

DEFINING INDIGENOUS RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN NEWCASTLE AS A COLLECTIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Dr Deirdre Howard-Wagner
Lecturer – Socio-Legal Studies
Department of Sociology and Social Policy
University of Sydney

deirdre.howard-wagner@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to give consideration to Indigenous rights activism in Newcastle Australia in relation the literature on social movement theory. The paper does not expressly adopt one approach over another, such as theories of resource mobilisation and political process or theories of framing or theories of movement identity. Instead, it draws on a number of key definitional concepts within the social movement scholarship to explain how Indigenous rights activism in Newcastle constitutes a collective social movement. It also considers the importance of particular mobilising social organisations in maintaining this collective social movement, and the significance of ‘tactical repertoires’ of protest adopted to progress Indigenous rights and bring about social change.

Key words: Indigenous peoples, rights, activism, social movements, whiteness.

Introduction

The paper engages with qualitative empirical data to describe how Indigenous rights activism in Newcastle Australia constitutes a ‘collective social movement’. This is a ‘collective social movement’ mobilised by ‘movement entrepreneurs’ (Tarrow 1998: 6) around a ‘consensual collective activity’ (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 23) – progressing Indigenous rights. Furthermore, these ‘movement entrepreneurs’ are engaged in a range of ‘tactical repertoires’ (Taylor and van Dyke 2004: 263) – both conventional and cultural – that progress Indigenous rights.

Methodology

The qualitative empirical data presented here is drawn from sociological ethnographic research conducted over a two and a half year period in Newcastle – from early 2001 to late 2003 and 2005. The specific empirical research data engaged with in the paper is based on a documentary analysis of historical documents of two key non-Indigenous organisations, the Newcastle Trades Hall Council (NTHC) and the Newcastle Aboriginal Support Group (NASG), who were particularly active in mobilising the struggle for Indigenous rights both nationally and at the local level; participant observation at various meetings and events aimed at progressing Indigenous rights; and, in-depth interviews with various non-Indigenous and Indigenous activists in Newcastle. The qualitative empirical data is analysed using a constructivist approach, which treats the data as a social phenomena as opposed to empirical fact.

Social Movement Theory

The social movement literature distinguishes between collective social action and a social movement, arguing that the former does not necessarily constitute the later. Diani (2000: 156), for example, argues that a social movement is a particular social dynamic, involving a plurality of social actors who are on the same side of social conflict. More recently, Diani (2010: 232) defined a social movement as a mode of coordinated collective action that is ‘based on sustained networks of coordination between independent, autonomous organizations and groups’, whose components are related via ‘specific intense solidarity’ that extend beyond the boundaries of a particular organisation. Solidarity does not imply homogeneity, but, often, common understandings and shared frames, linking heterogeneous actors that assign shared meanings to otherwise distinctive events (Diani 2010: 232). This definition consolidates aspects of the existing and somewhat disparate definitions of a collective social movement given over the last thirty years by leading social movement theorists, such as Melucci (1980, 1985), Touraine (1981, 1985), and Tilly (1998). Arguably too, I would add that a collective social movement is only sustained if it has the following attributes: ‘movement entrepreneurs’ (Tarrow 1998: 6) or key mobilising social actors or social organisations; ‘consensual collective action’ organised around a ‘shared solidarity and an interpretation of the world’ (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 23-24); and, the movement engages in ‘tactical repertoires’ (Taylor and van Dyke 2004: 263) either conventional and/or cultural forms of protest that are successful in bringing about social change.

Indigenous rights activism in Newcastle

Indigenous rights activism in Newcastle can be defined as a collective social movement, because it is more than a social process involving social action (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 21). An informal dense social network exists around the struggle for Indigenous rights in Newcastle, dating back to the 1960s.

In the late 20th Century and early 21st Century, in some ways the agendas and rationalities of dissident politics in Newcastle has significantly changed from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The local struggle for Indigenous rights in Newcastle involves what Maddison and Martin (2010: 109) refer to as a bivalent mixing of the ‘old’ agendas of economic redistribution and ‘new’ agendas of cultural recognition aspects of collective social movements. Over the years, this has been a struggle for economic redistribution and socio-economic justice for Indigenous peoples, as well as cultural recognition and anti-racism. This movement led to the establishment of the Awabakal Co-op, whose establishment has led to the development of an Aboriginal Medical Service, an Aboriginal Aged Care Service and Aboriginal Child Care Service, for example. Today’s agenda ranges from supporting the local Indigenous community in the struggle, local land rights and native title claims and protection of cultural heritage through to petitioning local government for recognition of Awabakal place names.

