Do Movements Learn? A Commentary on 'A Learning Theory of the American Anti-Vietnam War Movement' by John Vasquez
Author(s): John Shippee
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JOHN SHIPPEE
International Peace Research Institute, Oslo

1. Questionable Assumptions
The principle questions which arise from John Vasquez's article ‘A Learning Theory of the American Anti-Vietnam War Movement’ (JPR, XIII, 4, 1976, pp. 299-314) have to do with the assumptions which underly it. The first of these is that learning theory derived from the American empirical/behaviorist tradition is an adequate tool for explaining ‘how movements learn to adopt and reject different political strategies.’1 The second is that radical movements, though structurally amorphous, organizationally intermittent, and constantly changing in membership, are entities capable of learning. He says:

‘Movement learning can be said to occur when a significant number of persons within the movement learn the same lessons and therefore change the movements' behavior. These individuals will tend to learn the same lessons because they perceive themselves as belonging to a loosely organized group effort, share a common goal and previously learned set of behavior and confront similar experiences and precedents.’2

Vasquez traces the development of the behaviorist-empiricist learning theory which has developed in the fields of social psychology and political socialization from Thorndyke (1898) through Tolman (1932), to Greenstein (1960), Hess and Torney (1968) Weissberg (1974), and Brewer (1975). Nowhere in his discussion are critical learning theorists such as Freire (1971) and Illich (1972, 1973) even mentioned. The same is true for learning theories implicit in works deriving from radical peace and social change movements (Dolci 1968; Lakey 1973) and the growing literature on the pedagogy of peace (Wulf 1974; Haa-velsrud 1975, 1976; Galtung 1974). As a result, Vasquez is left with a basic approach which defines learning as ‘the process by which an activity originates or is changed through reacting to an encountered situation...’ (from Hilgard & Bower 1966). It is static, ahistorical, and descriptive, rather than critical and evaluative—in other words squarely in the tradition of empirical social science which came into full flower in the 1960's.

From a critical perspective, the concept 'learning' might be understood as a process of self-transformation and liberation whereby the learner is increasingly enabled to master and transform his/its environment. Learning in this sense is the equivalent of empowerment underpinned by what Paolo Freire (1971) has called 'critical consciousness'. The latter is in turn closely related to the definition of ‘critique’ as an activity which ‘reconstructs the constitutive genesis of the existing in order to recognize the actual or the universal possibilities that are objectively present in the existing.’3

Assuming for the moment that movements can in fact learn, where does this leave us? Vasquez's approach requires us to compare the diachronic, historically conditioned process of movement development with a fixed and ahistorical set of predictions. Basing himself partially on the assumptions of civil strife theories, he associates movement learning with increasing levels of force and ultimately violence, in more or less linear progression until:

a) the movements goals are attained;
b) the movement disintegrates into factions; or

c) both occur.
A critical understanding of learning, on the other hand, would enable us to evaluate movements in terms of their ability to act on the environment and to transform themselves in the process. — Not reactive behavior. But does it matter?

A critical theory of movement learning can help organizers and activists to overcome potential rigidities in evaluating past actions, and to emphasize explicitly the conscientization process in their future work. This in itself increases the critical learning capabilities of movement constituents.

The approach is richer than that of Vasquez because the content of learning is not assumed, nor is the direction of change. Learning can therefore modify structures, salient operational values and even goals, as well as strategies. Learners are seen as potentially conscious of the dialectical and historical processes acting on themselves and able to change them (Freire, 1971). The Vasquez approach loses any predictive power it may have if historical circumstances change. Its predictive capabilities also rest on the assumption that movements and their constituents are incapable of critical learning.

Vasquez suggests that movement strategies only change (in line with Tolman's principle of least effort) when it becomes obvious that goals are not being achieved. Arguing from literature on political socialization, Vasquez suggests that the movement would successively pursue strategies of moral suasion and argument, showing the unpopularity of the war by mass demonstrations and ultimately attempts to change policy through the electoral process. Violence is likely to break out only when these strategies are exhausted (Vasquez, 1976, p. 304).

Vasquez and the critical theorists part ways on the principle of least effort which may have a certain empirical validity, but is ultimately mystifying. It does not allow for the learners' potential to actively decide to undertake more energetic or original efforts to attain their goals. Nor does it allow for a deeper criticism than determined by the least effort principle.

