Jamison: the life and death of social movements


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.

“...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 is 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. 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, within which the problem out of which a new social movement grows, 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 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 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 of 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 don’t see social movements as alien to the ‘established’
institutions, but can 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 represents 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 represents the particular practices through which the
‘cosmology’ symbolised by its symbols and instruments are given meaning
through use. This includes participatory democracy, demonstrations, practical
interventions and so on.

• The Individual represents 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 an entire, complex social formation. 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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March 2012