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Social Movement Learning in Union and Community

Coalition: An Activity Theory Perspective

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Social Movement Learning in Union and Community Coalition: An Activity Theory Perspective

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Abstract: Building on recent contributions toward the synthesis of cultural analysis of social movements on the one hand, and Marxist Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) on the other, this paper presents an empirical analysis of union and community mobilization in Toronto (Canada) (2003-2009). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with union staff, hotel workers and a range of associated social activist communities (n=30), the analysis summarizes the application of the CHAT approach.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT LEARNING IN UNION AND COMMUNITY COALITION: AN ACTIVITY THEORY PERSPECTIVE

INTRODUCTION

As the work of Krinsky (2007) among others has recently confirmed, cultural analysis of social movements retains as one of its important assumptions that dynamic, inter-individual learning is an important means of explaining social movement development and mobilization. Despite this, social movement studies has an uneven history of dealing with matters of learning. I begin with a brief review of this tradition, and claim there remains a need to identify and apply theoretical tools suited to dealing with complexity, contestation and change. I then argue for the relevance of a Marxist CHAT approach to social movement learning, and in the second half of the paper I summarize an application of this approach reporting findings on union/community coalition learning between hotel workers and community residents in Toronto. The analysis speaks to how this community/union coalition expanded its influence while contesting existing political and economic arrangements, how and why this coalition produced a period of vibrancy and radicalization.

RESEARCH ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND ADULT LEARNING

Hall and Turay (2006) have provided a recent summary of social movement learning research in the adult education tradition that need not be repeated here other than to say that it suggests somewhat limited connections between these fields. At the same

time, in the field of social movement studies, interest in learning has been uneven and at times ambivalent. As Goodwin and Jasper (2003, p.131) noted, social movement researchers have often wondered of participants: "What goes through their minds?" However, looking across social movement research we might be tempted to question just how deeply this question has been taken up in the tradition as a whole. Challenging the inadequacies of the earliest psychological approaches to mobs and crowds, Gamson, Fireman and Rytina (1982) registered a re-conceived role for social psychological analysis, learning and cognition stating for example that the "[l]ack of know-how means the critical mobilizing acts are unlikely to occur" (p.146). In Snow and Benford (1992), we see that frames are defined as "interpretive schemata" (p.137) suggesting a strong link to matters of learning, though Snow and Benford would later prove much more ambivalent on the matter (2000, p.57). Up until his last publications, Tilly for example maintained that issues related to learning were exogenous to the study of social movements; though a variety of others such as McAdams, McCarthy and Zald have offered statements of general interest in the role of learning in social movements. More recently, Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2007) concluded that learning represents "important phenomena" adding that "how [it is] related to collective action participation [is] insufficiently studied" (pp.166, 170). Generally speaking, where issues of learning are dealt with we find limitations imposed by conceptual approaches.

In an effort to synthesize learning and social movement analysis, the approach taken in this paper is based on Marxist Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (e.g. Sawchuk, Duarte & Elhammoumi, 2006; Sawchuk, 2007). This is a perspective explicitly "underwritten by [an] ideology of empowerment and social justice", the analytic centre-piece of which is an orientation to the "collaborative purposeful transformation of the world [as the] principled grounding for learning and development" (Stetsenko, 2008, pp.471, 474). More than simply a statement of political commitment, this approach is also a reflection of the specific ontological and analytic terms of reference for Vygotskian learning approach. There is in other words simply "no gap between changing one's world, knowing it, and being (or becoming) oneself" (Stetsenko 2008,

p.484). And here, I argue we find a robust confrontation with learning as individuated and adaptive, as well as the potential for fully integrating learning and social movement analysis.

