

## Powerful, inspiring work

**Conversations: A Trialogue on Power, Intervention and Organization in Fisheries. Aliou Sall, Michael Belliveau and Nalini Nayak**

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**C**onversations is one of those rare books where individuals deeply involved in organizational work have reflected upon it in a manner that is simultaneously engaged and objective, personal and theoretical.

Aliou Sall, Michael Belliveau and Nalini Nayak have all been involved with fisheries for over two decades. Each has played a foundational role in organizing fishing people in their respective countries of Senegal, Canada and India.

Aliou Sall has been working with fishing people since the 1970s, and was a founder of the Collectif National des Pêcheurs Artisans du Sénégal (CNPS), a national organization. Michael Belliveau worked, from 1981 until his untimely death in 2001, as a full-time staff person for the Maritime Fishermen's Union (MFU) in the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

Nalini Nayak has worked with fishing communities since 1967, and was involved in the founding of the Kerala Malsya Thozhilali Federation (KSMTF) in the State of Kerala, and later, the India-wide National Fishworkers Forum (NFF). She has also been central in introducing a feminist perspective into issues of both resource management and organization in fisheries.

Together, the three authors and co-interlocutors were among the founders of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) in 1986, and have, since then, collaborated periodically on common projects or discussions. Conversations grew out of their desire to

engage each other in a sustained reflection on their shared and separate experiences.

The book has two parts. The first consists of a triologue among the three, carried out over the space of a week in a guesthouse in Ghana. The second consists of essays by each on the character of the fishery and the history of organizational efforts in their region. The authors also use the essays to further develop some of the themes of the triologue.

Taken together, the triologue and the essays reveal the fertile and creative mind of the organizer of the project, who must combine theory, new ideas, and an awareness of larger history and current developments with a deep knowledge and appreciation of her chosen milieu—technical aspects of the sector, the culture and psychology of the community—and then weigh all this against a judgement of the ripeness of the times and of what is possible, to devise institutions that will be viable, appropriate and durable or campaigns that will be powerful and effective. Michael Belliveau's essay is particularly brilliant in this regard. It is written as a reflection, both personal and theoretical, but it also serves as a history of the MFU. Events in the MFU and the parts of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia that it operates in are tied to shifts in resource patterns, Canadian government policy and international markets, as well as to world events and larger political forces. In its depth and long sweep, it is almost as if Belliveau sensed that this would be his closing statement, his summing up of his own life in the context of his work.

### Wide range

The conversation ranges widely, and any review can only hint at its richness and complexity. It goes from

autobiographical sketches of the authors' early politicization, to broad subjects such as the changing nature of social science, and to questions particular to fisheries, such as the role of fisheries science and models of resource management.

**F**resh insight is provided into some of the enduring themes of political organizing—the relationship of the 'outsider' or professional organizer to the community she works with; whether working people identify in terms of class or community; voluntarism versus waiting for the right conjuncture of conditions; sector-specific issues versus broader political issues and alliances; what a feminist approach to organizing would look like; the relationship of funded non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to unions and movements—and into themes peculiar to the current period: what community management might mean in a period of growing individualism; the power to organize and modes of organization in an era of globalization.

Senegal, Canada and India all have large and significant fisheries, but there are important differences between them and between their larger national contexts. The Canadian fishery is the most technologically developed and capital-intensive, and has the greatest amount of State intervention and

regulation. Fishermen had some power in the provinces where fisheries is a major source of occupation, such as Newfoundland (when the cod was plentiful, a situation that has changed with the collapse of the cod fishery). The MFU represents inshore owner-operators in the province of New Brunswick and a few villages in Nova Scotia.

Senegal is a small and relatively homogenous country. Fish is an important food item in Senegal, and the fishing community, therefore, has some political power. Senegal has a history of fisheries access agreements with various European countries, which use them for access to Senegal's fish resources. The CNPS is an autonomous national organization, unique in a country where most organizations are sponsored by the State.

The fisheries in India employs close to 10 mn people, but they have historically been marginalized as lower castes. While fish is an important food item in coastal areas, it is not so nationally, and fishermen have not had the same political clout nationally as farmers, for instance, have had.

#### **National organization**

The NFF is a national organization in a large and highly diverse society, where no two coastal States speak the same language, and is one of the few unions independent of party affiliation.

