

Can popular movements celebrate diversity?

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When the self determination of a group of individuals finds a common locus for energy a social movement can ignite a critical mass of people into action; people who have a belief in their personal ability to affect change.

This paper critiques the concept of the popular movement, and reviews its capacity to celebrate diversity. This is explored through two initiatives; Transition Towns and the Slow movements. These examples indicate that unless all four fundamental CD principles; participation, empowerment, subsidiarity and sustainability, are respected, an entity will be unable to realise its potential to mobilise a diverse array of targets to celebrate diversity. However, even when genuine efforts are made to adhere to these principles, limitations are revealed which indicate tensions between the CD principles; subsidiarity and sustainability in particular.

Popular movements

Popular movements may be defined as;

“forms of collective action with a high degree of popular participation, which use non-institutional channels, and which, at the same time that they formulate their demands, also find forms of action to advance those demands and to stabilise themselves as collective subjects, that is, as a group or a social category.” (Jellin 1986 quoted in Brohman 1996)

Where the term ‘popular’ is commonly used to represent a range of economically marginalised, politically disenfranchised, and culturally threatened groups” (Stephen 1992 quoted in Brohman 1996).

In Brohman’s article ‘Participation and Power’ (1996) a table indicates ‘Popular movements in selected Third World Countries’. One of the countries included is Kenya, which lists “16 323 women’s groups with 637 000 members registered in 1984, many of whom began as savings club”.

Slow Food

The origins of Slow Food are said to be born out of a 1987 protest to the opening of a MacDonalds fast food restaurant in the central Piazza di Spagna at the bottom of the Spanish steps in Rome (Chrzan 2004; Lotti 2010; Sassatelli & Davolio 2010). The protest voiced a reaction to the broader, interconnected issues of homogenisation, commoditisation and hegemony of the food industry (Chrzan 2004; Lotti 2010). It is likely that it may also have been related to a deeper seated resentment towards the US for its ‘extraordinary level of intervention

in its domestic affairs' (Forsyth 1998). Italian food is well known to be an integral part of the nation's identity and a further threat to the Italian culture was likely to have been perceived.

During the Italian protest 'activists' slowly ate dishes of pasta in front of the offending restaurant (Chrzan 2004). The core issue; a love of good food, is something that everyone can relate to on a personal level. In addition, the issue was both born out of, and emerged into, a time and space where the political and economic climate could support and fuel such a movement.

Today a Slow Food website describes itself as;

“an idea, a way of living and a way of eating. It is a global, grassroots movement with thousands of members around the world that links the pleasure of food with a commitment to community and the environment.” (www.slowfoodusa.org)

This description indicates that Slow Food presents itself as a popular movement, aligning with the 'culturally threatened' group in Stephen's definition of popular above. It has achieved success in mobilising considerable numbers of people throughout the world. Since establishing SF as an international NGO in 1989, the entity now boasts 100 000 members and a world-wide network of 2 000 food communities across 150 countries (www.slowfood.com) which involve some diverse groups of people including the farmers, producers, cooks and consumers. The entity has certainly traversed some extremes in economic, political, and cultural divides. Is this a celebration of diversity?

The success of Slow Food inspired the establishment of a Slow cities movement, Cittaslow in 1999, as a scaled-up response to the “fast lane, homogenised world” appealing for a return to ‘traditions and traditional ways of doing things’ (www.slowmovement.com). By 2007 Cittaslow had 50 member towns (Pink 2007).

Slow Food - a popular movement?

Despite its description and the numbers indicated above however, it is questionable whether the origins of the movements are accurately located within Jellin's definition of a popular movement. The story of its origin above has since been exposed as a 'myth' (Chrzan 2004). Slow Food emerged from an existing organisation; Arcigola, with roots spanning more than a decade earlier. The organisation was formed by SF figurehead Carlo Petrini and other Italian intellectuals from the political left wing (Lotti 2010; Sassatelli & Davolio 2010). Carlo Petrini's contribution to SF has been such that some sources attribute the establishment of the organisation solely to his name (Jones 2003). To what extent then, does this embody 'collective action' as intended by the definition? And does it even matter?

Collective Self Determination?

Self Determination may be understood on three different levels, the individual, group and indigenous people (Clements 2004). The determination of Carlo Petrini appears to be a large driving force behind SF. If this connects with the self determination of the producers and brings benefits to less financially privileged areas by allowing them economic opportunities, (at the very least) is it relevant if the nature of the relationships within the movement may be hegemonic? Surely there is benefit for everyone for the systems of the entity to be 'stabilised' (to

quote from Jellin's description) even if this manifests with an obvious hierarchy of control within the organisation?