The CHAT tradition of course comes with its own research language. It distinguishes *actions* and the conscious *goals* to which they are directed; un-self-conscious *operations* and the corresponding *conditions* to which they respond; and, the broader, socially established *object/motive* of *activity* to which the self-conscious chains of actions/goals and un-self-conscious operations/conditions are responding. Together they produce a dialectical, internally referential unit of analysis. In seeking to understand social movement learning from this perspective it may be particularly important to trace the internally related way that the processes of transformation of object/motives express a series of constantly emerging forms as well as specific projects expressing what people think they are doing (i.e. goals), how they go about doing what they do (i.e. operations) and the myriad artifacts through which both proceed apace. Activity being the minimal building block for this approach, the interest of this paper is to trace social movement learning as a series of instances in which people not only find and internalize but actively create and collectively externalize the object/motives of their various activities, and all the individual and collective machinations these processes entail. In this way we make analytically available insight into the evolving thinking, feeling, talking and acting that underwrite mobilization activities undergoing change. Necessarily muted in this short paper, we can nevertheless detect the applicability of a range of social movement studies concepts including mobilization repertoires, modes of resource mobilization, the role of political opportunity structures, and in particular, processes of contentious performance and framing.

THE CASE OF HOTEL WORKERS RISING AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR RESPONSIBLE DEVELOPMENT (CORD) IN TORONTO (CANADA)

This case study of community/union coalition building between 2003 and 2009 applies the framework summarized above. It is based on in-depth interviews (n=30) carried out in 2007-09, documentary analysis as well as direct observation. Interviews involved unionized hotel workers, union staff, community members as well as a range of additional Toronto-based activists engaged in the mobilization.

The story of this research in many ways begins in 2003 when UNITE-HERE[i] embarked upon its ambitious Hotel Workers Rising campaign[ii] that had as its goal to carry out massive, coordinated organizing drives to boost union certification in the industry across major urban centers in North America (e.g. Chicago, Boston, Toronto). This was in response to worsening work conditions against a backdrop of rising profitability and concentration of ownership[iii] (see Sawchuk 2009a). By all estimations this unionization drive has been successful, including in the City of Toronto. However, the backdrop of this success in Toronto also included significant social and economic polarization. In a city that attracts over 40% of Canada's immigration, between 2002 and 2007 almost 100,000 manufacturing jobs were lost while the proportion of working poor had grown significantly and poverty was becoming both concentrated in particular neighborhoods and intensely racialized. The city government, in turn, would go on to identify the 13 most impoverished neighborhoods for intervention. One of these is the Toronto neighborhood of Rexdale.

The analysis of social movement learning shows a merging of both crises and solutions that accompanied shifting needs, grievances and coalitions across the hotel worker union, a broad array of Toronto activists, and residents of Rexdale specifically. Beyond being a particularly impoverished neighborhood disproportionately composed of non-white and immigrant groups, Rexdale was now, particularly in light of the success of the Hotel Workers Rising campaign, also home to a significant number of unionized hotel service workers. Catalyzing events further was what in the social movement studies tradition would be understood as the political economic opportunity structure represented by the announcement by Woodbine Entertainment Group (WEG) of a new, $1B (Cdn) hotel, race-track and casino development project in Rexdale called

Woodbine Live. As the most expensive, single entertainment development in the city's history, part of securing the development was the Toronto City Council's tax grant of over $120M in exemptions to WEG over the successive 20 years. The contradictions inherent in both the lives of hotel workers and the lives of Rexdale residents were brought together through a series of transformations involving the Hotel Workers Rising organizing drive and, in turn, the creation of Rexdale's Community Organizing for Responsible Development (CORD) organization. These were transformations that would seek to challenge private sector developers as well as elements of municipal government on a series of political and economic principles. A culminating point of the analysis offered here is the matter of establishing what is known as a Community Benefit Agreement (CBA). That is, a legally enforceable agreement through which developers would be required by municipal government and further supported through hotel worker collective bargaining to provide for a variety of social benefits.[iv] The CBA, in this sense, was a major mediating artifact, a specific repertoire, imported from the New Haven Connecticut Center for the New Economy.

