Counterpower's Long Game. Review of Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*

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Counterpower's Long Game. Review of Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*

Abstract
"This is the Beginning of the Beginning" flashed in white light on Manhattan's Verizon Building. The message seemed to jump out of nowhere and Occupy Wall Street marchers crossing the Brooklyn Bridge broke into ecstatic chants. This was the Illuminator's debut, just two days after New York police had brutally evicted Occupiers from Zuccotti Park. Hours later, we would find out that the Illuminator, a.k.a. Mark Read, was projecting from the apartment of Denise Vega, a public-housing resident sympathetic to Occupy. The target was no accident: Verizon was attacking its union, seeking to slash workers' pay while accumulating record profits. Over a year later, the Illuminator is still active. And a portion of New York's Occupy movement revived itself as Occupy Sandy after last fall's hurricane. In the process, some of Occupy's insurgent edge has dulled, while the larger Arab Spring and the Indignados movements that preceded and inspired it have lost momentum and influence. At least for now.

Disciplines
Civic and Community Engagement | Inequality and Stratification | Politics and Social Change | Sociology

Comments
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March 18, 2013 — “This is the Beginning of the Beginning” flashed in white light on Manhattan’s Verizon Building. The message seemed to jump out of nowhere and Occupy Wall Street marchers crossing the Brooklyn Bridge broke into ecstatic chants. This was the Illuminator’s debut, just two days after New York police had brutally evicted Occupiers from Zuccotti Park. Hours later, we would find out that the Illuminator, a.k.a. Mark Read, was projecting from the apartment of Denise Vega, a public-housing resident sympathetic to Occupy. The target was no accident: Verizon was attacking its union, seeking to slash workers’ pay while accumulating record profits. Over a year later, the Illuminator is still active. And a portion of New York’s Occupy movement revived itself as Occupy Sandy after last fall’s hurricane. In the process, some of Occupy’s insurgent edge has dulled, while the larger Arab Spring and the Indignados movements that preceded and inspired it have lost momentum and influence. At least for now.

It is a good time, then, to reflect on whether we have really witnessed a “new species of social movement,” freed from old Left fetters, as sociologist Manuel Castells claims. Or whether these movements are better understood as novel instances of an older, more plural left tradition—characterized by complex relationships with unions, political parties, and community groups. For public social science, the distinction’s political and analytic stakes are high.

Castells’s Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age makes an enthusiastic case for the movements’ novelty. Castells, a distinguished scholar and movement sympathizer, is clearly thrilled by the explosion of protest that Networks analyzes. The new movements’ expressive language and horizontal approach to organizing appear to vindicate arguments he has developed since his The City and the Grassroots, through The Information Age trilogy and, more recently, Communication Power. And yet, while bold theoretical statements in Networks’ introduction and conclusion celebrate the new movements’ decisive rupture from earlier moments of Left politics, the book’s empirical findings, densely packed into a series of case studies, suggest striking continuities between new movements and old.

“Power relations,” Castells wrote in 2007, “[are] the relations that constitute the foundation of all societies.” And in Networks he returns to his claim that media and communication are the fields where power is ultimately won or lost. Yes, he concedes, state coercion can be decisive. But in the long run, “the construction of meaning in people’s minds is a more decisive and more stable source of power.” Pitched battles
IN THE INITIAL FEVER OF COLLECTIVE ACTION, EVERYTHING FEELS POSSIBLE. THEN CLIQUES FORM, LINES OF ACCOUNTABILITY BLUR, THE PUBLIC GETS DISTRACTED, AND GENEROSITY OF SPIRIT WANES.