2. The 'Movement' as a Unit of Analysis

Vasquez's study proceeds from the assumption that movements as such engage in learning. It is a proposition which is difficult to support. Furthermore, movements which consist of loose and ever-changing conglomerations of individuals and organizations and, at best, intermittent and rapidly changing leadership, are clumsy units of analysis with respect to learning — whether one's approach is behavioristically or critically oriented. This leads to a number of difficulties which will be discussed below.

Learning is an activity which implies the existence of one or more learners. Individuals, organizations, and institutions are capable of learning because they share certain characteristics such as:

1) memory
2) distinct boundaries
3) coherent and continuously operating means of receiving, evaluating and storing information and values — as well as means of acting on them — in short, consciousness.

Movements which are not at the same time organizations do not possess these characteristics.

Vasquez's characterization of political movements cited above certainly does not fit these requirements. The American anti-war movement itself was a multi-headed, constantly changing body with nothing formally defining membership, organizational structure or ultimate responsibility. Organizational frameworks tended to be intermittent, transitory, and at best partial.

The only collective consciousness which can be said to exist in such a movement is the rather loose variety postulated by Durkheim. Whether this type of consciousness — assuming for the moment that it exists — is capable of either critical or behavioristic learning is doubtful. Vasquez is left with the operational necessity of treating the anti-war movement as if it were an organization,
which it manifestly was not.

The other, more interesting alternative, would be to analyze the learning process undergone by more coherent organizations which were a part of the anti-war movement. SDS, The Winter Soldier Organization, The Central Committee for Conscientious Objection, The New Mobilization, A Quaker action group, and perhaps the anti-war organizations on highly involved and marginally involved university campuses would have made interesting subjects. Using a critical rather than empirical/behavioural understanding of the learning process would add to the relevance of such an effort.

3. Analytical Difficulties

As it is, Vasquez's assumptions make for needless difficulties in analysis and obscure a number of important questions and issues.

3.1. The Problem of Linearity

The way Vasquez sets up his model, he is faced with the task of fitting non-linear and widely varied phenomena into the linear and relatively uniform framework implied in his model. Nowhere does he explicitly present a non-linear formulation of the process of strategy change which would more adequately fit the data he presents (Vasquez 1976, pp. 305-309). This material suggests that strategic changes occurred in a process resembling wave-action — a new 'wave' building up as the previous one dies away. Certainly while some parts of the anti-war movement were emphasizing moral argument, mass demonstrations and large scale obstructions were beginning elsewhere. In Berkeley this sort of thing was going on as early as the summer and fall of 1965 — when the moral argument phase was at its height. Elsewhere, especially where the anti-war movement took a relatively long time to penetrate, the different strategy 'waves' tended to pile up on top of one another. Indeed, from 1970 to 1973 all of the strategies discussed by Vasquez were being employed to a greater or lesser extent.

3.2. What Was the 'Anti-War Movement?'

The examples Vasquez gives hints that he considers it to have included national organizations, the more involved and visible campuses, and certain highly publicized events, such as the Viet-Nam Summer Campaign and the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968. Marginal university campuses, the events following the Kent State killings and Cambodia invasion, and the development of anti-war activity in the military and among returned veterans are hardly mentioned. The need to generalize for a single, very unwieldy and diffuse unit of analysis means that quite a bit of significant (and perhaps inconsistent) information is left out. However, we are never really given the geographic or institutional boundaries of the movement in the article.

3.3. Can a Movement Have a Strategy?

As the above discussion suggests, the anti-war movement appears to have several simultaneous strategies, distinguished by degree of dominance rather than exclusive reliance on one or another. This appears to be natural in what was, after all, a multi-organizational phenomenon.

3.3 Can A Movement Have a Strategy?

Vasquez assumes that changes in strategy in the direction of greater force are operationally equivalent to learning behavior. This approach gives us no basis for evaluating the effect of strategic change on learning and vice-versa. If a critical learning theory is adopted, the difficulty vanishes. We can then evaluate the effect of action on conscientization and conscientization on action. Particular strategic changes in the direction of greater force or violence may indeed signify the opposite of learning — rigidly following a previously digested formula for example. In this respect groups like the Weatherpeople may indeed have gone over to a new paradigm when they began to use property destruction as a tactic. Whether this represented critical learning on their part is open to question and whether (given
the historical setting) it fostered it in others, is doubtful.

