

Jamison: the life and death of social movements

Review by Andy Blunden, 2012

Jamison, A. (1991), *Social Movements. A Cognitive Approach* Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, University Park, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press.

Jamison, A. (2001) *The Making of Green Knowledge: Environmental Politics and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Cambridge University Press, ebook.

Jamison's approach to the study of social movements hinges on the concept of 'cognitive praxis' – the practical and theoretical work a movement organises to realise its vision. He sees the distinctive character of a social movement in its cognitive praxis, and it is through this lens that he studies the development of particular social movements, their roots in an historical conjuncture and the changes wrought on the larger society. Social movements are, to Jamison – and I agree – the active creators of new social formations, not just vehicles or symptoms of social change, but its producers. The criticism I will make is not that this approach is wrong, but simply that it does not go quite far enough.

Social movements arise at a certain historical conjuncture.

“No social movement emerges until there is a political opportunity available, a context of social problem as well as a context of communication, opening up the potential for problem articulation and knowledge dissemination” (1991: 56).

I agree. A social movement arises in an endeavour to solve some problem affecting at least some group of people sharing some common condition of life. It could be a natural disaster or it could arise out of some feature deeply embedded in the conditions of a group of people within an existing society. But as Jamison notes, it is not that the problem is simply objectively given, it has to be perceived as a problem and capable of being expressed and transmitted as such. In other words it is essentially a problem arising in the specific social conditions of the existing social formation, moreover, as it affects a group of people suffering or enjoying common conditions of life as determined by the existing social formation.

Two things to note here. The problem can only be a problem because of the “cognitive praxes” of the existing social formation. If the existing society were simply a collection of individuals the problem could not manifest itself as a problem, and would not be capable of perception and communication: you can't have a contradiction unless you have a logic. Thus there is a definite link from the cognitive praxis of the new social movement, whose essential meaning is the solution of a problem, and the cognitive praxis of the social formation which generates the problem.

Secondly, despite the common conditions of existence, the group of individuals who are to form the base of the new social movement are not necessarily characterised by any kind of collective consciousness or shared identity at the time the problem arises: such a common identity is to be created by the social movement, which is, to use a well-known Hegelian expression, still “in-itself” when the problem is first felt. It is possible that this base might already have a collective identity – an ethnic minority, the whole nation about to enter war, etc. – but the problem and the social movement which responds, galvanises them into a *new* identity.

On the other hand, as Jamison says:

“... new ideas are formulated and then 'taken over' by the surrounding society. ... Social movements are, for us transitory, historical phenomena, and their 'success', ... is thus paradoxical” (1996: 3).

Jamison writes a great deal about the irony facing all social movements, that success as a movement always entails in their own dissolution, frequently beginning, according to Jamison, with an increasing professionalization of the cognitive praxis of the movement, as movement intellectuals find paying jobs in the institutionalised life of the community: “The cognitive praxis of postmodernity is organised in the image of the private consulting firm.” (1991: 148)

This I choose to describe with another well-known Hegelian term: “objectification.” Jamison also frequently refers to the “fragmentation” which affects the social movement as a prelude to its objectification, and demise as a social movement (1991:74). But this is not the whole truth, is it?

“All social life can be seen as a combination of action and construction, forms of practical activity that are informed by some underlying project” (1991: 2).

Exactly! What is going on with the process of objectification is the merging of the essential meaning of a social movement, the key notion underlying its cognitive praxis, with the cognitive praxis of the social formation as a whole. From the narrow point of view of activists who are interested in the social movement as such, this is indeed fragmentation, but not necessarily from the point of view of the development of the underlying idea. The existing social formation which produced the problem from which the new social movement grew, is itself the overall outcome of the objectification and continuing activity of social movements which have originated in the *past*.

So the point is that a social movement, as such, is the ‘middle phase’ of a process which begins in the conditions of a social formation, and ends with a new social formation in which it has merged with all the other subjects in the social formation. A social formation not only is born and dies, but has an embryonic life and a ‘life after death’, so to speak. This whole process I call a ‘project’.

Generally speaking, Jamison – and I agree – sees a social movement which has been incorporated as an *institution*:

“For us, when a movement begins to employ professionals, it marks a shift in the particular movement’s identity. It also signifies a shift in relation between that movement and the established political culture: it marks a step in the direction of ‘incorporation’ of the movement, its transformation into an institution” (1991: 100).

