Social Movements

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Social movements as contentious politics

Social movements are large, often informal groupings of people who come together against power holders around a common cause, in response to situations of perceived inequality, oppression and/or unmet social, political, economic or cultural demands. At their core, social movements are not about "polite debate" or "invited spaces" of interaction between state and society. Social actors coordinate their actions in sustained sequences of opposition and contestation intended to transform existing power structures and dynamics. Social movements are often one of the few (peaceful) options that people, who lack regular access to institutions or who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, possess to challenge established rules of the game – and this is what gives them their contentious character (Tarrow 1994).

Social movements are not new. Throughout history, individuals have come together peacefully to demand change from dominant elites. Examples include the movement to end the transatlantic slave trade dating back to the sixteenth century, movements to gain women's suffrage emerging in the late nineteenth century, and the peace, environmental, feminist and LBGT rights movements of the twentieth century.

Over the past several decades, social mobilisation has continued to expand and increase across the globe: in established democracies (the "Occupy" movements and "Black Lives Matter" movements in the US, the UK and beyond); in more recently democratised upper middle-income countries (Brazil, India, Turkey); and in countries that are undergoing major transformations (those in the Middle East and North Africa, Venezuela). However, social movements are not always progressive. Religious fundamentalism, neo-Nazism and ethnic nationalism, for example, have all been rooted in and spread by social movements (Adamson 2005; Horn 2013). Even when social movements don't succeed, they can have

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profound effects and set in motion important political, social, economic and/ or cultural changes both domestically and in the international arena.

Understanding how and why social movements emerge

Not every perceived grievance or injustice generates a social movement. The question of how and why different movements emerge, and how are they sustained over time, has generated much debate in the social sciences (Horn 2013: 21 – 22).

Recent scholarship on social movements highlights that effective social mobilisation does not develop within a linear, predictable trajectory. Instead, social movements are contingent, growing or shrinking in response to contextual factors that enable or constrain them, such as political and economic crises, rapid scientific changes or increasing urbanisation. They are thus likely to proceed along a "punctuated equilibrium" in which long periods of apparent quietude are followed by intense, and often turbulent, change.

Social movements emerge when political opportunities open up for social actors who usually lack them (Tarrow 1994). Social movements prove effective when they build or illuminate solidarities that have shared meaning within particular groups, situations and political cultures and make them feel connected. This involves mounting collective challenges, drawing on common purposes, and sustaining collective action across an extended period of time. Social relations are the foundation of social movements; the denser and more familiar social networks and cultural symbols are, the more likely movements are to spread and be sustained (Horn 2013). Leaders and activists are also essential (Green 2016). In addition, as the movements to promote human rights, gender equality, and action on climate change powerfully show, social activism is not confined to domestic or internal struggles. Transnational networks of solidarity have also harnessed collective action at the international/global level (Keck and Sikkink 1999).

Social movements and other channels of voice and representation

Contemporary progressive social movements continue to diverge on the question of how much effort to invest in engaging with formal state institutions and also on changing the terms of their relationships with citizens. Over the past two decades, more traditional formal channels of voice and representation, including political parties and parliaments, have experienced a deepening crisis of representation, with people across the developed and the developing world ranking them as the institutions they trust least. This kind of disillusionment has contributed to the growth of social movements, as citizens seek different means to exercise voice more effectively. How this has worked, and how this has affected representation deserves closer attention (For example, can informal social movements substitute political parties, and if so how?).

Over time, different social movements have transformed themselves into political parties (e.g. the Workers Party in Brazil, or the Aam Aadmi Party in India), and have sought to promote progressive agendas, more or less successfully, from within the formal political system. Nevertheless, linkages between social movements and political parties, and their potential impact on policy and broader political outcomes remain unexplored (Piccio 2015).

Social movements and ICTs

The rapid advancement of the internet, personal computers and mobile phone technologies has had a fundamental impact on social movements (Brecher et al. 2009). The rise of ICTs has opened up new opportunities for mobilisation and collective action that would have seemed unimaginable only a decade ago. ICTs offer the ability to create social networks, receive and share information and participate in collective action even when social norms or political repression limit physical movement or public visibility. However, ICTs are only tools of mobilisation; what gives technology its transformational power is the ways in which people use, appropriate and produce technologies as part of their strategies and objectives.

Donor engagement with social movements

While donors have made considerable investments to support civil society across the developing world (including non-governmental organisations, media outlets, etc.), engagement with social movements has remained rare. There are a number of reasons for this (Fernando 2012):

- The emergence of social movements is often unpredictable, making planning for engagement a challenge.

