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Why social movements matter for addressing inequalities and ensuring social justice

60. Why social movements matter for addressing inequalities and ensuring social justice

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This contribution examines our academic and political understandings of social movements, and the ways in which social movements in the developing world have recently tackled social inequalities and struggled for social justice. It highlights the importance of social mobilization, and critically examines the relationship between movements, political parties and the state. Constitutional moments are shown to be crucial for the establishment of an agenda and a discursive framework enabling the development or the critique of state policies. The author concludes by advising against romanticizing social movements, but recognizes the essential role that they play when they are relatively autonomous from the state.

History is replete with moments of intense social mobilization where people rise up against injustice, replacing the existing social order with the objective of establishing a more socially just society. The romantic and mythical aspects of these revolutionary moments have been captured in art and popular culture, including paintings, murals, novels, plays and films. Revolutionary moments are often at the core of the foundation myths of modern nation-states across the world, and the myth of the revolution often unconsciously informs our understanding of power, the state and social movements.

The 1980s were marked by the retreat of grand narratives and grand theories of social change, which were replaced by a single one, that of neoliberalism or the Washington consensus (Harvey, 2005). The free-market, pro-capital and anti-state orientation of this new discourse is well known. But less often mentioned is its corollary negative discourse on collective action. Following Adam Smith, Milton Friedman argued that collective action was subjected to a law of unintended consequences. Each time groups of individuals or the state acted in what was understood as the common good, for instance by addressing inequalities in society or the market, an invisible hand led the measures adopted to produce the opposite results to those initially intended.

This was the companion view to a conception of the state as inherently inefficient or as an object of corruption or rent-seeking. *Only* the individual working through the market could take charge of the common good.

But the 1980s and early 1990s saw the rise of numerous social movements and civil society organizations intended to tackle the negative consequences of neoliberal market restructuring through self-help local initiatives. This triggered a move to a post-Washington consensus phase in neoliberalism. Here the market and state in the developing world were still understood in the same way, but civil society actors were now cast as capable of keeping state officials in check (World Bank, 2001). The privileged actors were not, however, social movements but a new brand of NGOs funded by international aid and philanthropy, which quickly became synonymous with civil society. NGOs were naively deemed to be benevolent actors, closer to the population and better equipped than bureaucrats to address the needs and preoccupations of the local population (Kamat, 2004). Civil society organizations would improve governmental policy-making, implementation and monitoring.

The literature spoke of state–society synergy, complementarity, embeddedness and good governance (Evans, 1994). Since then, NGOs have become partners, stakeholders and even service providers to states or international development agencies, while social movements, often still seen through the myth of the revolution as too radical, are left out of the analysis of policies. However, as will be shown below, social movements and political conflicts can greatly influence the direction that policies take.

Social movements, politics, policies and inequalities[1]

In the past twenty years, social movements have forced their way back into policy discussion as numerous citizen groups and political coalitions have emerged to oppose mega-development projects (hydro-electric dams, open-cast mining), demand their right to access and control of resources (land, forest, mangroves, sea), and to social services (education, health, justice or employment) or even to implement their own vision of development, as with the Zapatista movement in Chiapas and the Landless Rural Workers' movement in Brazil. There are several ways in which social movements can tackle inequalities broadly conceived, including social, political, economic, racial, ethnic, gender, religious and generational inequalities. They do so first and foremost by demanding respect for basic rights and by politically organizing and representing marginalized groups. In this role, social movements can take a variety of actions (demonstrations, marches, occupations, blockades, civil disobedience, legal activism, military action and so on) to directly confront their oppressors, push their agenda into the public debate, or negotiate with the state. Social movements very often engage in coalition-building with other movements, political parties and politicians with the aim of influencing policy, or if possible the institutional framework of their countries.

Constitutional moments are privileged moments not only for political parties but also for social movements, because they are the point at which more inclusive political settlements and more progressive policy orientations can be embedded into the higher law of the nation. The 1950 Constitution of India abolished 'untouchability' and established legal safeguards for discriminated groups, castes and tribal people.

More recently, the 1988 Brazilian Constitution was partly the result of the influence of a broad coalition of political parties, social movements and civil society organizations that was able to push for certain social rights (education, health, agrarian reform) to be embedded into the constitution.