Yet, those non-Indigenous and Indigenous people actively involved in promoting Indigenous rights in Newcastle prefer to not simply label themselves as activists or to talk about left wing politics. This has certain connotations of radicalism associated with 1960s protest marches, politically confronting actions, as well as certain Communist leftist overtones. To simply describe the objectives of such people or organisations as

operating within a discursive logic of emancipatory politics or even dissident politics is also limiting. The term counter-cultural movement more aptly defines the practices of those involved in progressing Indigenous rights in Newcastle today. For example, as one interviewee involved in the organisation of the Cultural Stomp festival pointed out: “Our actions are not in any way political and we do not want any involvement in politics. Our approach is peaceful consciousness raising.”¹ The term ‘counter-culture movement’ refers to ‘outsider groups, which are opposed to the theoretical assertions of the dominant group’ (Eco 1994: 115).

Today, local organisations involved in progressing Indigenous rights are local branches of national organisations, such as Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR), and other local organisations, such as the Newcastle Aboriginal Support Group (NASG). While Indigenous people are members of such organisations, these organisations work alongside the local Indigenous community and organisations such as the Awabakal Land Council and/or Awabakal Co-operative in the progressing of Indigenous rights. Other organisations involved in promoting Indigenous rights include members of organising committees involved in the organisation of annual festivals, such as Cultural Stomp.

For example, focusing on the work of the NASG, as the following extract from interview data indicates, the Indigenous rights movement in Newcastle is about Indigenous people leading non-Indigenous people:

Interviewee 2: We should talk about the way that the Support Group got set up. It was quite innovative at the time that it was not whites leading blacks. We were told whitefella business was

about raising awareness among the whitefella community - it was our responsibility to inform our peers. That is why we had one or two events raising white awareness... That was very much about what our group was doing to raise white's awareness... It was so hard for the people who came to that to say that they were raising white awareness and they all said how good they were doing things for Aborigines - to get out of the patronising mode was very difficult. Interviewee 1: I remember those people that came along were very patronising. And, our President he would see red...

NASG's agenda is not about 'inclusiveness' or 'doing good things for Aborigines'; it is about 'changing white peoples' attitudes; it is a local movement focusing on Indigenous social, political and cultural rights, including rights to land. It is about shifting rationalities away from notions that white people are doing 'good things for Aborigines', which are considered patronising, to raising non-Indigenous awareness about Indigenous issues.

Collective identity and shared solidarity

Indigenous rights activism in Newcastle can also be characterised as what Della Porta and Diani (2006: 23-24) refer to as a 'consensual collective action' that is organised around a 'shared solidarity and an interpretation of the world' or what Diani (1992: 162) refers to as the framing process of common meaning that the activist subject gives to

their movement. It is often a shared ethical subjectivity. The above interview extract, for example, encapsulates this ethical subjectivity that shapes such activist practices.

The discourses of Indigenous rights activists in Newcastle evidence the existence of a double consciousness through the presentation of an alternative narrative. Here I invert Gilroy's notion of double consciousness (Gilroy 1993). This double consciousness establishes the motives of the broader collective social movement, which challenges the historical legacy and persistence of colonial practices in Australia's cultural and social institutions, in particular our political, education and media institutions. Such practices come under the scrutiny of counter-cultural organisations in Newcastle, and they work to expose how postcolonial practices continue to operate as acts of domination, forming the basis for a collective social movement to bring about social change.

Also, events organised by the NASG are aimed at resisting and challenging dominant cultural values of whiteness through practices, which bring about social change. This is achieved by holding, in consultation with the Indigenous community, public forums on issues such as racism, reconciliation, a treaty, local Aboriginal land claims, local Aboriginal place names and stories, as well as cultural activities, such as cultural awareness training, and cultural site tours for non-Indigenous people.