The goal of the UNITE-HERE campaign was broad. This union staffer explains that building on the Hotel Workers Rising campaign, the frame of mobilization activity had emerged with the following goals:

> …building local rank-and-file leadership and organizing are the key foci of the UNITE-HERE strategy... The campaign is about the broader struggle for power in the workplace which has to be broadened through an orientation to a struggle for power in the community. The focus became to move beyond outreach in terms of relations with the community...

Previous publications have detailed the different aspects of the social movement learning processes involved (Sawchuk, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). In this paper, I summarize the interacting and often conflicting relations of activity across multiple groups that provide an account of the contradictory mediations, overlapping activity systems, contested objects, and differential modes of (individual and collective) internalization

and externalization. From a CHAT perspective, these are summarized in Figure 1. This is a summary representation of the complex learning processes derived and synthesized from transcript analyses. In it training plays a role as part of a broader, shifting trajectory of social movement learning more broadly.

An important element of the analysis is the role learning amongst hotel workers themselves. In the context of the aggressive and highly successful union organizing campaign, hotel workers became highly energized, in many ways fueled by the emergence of incredibly vibrant social movement learning in action. In CHAT terms we see a rapidly expanding series of activities; shifting from initial conditions of non-unionized and fragmented work lives under increasingly difficult work to the construction of union culture, often across ethnic and linguistic divides, and ultimately union/community coalition. Each of these periods of learning is detailed by worker interviews where we see powerful effects of their appropriation of specific mobilization artifacts, the shifting of social and material relationships, and their individual and collective learning and development. In Sawchuk (2010) I show how the object/motive of activity shifts across these phases. Endemic to this is what in social movement studies is referred to a grievance construction processes; what in CHAT terms are understood as evolving processes of internalization of contradictory object/motives of activity and subsequent collective externalization (transformation) which produce new object/motives. In the case of each transformation, we find supports and barriers vis-à-vis specific mediated practices. Key mobilization artifacts (e.g. the Hotel Workers Rising Campaign, union training, English language development, the collective agreement; and subsequently the CBA) mediate operations and actions – specifically in a collective rather than an individualizing way.

Rexdale residents' (who were not hotel workers necessarily) learning also played are crucial role in the overall social movement activity structure. How did the various object/motives of UNITE-HERE's organizing activities relate to the distinct object/motives of the Rexdale residents? From the CHAT perspective we see initial, important differences between goals and the object/motives of union-based activity and

those of the activities rooted in the lives of Rexdale residents themselves. Why were Rexdale resident's becoming engaged in CORD/UNITE-HERE activity? "We wanted to be employed… educat[ed], train[ed]".[v] This is not an object/motive expressed by traditional bread-and-butter union activity per se; indeed, it had little to do with the initial goals of the Hotel Worker Rising campaign. But rather, through the Hotel Worker Rising drive and the contradictions partially resolved by emergent connection to CCNE-CORD, through the vigorous exchanges of people meeting, talking, organizing, protesting, the object of union activity had begun to shift perceptibly. That is, the object/motive specifically began to express the sentiment, as one Rexdale resident put it, that bringing together "people from different walks of life [is] valuable". The social movement learning thus entailed how union and community participants were both 'learning' about and from each other. Such lessons speak to how contradictions between these object/motives may be objectified, internalized, collectively externalized and potentially resolved through the construction of new object/motives of activity supported in the first instance by new structures of socio-cognitive mediation. As fundamental to understanding how new object/motives appear however are the types of operations that emerged, one of the most prominent being the transformation of "quiet" people who "then would speak": a specific learning transformation resulting from the alignments across many dimensions of the emergent system of activities. Knowing, thinking, understanding, feeling differently, becoming "hungry for knowledge and information" – these refer to matters of learning/activity only partially registered and more often presumed or ambiguously expressed in existing social movement studies as such.

