

A Movement Culture of Nonviolent Action

The emerging society that confronts hegemony.

The case of the landless movement MST in Brazil.

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“[Movement] Cultures that are shared, distinctive, wide in scope, elaborated, large in quantity, and intensely expressive tend often – and perhaps always – to be stifling and oppressive... There seems, in fact, to be a dilemma of culture: truly strong movement cultures tend to stimulate commitment and participation but to be authoritarian, while weak cultures, even though they are democratic and participatory, understimulate commitment and participation... The trick is to elaborate culture that sustains participation without stifling democratic participation and sponsoring demeaning treatment of non-members.” (Lofland 1995: 214-215).

Within the globalisation critical movement and its manifestations at the global arena, e.g. Seattle 1999 and Genoa 2001, an *oppositional protest culture* is constructed. Demonstrations of big numbers of people from different organisations and nations show they do not agree with the global policies of contemporary international regimes like The World Bank, The World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund. They try to enact a dissenting world opinion by collecting representatives from churches, trade unions, farmers of the third world, aboriginal peoples, students and others. They display in their own words in the protest against the G8-agenda that “You are G8, we are 6 billion”. A bit optimistic probably, but the logic of opinion dramatisation is clear.

Another kind of culture is created by movements who construct a *prefigurative or emerging society* (Breines 1982. Turner & Killian 1987). One part of constructing another kind of society within the movement is to form a new emotional culture, i.e. the rules of feelings and expressions. Ritual in a movement culture, is possible to understand as “a cultural mechanism through which challenging groups express and transform the emotions that arise from subordination, redefine dominant feeling and expression rules to reflect more desirable identities or self-conceptions, and express group solidarity” (Taylor & Whittier 1995: 178-179). When feminist groups start their meetings by sharing personal feelings and experiences and end with healing circles, they are practising “emotional prefigurative

politics”, not only resisting patriarchy by breaking gender norms. In a fundamental sense prefigurative movements try to (partially) move common sense and everyday routine by institutionalising new patterns of behaviour. Sustaining of a mobilisation of resistance is different from the arousing of strong protest events in the sense that it demands the reconstruction of dominant cultural patterns.

The concept of culture is a contested concept. In this text it is enough to understand culture as the specific and symbolic behaviour of people while doing universal human things, like eating, working and communicating. Culture is then a matter of *how* people do and understand these activities. Many will argue that culture functions principally to constrain movement action, but the basis of this paper is that culture may also function as resources that supply political opportunities for movement activists – the combination of inherent constraint and strategic opportunities is one defining feature of culture. It could further be argued that “cultural change can only be accomplished with the construction of new repertoires of action” (Taylor & Whittier 1995: 186). This paper present an alternative approach in the discourse of nonviolent action, dominated by the sociologist Gene Sharp (1973) and the “technique approach” which emphasise the law-guided effectiveness of various universal methodological principles (McCarthy, Ackerman & Kruegler). In nonviolent action studies movement organisations which use non-armed forms of struggle in order to effect social change is the object of exploration. It is an interdisciplinary field of academics, consisting of researchers from sociology, international relations, state politics, feminism, peace research etc.

Instead of focusing on the ideals or argumentative logic of nonviolence like the literature before 1973 – and instead of focusing on showing the strategic effectiveness of possible nonviolent struggle techniques like Sharp et al; a social constructivist approach would focus on the construction of nonviolent resistance as a complex and dynamic social process of interaction (Vinthagen & Chabot 2002. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).

One research direction would be to focus on the problematic construction of a *movement culture of nonviolent action*. The proposal would be that the social construction of group habits into a functional institutional system where nonviolent action is embedded in a movement culture would make nonviolent action sustainable. The movement culture of nonviolent action is a nonviolent society grounded within a dominating social system, yet moving against it by socially sustaining criticism, dialogue, and action. It is about a new kind of society opposing the existing one as well as being situated in the middle of it.

An example would be the environmental activists in Innerdalen in southern Norway who opposed the construction of yet another large water dam. Unlike in the Alta struggle in northern Norway, they did not only engage in dramatic yet sporadic collective action events during which they chained themselves to each other with heavy steel chains and impeded construction work. Instead, they tried to sustain resistance by moving down into the valley of Innerdalen and living there, toiling the land and building a village community—just as Gandhi and fellow activists did in Indian ashrams. They created an Environmental University during summer time, educating visitors about the construction of alternative energy and old handicraft. The point is that they did not only oppose the status quo through a short-lived blockade or in isolated and secluded eco-friendly communes. They actually put their ideas into practice and started building an alternative society in the midst of the dominant system. As long as they did their work on the land and lived in the village houses, the water dam could not be completed—at least not without moving or killing all the inhabitants of this alternative society.

