

A Critical Analysis of a Theoretical Debate on Power of Social Movements – a Case Study of the New Anti-War Movement

TIINA SEPPÄLÄ

Abstract

This article engages with a controversial theoretical debate on power of social movements. Through an empirical case study of four organizations within the new anti-war movement in Britain, it critically analyzes dominant globalist discourses – the liberal cosmopolitan and the radical poststructuralist approaches – as well as their state-centric critiques from the perspective of ‘critical theory in political practice’. It demonstrates that the theories have a problematic tendency to resort to a dualistic ‘either-or’ logic in conceptualizing power of social movements, which represents a clear diversion from the understandings held within the new anti-war movement where conceptions are mixed and overlapping. The article introduces a ‘bothand’ approach that not only reflects more accurately the way in which the relationship between instrumental and symbolic power is conceived within the movement but also provides a more comprehensive perspective for conceptualizing power in the context of social movements generally.