Community Development principles

The concept of a popular movement is rooted in the community development principles of participation, empowerment, subsidiarity and sustainability. These are interdependent and most effective when used together (Connors 2008).

While the Slow movements appear to abound in participation from which the promotional material suggests empowerment, subsidiarity appears notably absent. This brings into question the concept of sustainability also.

In a confusing, if not somewhat patronising and arrogant statement, this fact is evidently acknowledged;

“Towns in Italy have banded together to form an organization and call themselves the Slow Cities movement. In their zeal to help the world they have formed what amounts to a global organization that sets out to control which cities in the world can call themselves Slow Cities and which cannot. This is not a movement. Social movements are movements from the bottom from the community. The seachange movement, the organic movement, the vegetarian movement, the homeschooling movement, are examples of movements. No-one controls them. No-one assesses you to see if you are allowed to call yourself a seachanger or if you can say you are a vegetarian.

Yet, the Slow Cities movement – Citta Slow – holds the power to assess a city that wants to be called a slow city.” (www.slowmovement.com)

The site then goes on to set out who can apply to become a slow city, starting with “no town or city with more than 50 000 residents may apply to become a Slow city”.

“A commitment to community and the environment”

What are the implications of such a clear confession of control for an organisation presenting itself as a ‘global, grassroots organization’ (www.slowfood.com) with a stated ‘commitment to community and the environment’ (www.slowfoodusa.org)?

SF claims to support agro biodiversity, through their ‘Ark of Taste’ which “aims to rediscover, catalog, describe and publicize forgotten flavours.” To what extent are these activities consistent or supportive of their commitment set out above?

In order to protect agrobiodiversity SF have been criticised for inadvertently establishing a system which mirrors the conventional agricultural system it originally set out to oppose (Lotti 2010), privileging items deemed ‘worthy’ to their elitist tastes through a centralised certification process. The contradictions in theory and practice are illustrated in the example of one of the three food items SF promotes from Ethiopia; the Wukro White Honey.

SF literature introduces the honey as “A unique product and crucial resource in one of the most arid and inaccessible parts of the country” (*Wukro White Honey, Ethiopia Slow Food Presidium*). The information states that the Wukro white honey is “known and popular throughout the country”. It also notes a reason for the honey’s rarity; due to the short flowering period after the rainy season. Further literature reviews confirm that the rare white honey is “in danger of disappearing” due to the limited rainfall; “no rain; no flowers” (Smith 2010).

To site this situation in a wider context; Ethiopia is Africa’s largest honey producer (Smith 2010), and the 10th biggest producer in the world (Mocri 2000). The country is also a major producer of beeswax, “only surpassed by Mexico and China.” Sources claim the export of this product “competes with coffee, the green gold of the country” (Mocri 2000). In addition, the health properties of the products are also well known and utilized (Mocri 2000) in a country with a population of 80 million, where government provided health care is inaccessible for so many.

The apiary industry is therefore of some significance to the public health and financial economy of the nation.

SF literature describes its response to this situation.

“The Presidium involves 17 beekeepers (members of the Selam Beekeepers Association) and their families. In 2010 a building for honey extraction will be completed that will allow the beekeepers to improve the quality of their product by working in a more hygienic and sanitary environment. A shop will also be built where producers can sell their honey and other products directly to the public. Greater diversification by promoting other traditional products will help the local economy to be less vulnerable. The Association will be provided with materials to package their honey in properly labeled glass jars. This will enable them to receive a higher price for the product and reduce the risk of fake Wukro honey on the market. Lastly, some beekeepers belonging to Conapi (the Consortium of Italian Organic Beekeepers and Farmers) will help the Presidium to draw up production rules guaranteeing the quality and authenticity of the product.”

SF’s ‘commitment to environment’ seems a fairly narrow, self serving response. In ‘rediscovering’ this at-risk food item SF are merely privileging their own international consumers over the nationals that have been enjoying the product to date. The key challenge for this honey is climate change and deforestation (Smith 2010). The industry in general is also affected by the use of pesticides (Mocri 2000). ‘Environment’ clearly requires definition. Is the organizations commitment to the physical environment in which the honey is produced or the social environment of the privileged end consumers? SF’s ‘commitment to community’ appears similarly displaced.

Other aspects of the project similarly question SF’s commitment to community. Ethiopian society has long established systems of community support groups which practice the CD principle of subsidiarity with structures set up to be horizontal, and rotations of roles and responsibilities (personal experience and observation). The decision to appoint a single person

(*Wukro White Honey, Ethiopia Slow Food Presidium*) not only disregards but also has great potential to damage these local social structures.