FIGURE 1: The Competing Objects/Motive of Community/union

Coalition Mobilization & its Oppositions
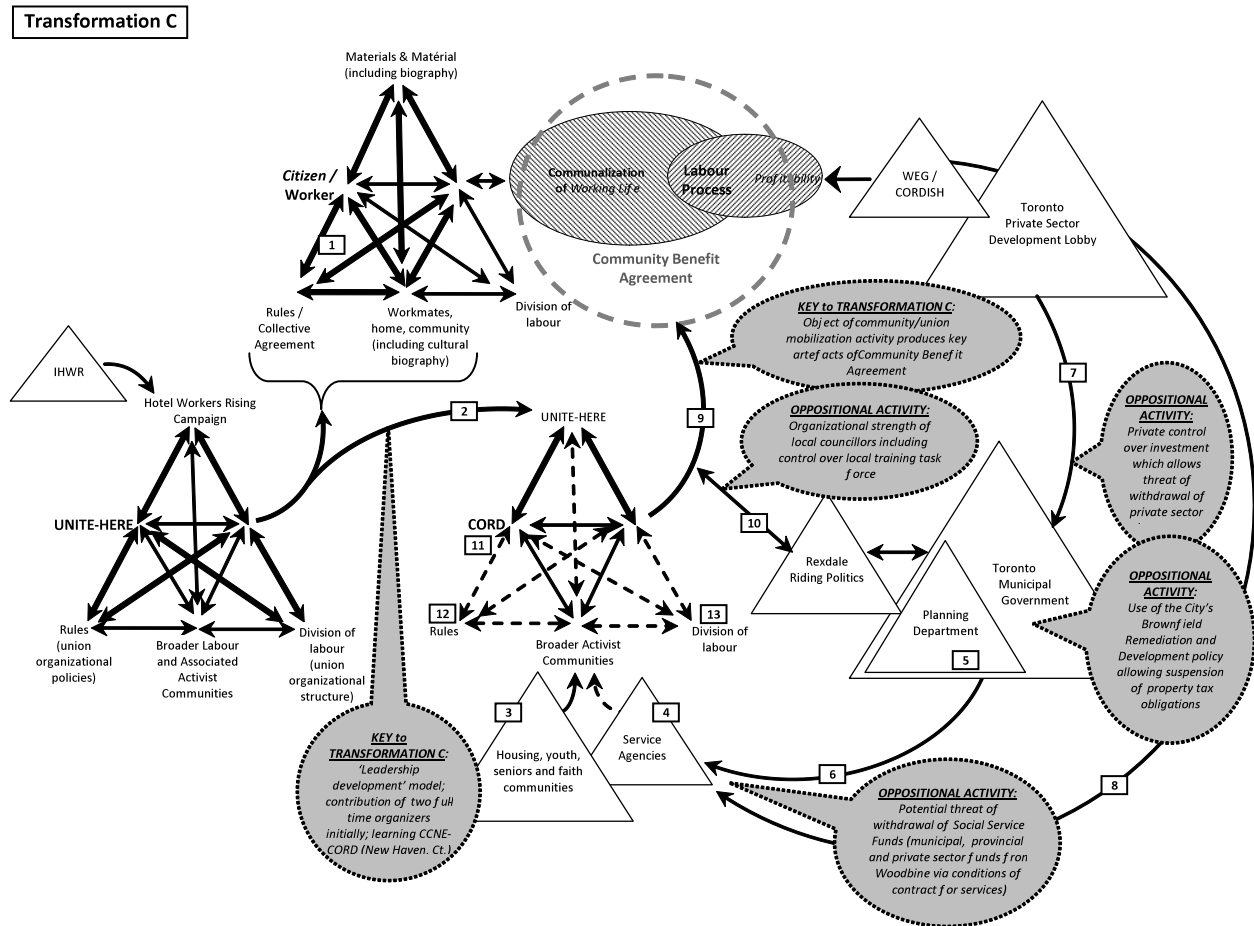
To adequately understand the social movement learning in this case, however, analysis cannot stop here. An additional matter that characterized the success or failure of the types of learning/activity changes that were emerging were contradictions between the goals and object/motives across a number of other activist groups involved in CORD as

well. A key example in this regard were activists linked to social service agencies within (and beyond) the Rexdale neighbourhood. These activists were people who managed or worked for various non-profit agencies that delivered services such as child-care, employment training, immigration or job counseling, second language learning and so on. These were people knowledgeable about community poverty issues, and in addition these were activists who enjoy a level of material stability from which to act (i.e. they have jobs as well as access to organizational resources). These activists were attracted to CORD for a number of reasons: to engage in a potentially innovative anti-poverty initiative, to help people, often with an interest in expanding service provision.