In the end, the village people in Innerdalen were driven away by the police and were unable to *sustain* the movement culture of nonviolent action. The commitment of participants where not strong and enduring enough, inhabitants of the alternative society did not move back repeatedly after being driven away, the activity dissolved and the dam where built. Similar land seizure has not spread into a sustainable movement.

Other groups, though, have been more successful. Take for example the landless movement in Brazil, the MST. The MST started in the early 1980s and is now a social movement with about 1.5 million active landless people and small farmers united in seeking "land-reform from below" by engaging in peaceful land occupations of non-used land. They have so far performed over 2,000 occupations and enabled land distribution that is more extensive than what the Brazilian state had achieved previously. In the MST—the *encampamentos*—people live in plastic tents for long periods of time (often 5-10 years) before their persistence allows them to become landowners. Like most nonviolent movements in the past, this movement is nonviolent for pragmatic reasons, not merely out of principle. Occasionally, some use their farming tools to defend themselves, but still they have not collectively armed themselves despite regular murders by organised paramilitary groups.

The MST has created a movement culture of nonviolent action by combining several activities and institutionalising them. In this preliminary analysis I present a non-hierarchical selection of nine elements of the movement culture. A movement culture could be analysed with the help of such concepts as these nine, but as well with other. It is my tentative

suggestion that a movement culture needs to find a way to combine different and central elements of culture into a new meaningful whole which encompasses people's basic life forms in order to sustain resistance.

Firstly, a movement culture needs to transfer its culture to new members through *institutions of socialisation*. Primary institutions of socialisation are the family, friends and the school, and all these are situated at the same social place – the occupied acampamento. As the first act in their temporary tent-society the MST founds “schools” for their children. They start off as schools in the free air or in tents, later they will be situated in their own houses with the help of communal funding from MST. When they can finally purchase the land, these schools ensure that the values and experiences of their struggle are transferred to the new generations. The schools are not only about information and learning practical skills. With their own rituals and social dramas they enact the events of the struggle, confirm their solidarity and socialise the new members into the struggle.

Secondly, there is a need of *institutions of material regeneration* of the movement culture. Economic cooperatives generate the livelihood and resources for a more professional and extensive struggle, which is emerging from the settlements that have won their pieces of land. Through their own “taxation” and redistribution resources are generated for the political struggle as a by-product of daily work in their cooperatives.

Thirdly, they *reconstruct the culture of dominance* when they mix established cultural elements like the Madonna figure, Che Guevara and football, together with heroic photos of the struggle of the landless farmers, and make a new blend of "MST-Culture" in order to sustain resistance. A house in of a MST community could on one single wall have it all mixed together, signifying the belonging of the family to the MST-culture.

Fourthly, the *everyday movement stories* “told and retold with strong positive or negative emotional expression among participants” show the values, successes and sufferings of the movement, as well as the wars with and horrors of the prevailing social system (Lofland 1995: 192. Fine 1995). This storytelling is part of the construction of the movement history of iconic events and personage. One such story is about the beginning of the movement. The creation of the movement is told to happen at huge tree where a meeting among the landless people sitting in the grass, looking over the vast land around, resulted in a decision to make the first occupation, which today is a story with a happy ending, after several years of collective suffering in plastic tents on the occupied land.

Fifthly, it is of course no coincidence that *the sacred place* (“the Mecca of the movement”, Lofland 1995: 203) of MST is a tree. The farmers are firmly rooted in the soil in the same

way as a tree, and as a movement they grow from the fertile land of theirs, as individual and family branches connected to the stem. As long as they get sun and water, they will grow together, towards the sky above.

Sixthly, storytelling might even take on a sacred quality as when the MST in a staged drama enact events of the movement. This *Mística* is a *ritual performance* at major gatherings which by movement members are described with religious concepts and references. The *Mística* is a clear example of a ritual element in the movement, but ordinary actions, modelled, planned and organised according to some iconic actions in the history of the movement, also involves ritual behaviour, central for the construction of a new emotional culture.