More aptly then, the tactical repertoires of the activist subject are representative of a countervailing discursive position that contests the dominant cultural representations of whiteness, which emerges as what Laclau (1990) refers to as a social subjectivity. Also, we can draw on Foucault's (1994 & 1997) notion of subjectivity to understand how the discourses and practices of the activist subject marks whiteness and challenge the

dominant social, cultural, economic and political practices. Thus, Foucault's hypothesis in relation to disciplinary power, the subject and resistance would also seem appropriate here in that this is a new form of resistance to the disciplinary power of whiteness. Resistance to forms of subjectification too falls more clearly within the category of Foucault's (1976: 95 & 1994) notion of 'counter conduct' in that they involve 'struggle[s] against the processes implemented for conducting others'. It is the will not to be governed in this form, but to be conducted differently (Foucault 2007: 195).

Social activism mobilising a collective social movement

Indigenous rights activism does not simply as Touraine (1981 & 1985) suggests coincide with particular political event or conflict, such as a land right dispute, but rather as Melucci (1985) suggests it is a constantly active movement in both the arenas of political and cultural production. It is the construction of an alternative discursive logic in which Indigenous rights becomes central. While cultural production and 'consciousness raising' takes the form of Indigenous cultural site tours and Cultural Awareness training, community volunteering in the form of prison visits and providing administrative assistance to local Indigenous organisations also forms part of the work of the NASG. The repertoire of tactics adopted by the NASG to promote Indigenous rights and bring about social change vary from writing letters to local, state and federal members through to acting as an umbrella organisation. In acting as an umbrella organization, the NASG takes on an administrative role and mobilises a broader informal social network of organisations and individuals to action, which was the case in the organisation of the development of a local document of reconciliation in the early

1990s, the Hunter People's Inquiry into a Treaty in 2000, and A Week of Action Against Racism in 2001.

The NASG acts as what Tarrow (1998: 6) defines elsewhere as 'movement entrepreneurs' in that they play an important role in mobilising a broader community consensus and action around a shared commitment to Indigenous rights. This network is activated quite simply via members of one organisation, such as the NASG, emailing members of Amnesty International or ANTaR. Alternatively, an organisation may post an article or advertisement in the newsletter of another organisation or attend and make announcements at general meetings of another organisation. Within organisations, members email one another or use telephone trees to alert other members of events and actions. Many members of one organisation are often members of several other organisations, so word of mouth also plays an important role in the transmission of information.

A collective social movement, tactical repertoires and the progression of Indigenous rights in Newcastle

Thus, the tactics of protest adopted in the struggle for Indigenous rights in Newcastle include what Taylor and van Dyke (2004: 263) refer to as conventional strategies and cultural forms of creative political expression. Conventional strategies include petitions, letter writing, vigils, lobbying and peaceful marches. Cultural forms of creative political expression range from what St John (2008: 167) calls the 'carnavalesque protestival' like Cultural Stomp and live theatre and performance and photographic exhibitions through to the more mainstream cultural forms, such as cultural festivals like Mattara, street parades,

exhibitions and cultural practices of everyday life. For example, as a carnivalesque protestival, Cultural Stomp performs multiple functions. It has held discussion forums on the Stolen Generation and reconciliation. It provides networking opportunities and public awareness raising in the form of activist and community organisation stalls. It is a forum for protest in the form of live theatre performance. It is a celebration of cultural diversity in the form of smoking ceremonies, Indigenous dance, as well as multicultural music (Indonesian Gamelon) and dance (belly dancing). It is a way of imagining a new society that is more inclusive and celebrates its cultural diversity. (St John 2008: 168; Ainger et al 2003: 180) As one person involved in the organisation of Cultural Stomp noted, the tactics of protest are “non-violent, apolitical and about inclusive consciousness raising”.²

Similarly, those events that resulted in Newcastle becoming the first local government area to sign a Document of Reconciliation involved both conventional strategies and cultural forms of creative political expression. In 1993, Newcastle City Council, Indigenous and non-Indigenous community leaders, along with 3000 individuals signed a local document of reconciliation. The initial stages involved the lobbying of local government to sign a document of reconciliation, which recognised Indigenous rights, and that non-Indigenous Australians obstruct Indigenous rights and must consciously act to remove these barriers was conventional in nature. Yet, Coming Together Day – the public ceremony held to mark the occasion and engage the public in signing the document – took place on Newcastle’s foreshore and reflected Indigenous tradition and culture. It was a community event led by the Indigenous community, and Ray Kelly, a local Indigenous rights and reconciliation activist of Dhan-Ghadi descent, was instrumental in the event taking place. As Farrell and Meehan (1997: 345-347) describe the event: ‘We walked in a

snake formation and passed through eucalyptus smoke as a purifying before shaking hands with the Aboriginal Elders... None of us had dreamt of that day some two thousand non-Aboriginal people would pass through the smoke and join the celebrations together with about five hundred Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people...’.