The effect of learning on strategy change is an equally important issue. Clearly, more forceful, mass-based strategies cannot be employed successfully unless the 'mass' is ready to adopt them. Vasquez's frame of reference cannot provide an evaluation of the factors internal or external to the movement which create a more critical consciousness, and therefore the possibility of more widely based and/or more system-threatening action. Nor can it provide a very satisfactory analysis of reasons why particular events in given historical contexts (My Lai, the Kent State killings, the 1968 Convention, publication of the Pentagon Papers) have an effect on critical learning and the actions that follow.

3.5. The Rule of Least Effort vs. Conscientization

In the context of radical political action, Tolman's rule of least effort (Tolman, 1932) needs thorough evaluation. Though it is undoubtedly followed by many, the exceptions may prove to be more important in terms of movement effect. Certainly no person or group which consciously challenges the legitimacy of the system in which they are living or required to function (e.g. the draft) are following the rule of least effort. Draft card burners and draft resisters early in the war and military deserters later on cannot easily be fitted into this rule. (Of course, affective motivations cannot always be ruled out.) If the rule of least effort is interpreted in the context of the individual (or organization) cognitive map, it becomes tautological.

3.6. Learning and Further Social Change

Vasquez's use of a reactive rather than critical approach combined with his interest in aggression is another limiting factor combined with his use of the entire movement as a unit of analysis. It prevents us from looking for learning processes and changes in consciousness that have contributed the basis for even more fundamental criticism of American society, politics, and foreign policy. The anti-war movement, often in combination with other parallel and overlapping movements:

1) helped bring about and spread a new understanding of the economic basis and imperialist character of American foreign policy;
2) contributed to the establishment of new critical trends in research and teaching in a number of fields, including history, foreign policy, economics, sociology, political science and anthropology;
3) contributed to the understanding and delegitimation of sexism in American public life;
4) fundamentally shook the roots of the legitimacy of the American political system as a whole, and brought about the beginnings of an examination of alternative political and economic structures.

Yet another issue which Vasquez cannot address is why the anti-war movement, the changes in analysis which accompanied it, and the parallel critical movements in other areas of American life, did not lead to a more fundamental alteration of the American political and social system. This can be laid at the feet of the ahistoricity of his approach. There is no attempt to analyze the role of historical or class context on the learning processes which occurred in the anti-war movement. This leads to an attempt to draw general conclusions from movement manifestations which are principally confined to the highly visible major middle-class university context and its offshoots. No attempt is made to compare this to movement manifestations and learning in the army, minority groups, etc. More importantly, the empirical-behavioral approach Vasquez takes does not allow us to compare the actual learning processes engendered by the anti-war movement with the potential which might have been generated through different approaches. This would not only have provided a richer understanding of movement dynamics and the social, economic, and cultural factors which underpin them, but also of the movement-strategic and more general
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socio-cultural factors which limited or enhanced the critical learning potential generated by the anti-war movement in specific contexts.

4. Conclusion
The principle limitations of the Vasquez article involve application of a learning theory which ignores the human potential for mastery and action (as opposed to reaction) to an entity which cannot learn. The anti-war movement was a many-headed conglomeration which was constantly learning different things at very different rates which the ahistoricity and implicit linearity of Vasquez approach does not capture very well. It would be more interesting to have more limited application and comparisons of critical learning theories applied to movements seen in their social and historical contexts. This would allow us to analyze how learning affects movement strategy and action, and the effect of the latter on the former. We could also explore more fully the effects of social and historical factors as limitations or enhancers of the critical learning process more fully than the Vasquez article allows us to.

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Reid, Herbert G. and Ernest J. Yanarella, 1976. 'Toward a Critical Theory of Peace Research in the United States: The Search for an Intelligible Core', Journal of Peace Research, XIII, No. 4, p. 320. This article, which follows Vasquez in the same issue of JPR, is itself a thoroughgoing implicit critique of the approach which he has adopted.
4. This was particularly apparent at university campuses on the margin of movement activity. For example during the 1969-70 academic year at California State University, Fullerton, everything from argument to moral witness to sporadic violence was experienced. It is also of interest that anti-Vietnam war activity was thoroughly mixed in with a host of local issues and challenges to accepted cultural standards. Thus, the various movements which were occurring during the 1960's exhibited similar 'wave' patterns to that of the anti-war movement taken by itself.

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2. ibid.
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