Community Development as a process emphasises the development of structures by which “communities can identify and address their own issues, needs and problems within their own terms of reference.”(Kenny 2006) Imposing the values of an individualistic minority world society on a narrowly focused group of beneficiaries may bring short term gains to the bee keepers and international consumers, however as mentioned earlier; CD principles are interdependent. A focus on empowerment for a limited number of individuals in the short term, with a tokenistic gesture for the wider geographic community without engaging the already developed apiary community will have an impact on the long term empowerment, or disempowerment of their targets, as well as the wider community as indicated by the fate of the food items which don’t make it to the Slow Food list. The strength of the self determination of the nation has already been shown in history, in particular as the only African nation to withstand colonisation. A source of great pride for the country is their rejection of Italian’s earlier in history. It seems short sighted of SF not to understand this and establish more respectful systems in lieu of their own experience with the US, which triggered the popular rise of the organisation.

The systems the organisation have established are actually not supportive of meeting its objectives. The Slow Food label is ultimately in competition with a long term transformational process that would assist meet objectives to celebrate diversity both in the community and the biodiversity it claims to “defend” (www.slowfood.com). In focusing on the empowerment and participation of a narrow target, the principles of subsidiarity and sustainability have not been resolved.

There are of course tensions and limitations to community development. It is not possible for one organisation to provide opportunities for the extensive apiary community to directly participate in an initiative, and neither would such a diverse community necessarily be interested to do so. Individual participants in communities are not focused on the common good, as is frequently assumed. Therefore, even if those initiating an organisation set out systems to practice all the CD principles, enforcing or even attempting to ensure these are followed through by all participants, goes against the very concept.

Nevertheless the Transition Towns initiative attempts to do this.

Transition Towns

In contrast to SF, the Transition Towns (TT) movement has an intentionally more humble approach. The home page of their website personalises the central theme and describes ‘Transition’ as a ‘process’ and a ‘social experiment’ for which there is a disclaimer; “we truly don’t know if this will work” (*Transition Towns website*).

Similar to SF, the central theme of TT holds personal appeal to a popular mass of people; “Transition results from government and market failure to tackle effectively the twin problems of peak oil and climate change: in spite of some rhetorical commitment to grassroots solutions from politicians”. (Seyfang and Smith 2007 quoted in Scott-Cato & Hillier 2010). The TT movement has grown up as a “citizen response to climate change” (Scott-Cato & Hillier 2010) and as at

November 2010, 642 TT initiatives were registered of which 318 are ‘official’ (*Transition Towns website*), a number which has nearly tripled in the past 18 months (based on figures calculated from Scott-Cato & Hillier 2010). This information similarly resonates with Brohman’s image of a popular movement as defined earlier. Unlike SF however, TT was more established on the principles of CD perhaps due to the foundation it emerged from.

TT has its roots in the 1970’s principles of permaculture which also had utopian ideals; with a focus on ‘Care of people, care of earth and redistribution of surplus’ (*Permaculture Activist*). While permaculture intended to ‘integrate rather than segregate’ (Freedman 2010), its journey has been chequered with division; from polarising specialists when it was first established (Veteto & Lockyer 2008), to the physical manifestations of the principles in Eco Villages which prioritise inclusion (Metcliff 2008), within the contradictory framework of an exclusive site, which by nature requires it to be isolated from the more mainstream society.

CD principles

TT founder Rob Hopkins came from a background as a permaculture educator. It is therefore no coincidence that the principles of TT intentionally set out to address the challenge of inclusion which, where structures arose to support permaculture, were unsuccessful in addressing. Hopkins notes that “permaculture has favoured isolation over interaction” (<http://transitionculture.org> referenced in Connors 2010). The concepts of empowerment, participation, subsidiarity and sustainability appear of concern in the TT principles of;

- Positive Visioning

- Help People Access Good Information and Trust Them to Make Good Decisions

- Inclusion and Openness

- Enable sharing and networking

- Build resilience

- Inner and Outer Transition

- Transition makes sense – the solution is the same size as the problem (which intends to focus on “whole systems not just one issue”)

- Subsidiarity: self-organisation and decision making at the appropriate level.

(Transition Towns website)

Inclusion?

Despite such efforts towards a commitment to the CD principles, including the specific focus on inclusion, the movement has still not been able to engage the diverse audience (Cohen 2010) it set out to and just as SF received criticism “for its part in the growing tensions surrounding inclusion and exclusion in consumer culture” (Sassatelli & Davolio 2010), TT has received similar accusations of appealing to a predominantly white, middle class following (Cohen 2010; Connors 2010).