The document itself was not simply a symbolic gesture recognising Indigenous rights, but a commitment by non-Indigenous Novocastrians to the Indigenous communities living in Newcastle to overcome racism. For many years, the document was used as the basis for local Kooris and Gooris to make claims relating to the recognition of Indigenous rights. The local government worked closely with the local Indigenous community by holding forums to discuss ways of actioning the ‘Commitment’. The forums led to the development of an action plan for implementing Indigenous rights.

Moreover, in 1997, the then Mayor and Councillors of Newcastle City Council developed their own commitment to those Indigenous Australians living in the Newcastle region, which expressly outlined ‘practical’ measures for recognising Indigenous rights locally, such as the recovery of local languages and the recognition of Awabakal sites, stories and names on local signage.

Thus, the political and conscious raising strategies are not peripheral acts held on the margin of society. Such acts involve direct engagement with the community and government, including local government, state and federal MPs, in the progressing of Indigenous rights. Other initiatives, for example, include the Hunter People’s Inquiry into a Treaty, which was organised by the NASG, with the encouragement and support of the local Indigenous community groups and individuals. The forum was held at the Newcastle Regional Museum on 4 November 2000, making it the

first black/white public inquiry into a treaty at the local level in Australia.³ Eighty people attended the event; at least half of those people were Kooris or Gooris. Dr Bill Jonas, a local Worimi, who has affiliations with the local Indigenous community in Newcastle, and was the then Aboriginal and Torres Social Justice Commissioner, chaired the forum.⁴ Attendees were invited to talk about their visions, concerns, and any issues relating to a treaty. Written submissions from Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations that were unable to be represented at the forum were also received. All speeches and submissions were transcribed, coded and presented in a report. The NASG then wrote to Newcastle's Lord Mayor inviting him to hold an official ceremony so that the document could be handed over to representatives from the three levels of government. The report titled: 'Let's Get on With It – Report of the Hunter Peoples' Inquiry into a Treaty'⁵ was handed to the three levels of government on 3 June 2001 (Mabo Day) in a ceremony held in the Lord Mayor's Function Room. Local Elders and Indigenous spokespeople addressed officials and handed over the document to the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, and local state and federal Members of Parliament. In handing the document over to the three levels of government, politicians were brought into the process, and politicians became actively engaged in the issues. The Lord Mayor tabled the Report in Council. The state member tabled the Report in the Parliament of New South Wales. The federal member tabled the report in the Australian Federal Parliament.

By engaging with the political at this level, the media's attention is also engaged positively. The media gets drawn into the process because of its attraction to events involving public figureheads and local initiatives and the reporting of such events,

which raises the profile of the story in the local NBN television news broadcasts, the local Newcastle Herald, and ABC radio interviews.

Conclusion

There is limited space here to explore the many examples that could be presented to support the claims made above. Nonetheless, within the available space the paper has attempted to demonstrate the following. Indigenous rights activism in Newcastle is not temporary in nature. It has involved sustained tactics of protest for Indigenous rights dating back to the 1960s. This is a multi-dimensional urban social movement embedded in space and place (Leach and Scoones 2007: 14), involving local citizens who act as members of a socially and spatially embedded community (Leach and Scoones 2007: 15). In some instances, such as those initiatives emerging out the NASG, the target for political mobilisation is not only local government, but also state and federal government. In other instances though, while social activism emerges as forms of everyday resistance to both local and national political processes, initiatives are aimed at ‘consciousness raising’ among the mainstream ‘white’ community, as is the intent of Cultural Stomp. The Indigenous rights movement in Newcastle is also a source of social innovation and has been successful in bringing about social change and progressing Indigenous rights at the local level.

¹ Cultural Stomp an annual festival of cultural diversity that was first held as a peaceful demonstration of cultural diversity to counter the negative statements made by Pauline Hanson, who was speaking at the same time in Newcastle Civic Hall.