- Social movements are deeply political in what they hope to achieve, often in confrontational ways. The use of extra-legal activity (e.g. protests, civil disobedience, land and building occupations) is not something that international development actors feel comfortable with. Further, there are concerns that governments in partner countries may resent international donors for supporting groups perceived as the 'opposition'.

- The informality of social movements makes it difficult to engage with them on the basis of donor requirements and bureaucratic procedures

As the post-Arab Spring experience suggests, direct support to social movements can be extremely challenging, because donors do not always understand the local context in which the movements operate. For example, it is often not clear how representative different social movements are, and whom they seek to represent. These movements also tend to be leaderless, and while their organic, flat nature can be effective in many ways (like bringing down dictators across the Arab World), this strength can turn into a weakness when it comes to developing agendas for change and being able to engage with other relevant actors, be it the state they oppose, or international actors who seek to support them.

A number of other issues related to direct-donor support have been identified, including:

- Financial co-option or incentives. Many social movements will prefer not to take money from outside sources, for fear of appearing to have been co-opted and to have lost autonomy. In addition, when donors finance movement activities (either directly or through NGOs) they may inadvertently create competition for resources and/or may trigger behaviour that see movements begin to respond more to donor demands than members' interests and needs.

- Time and resource investment. Empowered citizens who are engaged in bringing about progressive change emerge over time. This often does not fit with an international donor agenda focused on relatively quick and easily measurable results. Donors need to be much

more realistic about the kinds of changes that donor support can help to bring about, especially on the basis of short-term projects and programmes. They should also be willing to be patient and remain engaged over the long term.

Key readings

Reading 1: Tarrow, S. (1994). Introduction. *Power in movement: social movements and contentious politics:* 1 – 28. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
http://www.d.umn.edu/~epeters5/MAPL5111/5111%20Articles/Tarrow%20--%20Power%20in%20Movement%20(optimized).pdf

Reading 2: Horn, J. (2013). Engendering social movements: Evolution, definitions, debates and resources. *Gender and social movements overview report:* 18 – 34. Brighton: BRIDGE Gender and Social Movements, Institute of Development Studies.
http://socialmovements.bridge.ids.ac.uk/sites/socialmovements.bridge.ids.ac.uk/files/07.%202.%20Social%20Movements.pdf

Reading 3: Green, D. (2016). Part III: Activists. *How change happens*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available here from October 2016: https://global.oup.com/academic/product/how-change-happens-9780198785392?cc=gb&lang=en&#

Reading 4: Keck, M.E. and Sikkink, K. (1999). Transnational advocacy networks in international and regional politics. *International Social Science Journal* 51 (159): 89 – 101*.*
http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic446176.files/Week_7/Keck_and_Sikkink_Transnational_Advocacy.pdf

Reading 5: Adamson, F. (2005). Globalisation, transnational political mobilisation and networks of violence. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 18 (1): 31-48.
https://www.academia.edu/13238583/Globalization_Transnational_Political_Mobilization_and_Networks_of_Violence

Reading 6: Piccio, D.R. (2015). How social movements impact political parties. In: *The consequences of social movements: People, policies, and institutions* (Eds. M. Giugni, L. Bosi, K. Uba). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
http://www.academia.edu/9506734/The_Impact_of_Social_Movements_on_Political_Parties

Reading 7: Brecher, J., Costello, T. & Smith, B. (January 2009). Social movements 2.0. *The Nation.* Retrieved from https://www.thenation.com/article/social-movements-20/

Reading 8: Fernando, P. (2012). Working with social movements. In: *Poverty reduction and pro-poor growth: The role of empowerment.* Paris: OECD – DAC.
https://www.oecd.org/dac/povertyreduction/50157985.pdf

Questions to guide reading

- How and why do social movements emerge in different places at different times? What are the implications of this on efforts to support social movement building?

- What kinds of shared identities and solidarity networks might bring people together more effectively across time and space? How do overlapping identities interact (e.g. women and ethnicity or class)?

- It has proven relatively easy and cheap to mobilise large numbers of people online around different causes, but how does offline and online social movement building fit together? How can substantive engagement in social movements be sustained on and offline over time?

- How do globalisation processes provide new opportunities and challenges for building and sustaining transnational social movements, both progressive (e.g. human rights) or otherwise (e.g. violent extremism)?

- How do social movements link to other, perhaps more formal forms of collective organisation? Should these different groupings work in closer synergy with one another?

- What is the role of individual leaders in creating and sustaining social movements? What does this mean for how a movement might evolve?

- What might be the most effective ways for donors to support social movements and to avoid doing harm if they choose to engage with social movements directly?