But it is far more productive if, instead of viewing an institution as something alien to social movements in general, we see them as a project at a specific stage of its development, different from the social movement it used to be. Social conditions, social movement and institution are three phases in the life cycle of a project. Social conditions contain within them the impact of past social movements and the potential for future social movements. Institutions likewise are governed by practical norms, norms of belief and semantic norms which are traces left by their origins in a social movement as well as the impact of other social movements which had been previously institutionalised, and the conditions from which a new social movement can spring. Every social movement is a potential institution; every institution is a potential social movement.

If a social movement does not aim for the ‘forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions’ (*Communist Manifesto*, 1848), then incorporation, or mainstreaming, is exactly what a social movement is aiming for. Hegel explained this process in terms of three processes: mechanism (the social movement relates externally to others forming a cultural mosaic), chemism (the social movement forms relationships of affinity and mutual exchange with the others) and organism (the social movement and the others each use the other as means to their own ends) ultimately merging as one concept in an integral form of life.

So if we take ‘project’ such that ‘social movement’ is just one phase of its development, then we can understand the entire social fabric – even its more brittle parts – as woven from projects. This is particularly important for the understanding of social movements, because we must not see social movements as alien to the ‘established’ institutions, but use the same theoretical means to understand the structure and dynamics of the wider social fabric with which a social movement is interacting.

Further, just as a social movement is mobilised behind an ideal, what Jamison calls a ‘cosmology’ – a concept of how the world might be other than it is, at its completion and objectification within the larger community, its ideal has not disappeared, but remains within the language and ideological cosmos of the existing society as a concept, modifying the social practices of the community.

Jamison is quite right when he points to the three dimensions which constitute a social movement, though I am not sure that he is completely clear on the identity of these three dimensions. Utilising Habermas’s idea of ‘knowledge interest’, he found in his analysis of environmentalism:

“three types of dimensions of ‘knowledge interest’: cosmological, technological and organisational ... an ecological worldview, a small-scale alternative technology, and a democratic ‘science for the people’ ...

“Our argument is that environmentalism can be called a social movement only to the extent that the three ‘knowledge interests’ were combined into an active integrative force – into a living praxis – among environmental activists” (1991: 66-67)

He elaborates:

“Like its cosmological counterpart, alternative technology represented the utopian mentality – but at a practical level” (1991: 76).

and:

“cosmology, technique, and organisation become components of a social activity rather than aspects of thought. They become dimensions of a living movement rather than disembodied forms of consciousness” (1991: 70).

and:

“What made environmentalism into a social movement was its combination of the three dimensions into a core identity. ... Environmentalism as a social movement combined an ecological worldview an a vision of an alternative technology with an interest in participatory decision-making ...” (1991: 77).

Jamison has developed this profound thought almost exclusively from a study of the environmental movement and has attempted to generalise it. Coming from a completely different direction, I arrived at a very similar conclusion through a study of Hegel’s Logic. Hegel conceptualised these three dimensions logically as Universal, Particular and Individual. In a materialist reading of Hegel which is concerned with human actions rather than thoughts, I read this as follows.

- The Universal is embodied in the universal, meaningful artefacts around which the movement is mobilised, and this includes everything from its symbols and key words through material technology to land and landscape.
- The Particular is embodied in the practices through which the ‘cosmology’ symbolised by its symbols and instruments are given practical meaning. This includes participatory democracy, demonstrations, practical interventions and so on.
- The Individual is embodied in the individual actions which in aggregate make up the forms of social practice and are carried out by individuals who by virtue of their participation may deem themselves ‘members’ of the social movement.

I think this is the heading under which Jamison's "technology" should be captured.

I think Jamison's intuition was profound and true, and in particular how the movement as such is constituted by the identity of these three dimensions. When the actions no longer correspond to the social practices they are deemed to constitute and the social practices cease to be organised around the universal symbol or material artefact that inspires them, etc., the movement is either nascent or moribund. The advantage of using Hegel's moments is that this taps deeply into the conceptual structure of the entire culture and the most fundamental level.

One final comment: the conceptualisation of Other. I think Jamison's incorporation of this once-fashionable idea is unfortunate. "This Other is not merely a theoretically constructed object, however, but a real social actor operating through the specific arenas of a political culture." (1991: 119) On the contrary, there is the Other as a theoretically constructed "enemy without" which is part of the constitution of the universal identity of the movement, in particular its narrative. But the Other in the real sense of the fate of the movement is not a unitary identity but on the contrary the entire social formation, with all its diverse projects. And if *that* is taken as a big-O Other, as an indivisible homogeneous protagonist, then this is an unfortunate self-deception.

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