² Extract from interview with a member of Cultures in Action, which is responsible for bringing together an informal social network of organisations and individuals in the organisation of the annual Cultural Stomp festival.

³ Newcastle Aboriginal Support Group (2001) 'Let's Get On With It': The Hunter People's Inquiry into a Treaty, prepared by the Newcastle Aboriginal Support Group.

⁴ Dr Bill Jonas was a lecturer at Newcastle University and has worked with the local Indigenous community in a study titled: On the fringes of Newcastle: a matter of people (Hall and Jonas, 1985). Dr Jonas is a Worimi. The Worimi land is north of Newcastle across the Hunter River, and includes the Newcastle suburb of Stockton within its boundaries.

⁵ 'Treaty - Let's get on with it' was the NAIDOC week theme in 2001.

References

Ainger, K., Chesters, G., Credland, T., Jordan, J., Stern, A. & Whitney, J. (eds) (2003)

We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism, London: Verso.

Della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (2006) *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Second edition, Blackwell Publishing: Malden, Oxford, Carlton.

Diani, M. (2000) 'The Concept of Social Movement', in K. Nash (ed) *Readings in Contemporary Political Sociology*, Blackwell Publishers: Malden, Oxford: 155-176

-
- Diani, M. (2010) 'Struggling Movements in Dubious Opportunities – An Afterword to Surviving Neoliberalism: The Persistence of Australian Social Movements', *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 9 (2): 229-233.
- Eco, U. (1994) *Apocalypse Postponed*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis.
- Farrell, M and Meehan, D. (1997) 'Coming Together Day: Two Looks', in P. Walsh (ed.), *Novocastrian Tales*, Elephant Press: New Lambton, NSW: 345-350.
- Foucault, M. (1976) *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Pantheon Books: New York.
- Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Penguin Books: London.
- Foucault, M. (1978) 'Governmentality', a lecture given at the College de France in February 1978, translated by P. Pasquino, *Aut Aut*, September-December, pp.167-8.
- Foucault, M. (1990) *The History of Sexuality, Volume One, An Introduction*. Penguin Books: London.
- Foucault, M (1994) 'The Subject and Power', in J. D. Faubion (ed.), *Power – Essential Works of Foucault 1954 – 1984, Volume 3*, Penguin Books: London, England.
- Foucault, M. (1997) *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume One*, P. Rabinow (ed.), Penguin Books: London.
- Foucault, M (2007) *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978*, M Sennellarts (ed.), Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke.
- Gilroy, P. (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge.
- Habermas, J. (1981) 'New Social Movements', *Telos*, Vol. 49: 33-37.
- Howard-Wagner, D. (2009) 'Whiteness, power relations, resistance and the practical recognition of Indigenous rights in Newcastle', in *Theory in Action*, US Journal of Transformative Studies, Volume 2 (1): 40-65.
- Laclau, E. (1990) *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, Verso, London and New York.

-
- Leach, M. and Scones, I. (2007) *Mobilising Citizens: Social Movements and the Politics of Knowledge*, Working Paper 276, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK.
- Maddison, S. and Martin, G. (2010) 'Introduction to 'Surviving Neoliberalism: The Persistence of Australian Social Movements', *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 9(2): 101-120.
- Melucci, A. (1980) *The New Social Movement: A Theoretical Approach*, *Social Science Information*, Vol. 19: 199-226.
- Melucci, A. (1985) 'The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements', *Social Research*, Vol. 52: 789-816.
- Tarrow, S. (1998) *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Taylor, V. & van Dyke, N. (2004) "'Get up, Stand up": Tactical Repertoires of Social Movements', in D. Snow, S. Soule, H. Kriesi (eds) *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Oxford, Carlton. Chapter 12.
- Touraine, A. (1981) *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Touraine, A. (1985) 'An Introduction to Social Movements', *Social Research*, Vol. 52: 749-788.
- Tilly, C. (1988) 'Social movements, old and new' in B. Misztal (ed)., *Research in Social Movements: Conflict and Change*, Vol. 10, JAI Press: Greenwich Connecticut.
- St John, G. (2008) 'Protestival: Global Days of Action and Carnivalized Politics in the Present', *Social Movement Studies*, Vol.7(2):167-190.