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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

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

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 *a* and the conscious *a* to which they are directed; un-self-conscious *a* and the corresponding to which they respond; and, the broader, socially established *b* / of *a* 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

those of the activities rooted in the lives of Rexdale residents themselves. Why were Rexdale residents 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.

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

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

changing structure of activity whether it was in terms of un-self-conscious operations, self-conscious goals, or broader

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ⁱ Though beyond the scope of this paper, this is a union t