Here and in his accounts of Occupy and the Arab Spring, Castells make a compelling case that the culture of the Internet is feeding a global trend toward the pursuit and defense of autonomy. But two other themes suggested by his empirical material warrant a closer look: first, how movements adapt as they struggle to reorganize internal power relationships in more lasting ways despite increasingly violent repression. In the initial fever of collective action, everything feels possible. Then cliques form, lines of accountability blur, the public gets distracted, and generosity of spirit wanes. Castells has much less to say about this stubborn trend. Yet it is after hope peaks...
that the real work begins—including, for scholars, renewing social-movement studies to better grasp the intersections of strategy, leadership, and mobilization under police pressure and mercurial public attention. The second theme is the reciprocal impact of new movements connecting with longstanding groups. Some unions and many labor militants played key roles in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements (perhaps unions’ lesser role in Spain explains why Castells ignores them in his synthetic theoretical chapters). We need more political economic analysis to grasp the underlying class dynamics of the so-called 99 percent, and of the tensions between the Middle East’s urban middle classes and mostly impoverished peasants.

Castells does recognize the growing salience of class. Networks observes that in a January 2012 American poll by Pew, about four months into the Occupy movement, 66 percent of Americans reported feeling that there were strong conflicts between rich and poor—up 19 percent since 2009, and the highest number since Pew first asked the question in 1987. Respondents ranked class ahead of race, age, or citizenship status as the country’s most important source of tension. What Networks does not report is that parts of the US labor movement have been moving toward more flexible, network-based, and media-oriented tactics, including brief but highly disruptive strikes in campaigns targeting the supply chains of companies like Amazon and Wal-Mart, and in a new push to unionize New York’s fast food restaurants. These campaigns’ tactics have combined lessons from earlier moments of labor militancy, a recent trend toward more grassroots organizing strategies, and some of Occupy’s innovations. The case for weaving organized labor’s evolving tensions into this story is compelling outside the US too. BBC economics reporter Paul Mason’s lively Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere, written in the fall of 2011, and covering Greece and Britain in addition to Spain, the US, and the Middle East, places organized labor in the new movements’ troika of social protagonists, next to unemployed college grads and poor urban youth.

We thus find in Networks that tension between stark, sweeping theory and rich, suggestive empirical work that has so often characterized Castells’s books—in this case understandably exaggerated by Networks’ rushed composition. If this contrast is at first frustrating, it is ultimately productive. Even when he does not persuade, Castells informs and incites useful arguments. Aspiring public social scientists should take note. Yet no account can deny that the new movements’ success in public opinion was not enough to prevent vigorous repression, and in most cases the dissipation of the movements’ initial encampments and collective structures. In the past 18 months, new movement activists have mostly been scattered into thinner but wider networks. Is this the end of the story?

Confronting the new movements’ apparent stagnation, Castells’s sympathetic gaze seems to narrow. Recalling his (partial) definition of counterpower as meaning-making, he declares victory over the long haul based on movements’ cultural influence—even as he acknowledges how hard it will be for them to force concrete reforms. But the game will be difficult to win when the movements’ opponents are determined elites and militarized police. At times, Castells acknowledges that while shifting opinions make change inevitable, it could be for the worse. He ends on a happy note—but his arguments cannot substantiate his tone.

To ground a more hopeful perspective, we would have to pay closer attention to dynamic elements of the labor and environmental movements—especially the organizing in the borderlands between unions, community groups, and social-movement activists. In North America, several of Occupy’s leading activists were rooted in radical green organizing, but they willingly deferred talking about climate change in order to tell a strictly economic story. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, they have broken their silence. Meanwhile, 350.org has been building an increasingly militant, if mostly middle-class, climate justice movement in the same
borderlands. Talks with unions are going better and in New York’s Far Rockaway neighborhood devastated by Sandy, 350.org activists have partnered with Occupy, labor, and community groups. This could mean an even broader social and political basis for new movement activism. True, analysts and organizers have plumped for this sort of convergence since the 1960s. Then again, revolutionary beginnings only appear to come from nowhere.

Daniel Aldana Cohen is a PhD candidate in sociology at New York University, where he researches the urban politics of climate change and is a founding member of the Superstorm Research Lab. His writing has recently been published by Jacobin, Dissent, Metropolitics, the NACLA Report on the Americas, and the Center for Humans and Nature.

Tags: Internet, Nonfiction, Occupy Wall Street, Social Movements

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