiction, but it can certainly change the immediate object and the experience of the need state. The massive construction of public housing, on the other hand, whatever its pitfalls, would decommodify housing, and take exchange-value largely out of the activity. There will still be contradictions, but the primary contradiction might shift into that between accumulation and legitimation in the state. In the meantime, again, the object of activity could also shift from

securing affordable housing to securing *decent* housing that one can afford. This may take a different turn when dealing with the state, entailing different public constructions of the subject of activity and the community of those who share the object. This construction can be more or less expansive (there is no guarantee that the cycle of learning always expands!), moving, for example, from beleaguered tenant to citizen. These heuristics, in other words, can mediate among levels of analysis and scope of activity, and account for shifts in the focus, composition of, and construction of collective subjects.

Dialogue

Engeström and his colleagues clearly anticipated that CHAT, and his distinctive Developmental Work Research heuristics could be used as a consultative tool. Though the substance of his consulting work has been criticized politically, it points to potentials in this perspective for social movements scholars in general and for scholar-activists in particular. While I have not--yet--suggested using the framework as a planning tool for an affordable housing activist coalition in which I am active, there does not seem to be any reason that it could not join a host of other heuristic exercises for campaign planning and organizational self-assessment already in use in social movements. Opening up structured discussions among activists about what our objects are, and how those define who "we" are--and in the context of the challenges of identity politics, a more pragmatic way to begin--and what kinds of language and other tools we have at our disposal, we actually use, or could use, seems like a good place to start. Putting that on top of discussion of the rules, traditions, etc. to which we submit (necessarily or not), who else is interested in our objects, and how we divide our labor also seems sensible. Figuring out how, in our current practice, some of these clash with each other or are inadequate to our intended tasks, seems like an important exercise for most movement groups. If we then reflect about *why* the contradictions exist, we might well try--with the help of different models--to alter our practices. And, if we keep "going round in circles," we will at least have a sense of why that is, and perhaps be pushed to enlarge our activity further in an attempt to join our new "good sense" with that of others in other fields of activity.

Results and Contradictions

Most academic work on social movements will not take the form of spirited arguments with the scholar's "own" movement, while making a larger sociological point, as did Piven and Cloward and Freeman before them. And even they--whose work is read forty years and more after it was first published--were as successful as they were because they used sociological analysis to map and name key contradictions in their respective movements, contradictions between activities (defined by their objects) at different, nested scales of abstraction. For Freeman, the "small d" democracy sought by radical feminists was not served by eschewing all organization and hierarchy; instead, Freeman urged her feminist sisters to recognize that there was a strong structure to "structureless" organizations, and that the denial of intentional

structure in the face of actual structure, though the *common sense* of the movement, was actually at odds with the movement's *good sense*, in which there was a persistent suspicion that while new forms of organization were needed, it might not be enough simply to negate the old forms with their mirror-image. This was a matter of there being a secondary contradiction between rules and tools on one hand, and the object, on the other.

By taking CHAT's perspective on learning as an approach to the study of social movements--their decisionmaking, their form, and the relation between these and the political objectives of a movement, movement scholars can begin to do several things that have eluded the field as a whole, with several key exceptions. The first is to research movements in a way--with a process--that engages movements and does not just see them as objects of study. The second is to develop ideas about movements that do not look *past the movements' politics* as if their objects did not matter to their activity. A corollary to this is that we can understand activity on multiple scales and in multiple temporal registers. There is no reason to artificially decide that science demands short-term, individualizing microfoundations. Doing so is both symptomatic of the current phase of capitalist development (almost making a caricatured Marxist case about bourgeois science!), and denudes political action of its politics. A focus on *contradictions* rather than *dilemmas* allows us the flexibility to figure out the relation of parts to wholes allows the sociology of social movements to work in dialogue with movements, and not just as scientists pretending that our own work has no politics, and certainly no politics that we do not already understand perfectly. That movement scholarship has only rarely recognized the pitfalls in current approaches[31] has come at the cost of our being able to talk about our work beyond the walls of the academy.

---

[31] A significant exception to this is in the field of labor movements, but that has been disciplinarily apart in US sociology.