Introduction

February 2011, City Hall Park, New York City. Ten thousand people mass together on a clear morning to proclaim their solidarity with public sector workers in the state of Wisconsin. With their supporters, public sector workers have been protesting for more than two weeks at the capitol in Madison, and have occupied the building. There, Governor Scott Walker has just proposed a law ending union rights for public sector workers. We stand on the sidewalk, penned into areas separated by metal police barriers, holding placards, shouting slogans and appreciation to passing, honking motorists, and listening to a stream of union bigwigs and politicians from the Democratic Party denounce Governor Walker, Republican legislators, and policies that have caused epochal inequality in the United States. The crowd at City Hall has gathered on three days’ notice, contacted by friends, unions, and other organisations, most often through email lists, such as those maintained by MoveOn.org, an online, centre-left advocacy broker.

A visitor from Wisconsin reads out a statement of solidarity from her daughter’s friend, an Egyptian student who has joined the Revolution with hundreds of thousands of others demonstrating in Tahrir Square, in Cairo. During these weeks, images of solidarity signs from Madison, Wisconsin to Cairo and back circulate on the Internet.
Vast gulfs separate the demonstrations at City Hall Park, the state capitol in Madison, and in Tahrir Square and before that in Tunisia, as well as the revolutionary situations in the Middle East and the often militant demonstrations and strikes in Greece, Britain, and so on which preceded them. Nevertheless, the important element of mutual public statements of solidarity between Madison and Cairo is that far-flung protesters are drawing inspiration from each other and beginning to see their struggles as connected. This opens up a set of questions that is at once analytical and political:

– How are contemporary struggles of people from Egypt to Wisconsin, and from Greece to India connected?
– Given the connection among struggles, how can people best conduct local action while building solidarity with others in ways that advance a larger project of freedom?
– How do activists and others make sense of these struggles, why do they do so as they do, and what can be done to promote alternatives to dominant ways of understanding contemporary social relations?
– How do the legacies of previous struggles prepare us for – or impede us from – fulfilling these tasks?

These are not precisely the questions that scholars of social movements have been asking for the last thirty years or so, but they do bear some family resemblance to their more scholarly cousins. The academic versions most often lead to answers that aspire to a generality that the more activist-analytical ones do not. Academic social movement scholarship asks questions that then get sorted into ‘theories’, or ‘approaches’ whose tenets are supposed to apply across cases and generate testable hypotheses in a predictable way.

This chapter will begin by briefly reviewing these theories according to what kinds of questions they ask and answers they offer. I will argue that each of them does have something to offer an activist understanding of social movements, but that each is also one-sided. They all suggest facets of movement dynamics, but do so as if they were unconnected to each other, or imply that their collisions are contingent rather than systematic. I then offer a different, Marxist approach, drawn largely from the work of Antonio Gramsci, and highlighting five key aspects of Marxism, namely: dialectical totality, contradiction, immanence, coherence, and praxis. What I mean by these will become apparent, but for now it will suffice to say that these aspects shift the analytical and political ground of academic theories towards the initial set of questions, making them both more useful for activism and more comprehensive.