Seventhly, there is the utilisation of and construction of *movement havens*, or liberated zones (Fantasia & Hirsch 1995). Traditional social spaces, relatively free from domination, may during acute social struggle serve as spatial and organisational vehicles of cultural transformation and social change. During the Algerian anticolonial struggle the traditional and formerly conservative family, mosque and Casbah became the basis of sustained cultural change and revolution, to that extent that the female veil was the symbol of strong, liberated freedom fighting women. In times of crisis then, certain areas of the periphery might become focal areas of resistance, by virtue of its distance from the centre of the system. I would argue that the farming family and the countryside vast land, serve as these kinds of movement havens for the MST, as the favellas (the city slum areas) in a similar sense become this area for the new movement created jointly by favellas citizens and MST activists. They are traditional social spaces with a limited control from the hegemonic class in society.

The last three elements of the movement culture which are presented are the creation of group boundaries, interpretative frameworks and politicization of everyday life – central and interrelated processes of movement identity, which is formed through interaction in the movement communities (Taylor & Whittier 1995). Without *group boundaries* the sense of “we” disappear, but with thick borders which new members needs to pass in order to enter into movement communities the possibilities of mobilisation and influence on the rest of society might disappear. The *interpretative frameworks of movements* is their strategic manipulation of elements of hegemonic culture into movement suitable understanding of world events. The movement researchers Gamson (1992), Snow and Benford that developed (original ref??) the concept suggest three functions of movement frames; calling attention to a situation of a collectivity and portray it as “injustice” (punctuation), explaining the causes and

suggest the remedies of this injustice, emphasizing the possibilities of “our” agency (attribution) and constructing different experiences of movement activists into a coherent outlook benefiting the movement production of a “we” (articulation). These frames does not exist prior to but is constructed during movement activity, through a number of alignment processes (bridging, amplification, extension and transformation of elements of the dominant culture) (Snow 1986).

This framing process happens through a discursive struggle where symbols of power are dramatized in publicity by ritual performance of action scripts. By organising peaceful occupation of nonused land, where the MST is creating cooperative and ecological farming, while knowing the big farm owners and police are going to attack them with the use of overwhelming force and even illegal violence – they dramatize the injustice of land distribution in Brazil, at the same time as dramatizing the agency of MST in creating justice for the landless. The framing problem of MST is to find ways of bridging the interpretative understanding of the movement and its solidary group, i.e. the landless and small farmers of Brazil, and further the slum dwellers and other marginalised groups. One thing is to sustain the interpretative frameworks of the people that already are active members of the movement, and a completely other thing is to influence the frames of groups that objectively have a common cause with the movement but who are not active and do not identify with MST.

The *politicisation of everyday life* is happening through the integration of the elements above into a communal life within the MST. When you shop in a cooperative store, have your kids at a school, work at a slaughter house and rest at a café – which all are run by the MST community, all your life sustenance depend on the politics of the movement – for good and worse.

This kind of *movement culture of nonviolent action* is about living the revolution, not simply individually as a life-style or for self-betterment, but collectively as in Gandhi’s constructive program (which Sharp almost completely ignores due to his focus on technique). This movement culture is not merely about alternative living, but about creating a confrontational society that challenges the power structure by living according to its own values and principles. This movement culture is not about liberal forms of protest such as free speech and opinion making, but about enacting and living the alternative life by putting it into practice. A movement culture reinvent traditional forms of protest by institutionalising them as permanent parts of life rather than as single events or spontaneous movements. In other words, they are creating the social and material foundations for a life of struggle. This

dynamic process is *problematic and multidimensional*: a lot of things need to function together as a whole for it to survive and expand. As such, we—as scholars and/or activists—have much work to do in order to understand the various conditions enabling and constraining movement culture and sustainable nonviolent action.

We must ask: what makes the sustained movement culture of nonviolent action possible among the landless movement in Brazil, but not in the environmental movement of Norway? History or social structure might explain something but the understanding of the role of movement culture is underdeveloped. What aspects of social life need to interact creatively in order to make this confrontational society durable? This is surely not only a matter of effective resource management, but also a matter of creating social solidarity and integration in a situation when both tempting offers and frightening reactions by the dominant system risks tearing apart the fabric of solidarity on which any wise movement strategy relies.

A relational/constructionist approach would try to understand what makes the unthinkable—nonviolent and persistent resistance against violence and oppression—intellectually thinkable, emotionally conceivable AND social sustainable. What makes nonviolent action become part of a movement's culture, part of a community's habits? What makes nonviolent action become natural and integrated into social life instead of an exotic idea promoted by strategic utopians in ivory towers?