There are also several commonalities between the three fisheries. In all of them, community-based, traditional fishing people began to mobilize in response to shrinking access to the resources or to coastal lands, as more 'efficient' exploiters entered the sector, or as coastal lands began to be put to other uses, such as tourism. Much of the conversation in this book, therefore, is devoted to questions of resource management, focusing on the twin aspects of the role of science and the relative roles of State and community. Scientists played a central role in devising resource management models in the Canadian fishery, but the collapse of the cod has revealed the shortcomings of relying on fisheries science and has led to a turn to the 'traditional knowledge' of the fishers. But, the discussants wonder, how much of this is merely fashionable, and how much should fishers share with scientists in the absence of a consensus regarding who will own this information and how it will be used?

Furthermore, there is no easy alternative to scientific management in community management, for the question of community is itself fraught. The process of 'professionalization' of the Canadian fish harvesters is creating a situation where the harvester is increasingly defined by ownership rather than membership in a community. Also, the social security provided by the State has reduced the need for the communal solidarity mentioned in the contexts of India and Senegal. But within these countries as well, this solidarity is diminishing, as the pressure for higher returns and increased consumerism leads to a differentiation based on ownership and access to credit.

In addition, there has always been an ambivalence in fishing people's self-identity—as workers or self-employed owners, and as class or community. And where they identify as a community, it is often on the basis of religious, ethnic or caste identities, as in India, so that an appeal to community may not always have progressive outcomes. All three discussants note wryly the vulnerability of the communities they work with to populist appeals, and to co-optation by members of the community with political aspirations.

Other aspects are also linked to this tangled question of community. The complex relationship between community, class and gender is reflected in the very different space for women's participation in the three contexts. It would seem that, where the fishery is still more of a community affair, women have a greater role to play in the organization itself, whereas in the Canadian context, their role is limited. And conversely, where women have organizational presence and strength, they are more likely to take up issues other than the 'hardcore' ones of resource rights and incomes.

But is it necessarily preferable to take up wider issues? Should fisheries organizations concentrate on sectoral issues, or should they take up broader issues and alliances in larger movements? Michael Belliveau argues that only by focusing on issues such as the restoration of the resource and access rights will fishermen remain with the organization, and only if there is an enduring mass base can the organization keep open some space for supporting progressive politics. This position is certainly confirmed by the observation that organizations that focus increasingly on larger, national-level issues and movements begin to lose their mass base because they are seen as not being able to assist with issues of immediate concern to their members.

However, Belliveau's insistence that organizations focus on 'hardcore' fisheries issues and not "escape into politics", while a salutary check on those pushing purely political agendas, does not then deal with the issue of how these organizations may remain progressive. If no broader ideological work is done, what will ensure that a focus on bread-and-butter issues and professionalization does not lead to conservatism, or that the populism that fishers are vulnerable to is countered?

#### **Progressive position**

Even though he details in his essay the progressive position put forth by the MFU with regard to the dispute over native fishing, it is not clear whether that was due mainly to the presence of people like himself and would have been lost in their absence. Surely, the case demonstrates

only too clearly the need for educational work around issues such as this, one of the most vexed in Canadian politics, where the rights of fishing families must be balanced against a history of expropriation and extreme marginalization of the First Nations.

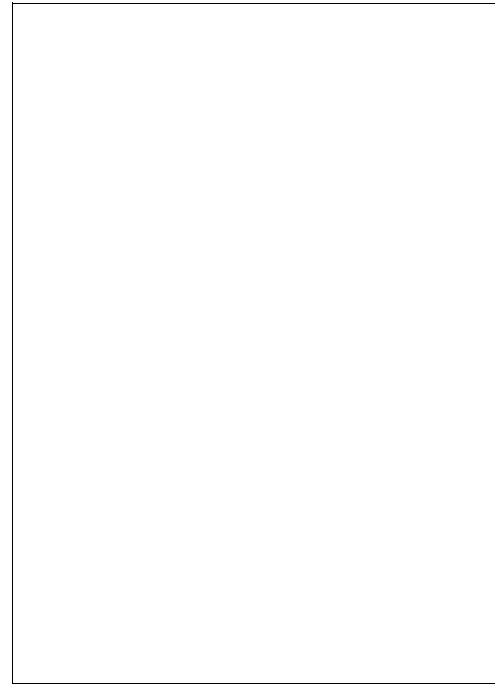
**T**his is the kind of work that has been attempted in India, although it can be strongly resisted, as Nalini Nayak points out when describing attempts to introduce a feminist perspective as well as one concerned with self-limitation of capacity within the community.