Looking more carefully we discover a number of contradictions at the object/motive levels of activity, at the level of operations as well as contradictions inherent in key mediating artifacts. On the surface, these contradictions seemed to revolve around the ability to "marry the two types of expertise" of unions on the one hand and community service agencies on the other. In CHAT terms, the entry point into why these coalitional relations eventually sputtered, however, is found in the fact that Rexdale community members appeared within the activity of these agencies as "clients", "consumers of a service rather than members". Specifically, residents are structurally positioned within systems of activity that – at the levels of operations, actions and object/motive – subject them to fundamentally different patterns of (strong and weak) mediation which produce specific trajectories of learning and development among participants (both service providers/activists and Rexdale residents/clients).

Finally, in addition to the overlapping hotel worker, Rexdale CORD, and social agency activist activity, there were also a variety of oppositional activities that came into play as well in the form of direct involvement with city government, the employer (WEG) and the development lobby in Toronto. Mediated by a number of separate artifacts – namely, ideological artifacts, rules that provided for the withdrawal of agency contracts, the suspension of tax obligations and even the threat of the "pull out" of WEG's (i.e. property rights) – what was expressed by the Toronto municipal ward councilors in Rexdale along with WEG representatives was an object/motive in which the notion of

social benefit goals (i.e. the goals of the CBA and possibly collective agreement as well) were contested. The analysis of these events in terms of social movement learning from a CHAT perspective directs our attention to the evolution of the object/motives of the activity systems reflecting processes of socio-cognitive internalization and externalization. These oppositional activities often successfully externalized, re-invigorated and thus stabilized existing contradictory relations. This reverberated through the system of activities as a whole deep into the consciousness and broader socio-cognition of activists as well. These activities thus deeply shaped, among other things, the types of advancing socio-cognitive changes – a palpable socio-emotional and cognitive vibrancy – that seemed to define the initial phases of community/union mobilization.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this paper I have sought to summarize the relationship between Marxist CHAT on the one hand, and various social movement phenomena on the other. The dynamics of social movement learning have several potential linkages to theories of resource mobilization, political process for example, and perhaps most notably, theories of framing, repertoire and contentious performance. It is a perspective that suggests, as does the work of Krinsky, Steinberg and variety of others, that well-formulated learning analysis that adequately explains both the adaptive *as well as* the productive or rather the contested and transformative nature of practice can in fact be a valuable resource within social movement theory going forward.

Central to the analysis was the process of how object/motives of socio-cognitive activity shifted over time with special attention to artifact mediations. Clearly, the types of changes so often recounted and analyzed in social movement studies are at the same time matters of highly complex learning processes. It was a series of contradictions and (partial) resolutions that defined social movement cognition when we explored the cultural, material and historical organization of activity from the standpoint of a variety of activists. Key mediating artifacts, their strong or weak mediating character, and the

changing structure of activity whether it was in terms of un-self-conscious operations, self-conscious goals, or broader object/motives allowed us to see how learning processes and action are mutually constitutive over time.

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[i] Though beyond the scope of this paper, this is a union that, at press time, has been racked with recent internal divisions leading to portions of the union forming a break-away union. Over the time period under examination there did not seem to be any significant affects in Toronto resulting from this however.

[ii] See http://www.hotelworkersrising.org/index.php for further information.

[iii] See http://www.hotelworkersrising.org/media/Hotel_Industry_Fact_Sheet.pdf for a summary of the sector in these terms.

[iv] E.g. community hiring, improvements in child-care services, parks, transportation, and so on.

[v] Quoted material below that is not otherwise attributed to a publication are taken from the interview data of the study.