The TT movement has been likened to a prism through which “anyone can look and see a rainbow of possibilities” (Mooallem 2009 quoted in Connors 2010), yet to what degree is that prism accessible to a diverse audience? Cohen (2010) identifies that the TT’s basis for community affects who it attracts. The movement communicates a message of individualism. It has been argued that the implicit focus of TT is the ‘empowered individual’; a concept which has strong associations with a ‘middle class way of life’ (Cohen 2010).

This is illustrated most clearly by the prominent position of the founder, Rob Hopkins, whose skills and passion for the ideals have kept him on centre stage; perhaps comparable to SF founder Carlo Petrini. While subsidiarity may be emphasised in the information disseminated, the systems established to disseminate this information, including Hopkins central presence communicates a different message. One of the TT principles includes a commitment to ‘trust them to make good decisions’, but to what extent does a centrally controlled model with such a key figurehead communicate such trust? To what extent does this connect with the self determination of those it seeks to engage? Are the systems that have been established connecting with the belief of a popular audience in their personal ability to affect change? The movement has received criticism for these contradictions (Connors 2010).

The principles associated with establishing a TT suggest ‘integrate rather than segregate’ from which they emphasise partnerships, however the focus on inclusion does not communicate a message of equal respect or unity. What would happen if the TT concept and Slow City concept met in one community. Would an equal partnership transpire? It seems unlikely.

Is the TT label similarly being prioritised over its core objectives? To what extent has the well intended TT just become another competitive entity? Does an entity have to be willing to compromise its own identity in order to achieve community development ideals?

It seems that social movements are well known to have limitations for inclusion (Connors 2010) and their tendency to be “fragmented, parochial and of limited duration and effectiveness” (Hillier 2002 quoted in Scott-Cato & Hillier 2010). Are popular movements any different?

Popular movements clarified

The Oxford Dictionary defines an institution as;

“The giving of form or order to a thing; orderly arrangement; regulation.”

Therefore, according to Jellin’s description of a popular movement, when collective action adopts order it is no longer using “non-institutional channels”. The definition suggests that in the process of formulating their demands there is a search for a form of action or order ‘to advance those demands and to stabilise themselves as collective subjects...’

It may be argued therefore that the territory of a popular movement is the messy, still conceptual, yet to be defined and therefore unbounded, raw idea which may emerge and shift in place and time in a spontaneous manner. Once it takes some form it therefore loses its status as a popular movement.

Subject to the personal appeal of such a raw idea, the ‘popular movement’ moment connects with the concept of community development because the idea still holds appeal for individuals and communities to claim some ownership and their own effective control and application of it, on their own terms of reference, which appeals to the concept of self determination.

Berger (2007 quoted in Connors 2010) notes; ‘the promise of a movement is in its future victory whereas the promise of the incidental moments are instantaneous’ It is in this instantaneous

moment that an audience may be inspired by a concept, however the engagement of a diverse audience will depend on the means to which they are able to relate to the ideas on their own terms of reference.

It may be argued therefore that in the sites where SF and TT have become or are becoming established and finding form based on the TT guidelines, no longer hold the status of a popular movement. This also suggests the same for the examples of popular movements listed in Broham's article. The 637 000 women that were inspired to join groups in Kenya were likely to have been mobilised because of a belief in their personal ability to affect change, in their own lives and/or their families and communities. Structure is required to continue this momentum and ultimately the form such structures take as the popular movement graduates to an entity such as a social movement and/or NGO, will influence its ability to engage a diverse audience.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that a mass of people can be mobilised when a concept is both born out of, and emerges into, a time and place where its central ideas connect personally with the interests and/or concerns of a popular mass of people.

The extent to which a movement can engage a diverse array of participants has been shown to be independent of its commitment to the CD principles of empowerment, participation, subsidiarity and sustainability, as shown through the example of the Slow Movements which has involved large numbers of people from diverse communities. In contrast the TT movement has, to date, engaged a fairly narrow community despite clear objectives of inclusion and a strong commitment to the interdependent principles of CD.

However, a movement's ability to truly celebrate diversity does not come from its ability to simply involve those from a spectrum of economic, political and social backgrounds. The example of the Slow Food's response to Ethiopia's Wukro honey indicates that structures established to empower vulnerable targets can instead undermine the long term transformation in a target community. The structure of the Transition Towns movement is similarly at risk of undermining its objectives also and this example has revealed tensions within the CD principles of subsidiarity and sustainability.

In addition, the concept of a popular movement as an enduring entity in any time and place has been revealed as a myth. A popular movement exists and travels in the space where an idea can still be claimed as personal. It is argued that it is in this unstructured form that a concept is best able to appeal to the self determination of a diverse group of people and therefore truly celebrate diversity.

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