This leads to another recurring trope of the conversation—that of the relationship of the ‘outsider’ to the community she works with—for it seems that it is when organizers attempt to introduce these larger perspectives, to counter populism or narrow economism, that they get challenged as ‘outsiders’.

Of the three, only Aliou Sall comes from a fishing family, but he too became an ‘outsider’ of sorts, an intellectual rather than someone who works with his hands, when he went away to Europe for higher education. Interestingly, all three were influenced by the work of Paolo Friere and Ivan Illich during their early politicization, and they use their ideas to debate the difference between accompanying a situation, supporting it, and ‘intervening’ in it. Does the community gain more if the supporters identify completely with it, immerse themselves within its situation, or, as Belliveau suggests, if they remain ‘outside’ to some extent, and bring something new to the situation?

The context of Conversations is one of an apparent narrowing of political possibilities and a backsliding of gains. In Canada, this is witnessed in the trend toward ‘professionalization’, the focus on bread-and-butter issues, and the resistance to progressive positions with regard to other marginalized groups such as the natives.

In India, it is seen in the growth of casteist feelings within some of the local unions, and communalism within the country at large. In Senegal, there are some hints of



this in the attempts at co-optation of the movement by NGOs, and by politicians from the community.

It is in this context that these supporters have been challenged and their contribution questioned. But while Aliou Sall wonders whether fishing people need outsiders to organize them at all, Michael Belliveau is clearest that they bring something important to a situation. In some tension with his position that organizers or supporters should not introduce wider ideological or political issues, he argues that “(a) social grouping becomes regressive and infantile in its thinking when it starts to believe that it is self-contained.”

In any case, all three agree, the gains of organization must be measured in other ways than in the subjective response of members. But there is no agreement upon what the objective measures might be. Do they have to do with conserving and restoring the resource? Or protecting the community and especially those marginalized within it? With social and political recognition for a previously low-status occupation and community? Or presence on official committees? Are they reflected by the size of the base? Or by national presence?

#### **Difficult assessment**

Given the difficulty of assessing gains, the organizer is only downcast if she puts too

much faith in rational, planned action, in 'voluntarism' or the assumption that one can control and influence all change if one has the will. Wisdom lies instead in keeping in touch with the base, knowing how to wait for the right conditions, and accepting uncertainty in the face of the still mysterious and frequently capricious nature of fisheries. In Belliveau's memorable words: "We must learn to leave a lot of room in our thinking for ironies, for occurrences that take place unexpectedly, and even for reversals. That's what I mean when I say you have to leave room for 'the Will of Allah'."

A word on the format of Conversations. Does the triologue work? It allows us to 'hear' the discussants, providing for a directness of voice, and makes for all kinds of interesting and unexpected references and explorations, as each sparks a response from the other. But this also means that the conversation wanders, as conversations tend to do, and goes rapidly from technical details of the fishery to reflections on life itself.

The section entitled "On Organizational Work" is particularly long and could have done with some finer subtitling, as it includes long diversions into the specifics of the fishery and sociology of each area, as well as into the relationship between fishery science and the 'traditional knowledge' of the fishermen.

Also, there are allusions that are not always developed in the course of the conversation itself, such as Belliveau's tantalizing references to the dispute over native fishing rights—a potentially burning issue for Canadian readers. Initially, therefore, one wonders whether an outside interlocutor may have helped, especially if the work is to be accessible outside the fishery. But this doubt is laid to rest as one gets to the second part, and finds that the idiosyncracies and shorthand of the conversations are nicely balanced by the systematic coverage of the essays.

ICSF must be commended for the quality of the publication. The book is beautifully produced in terms of text, layout and cover design, a real treat for book lovers, and the perfect complement to a work that is powerful in its ideas and inspiring in its

passions. This book is invaluable to those working in fisheries, as well as to all those concerned with questions of power and the scope of collective action to counter it, and effort must be made to publicize it to a larger audience.

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