Similarly, peasant and indigenous movements that had brought down presidents participated in the constituent assemblies that culminated in the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador and the 2009 Constitution of Bolivia. They were largely responsible for enshrining principles like pluri-nationality of the state, food sovereignty, environmental sustainability, and even the rights of nature in the case of Ecuador, in these constitutions (Arauco et al., 2014, pp. 28–40).

Constitutional social rights do not guarantee that the state will comply. The Brazilian Constitution was only mobilized to justify more active state social policies under the first government of Luis Inácio 'Lula' da Silva in 2004, fifteen years after its adoption. Similarly, the concept of food sovereignty in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador has not guided their agricultural policies, which mainly support large-scale industrial agriculture for export. Nor have clauses on environmental sustainability and the rights of nature impeded the Bolivian and Ecuadorian states from increasing gas, oil and mineral extraction, encroaching on indigenous peoples' territories, and criminalizing social movement opposition (Bebbington and Humphreys Bebbington, 2011). Constitutional clauses only lead to progressive policies when there is sustained and autonomous political pressure from social movements, civil society organizations and progressive political forces, as well as political will from governing parties or sectors within the state. Progressive constitutional principles, or court decisions, provide social movements with the ability to struggle for or against policies that have an impact on inequality, by mobilizing the foundational myths of the nation-state or exposing the contradictions of state discourse about progress and development.

The case of India, with its long history of legal activism, is an excellent example. The social movement around the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) of 2005, building on earlier decisions from India's Supreme Court in favour of social rights, contributed to the creation of a legal and judiciable basis for members of poor rural households to demand paid work from their local government (Arauco et al., 2014, p. 43).

The movement against the UK's Vedanta mining company represents another successful case in which tribal peoples from the state of Odisha managed to mobilize legal rights related to religious beliefs and tribal peoples to reverse the granting of mining rights over bauxite deposits to Vedanta on the Nayamgiri Hills that they held sacred (Temper and Martinez-Alier, 2013).

In many cases, social movement mobilization does not produce immediate effects, but instead establishes social and institutional foundations that are subsequently activated by political actors or new waves of social movement mobilization. The examples above of the attitude of the state towards social movements in South America and India highlight the point that social movement activism has not only short-term but also long-term consequences. At the same time it underlines the fundamentally conflictive nature of development policies.

For instance, the most progressive policies of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) government under Lula in Brazil (universal cash transfer payments, quotas in higher education for discriminated groups, anti-discrimination laws, formalization of work and so on) were a response to decades of activism that began with the struggle against dictatorship in the early 1980s. This wave of social mobilization produced an extremely active, politicized and dense civil society, even though by the 1990s it was showing advanced signs of institutionalization and 'NGO-ization' (Alvarez, 2009). At the same time, its most conservative policies, such as its weak agrarian reform and its support for large landlords and large-scale export-oriented agribusiness, point to the PT's inability or unwillingness to disturb vested interests, upon which it depended in the Congress.

The state, civil society, autonomy and social movements

The myth of the revolution weighs heavily on our positive or negative assessment of social movements. Many tend to see them as being driven by a will for social change that is fundamentally democratic. However, social movements are not always revolutionary or democratic in their objectives or their internal decision-making.

There are numerous experiences of states across the world that have been formed around corporatist and clientelist networks in which social movements were a key instrument of social control. Even though they may oppose a specific state policy or measure, social movements do not necessarily seek autonomy from the state, but often seek to participate in its decision-making.

Some social movements participated in left-wing governments by accepting that their leaders should take government positions: in Bolivia under Evo Morales, in Brazil under Lula de Silva and to a lesser extent in Ecuador under Rafael Correa. Social movements in these countries have also pushed for the creation of alternative participative political spaces, such as fora, councils and national conferences (Arauco et al., 2014). These have increased the politicization of popular sectors but have not radically transformed national politics.

Policy-oriented scholars and policy-makers continue to view social movements with suspicion, as many continue to work within the good governance framework that privileges NGOs. At the opposite end, more radical scholars tend to over-emphasize the radical potential of social movements because they believe that the world today requires social injustice to be tackled through fundamental social change. I believe this to be the case. But fundamental social change and social justice are not reached in one moment of catharsis. Instead they are produced through the ebb and flow of political struggles, which only sometimes involve revolutions.

As we have seen, social mobilization, combined with specific alliances with political forces, can translate into more inclusive political settlements, legal principles and rights. These can promote policies that tackle inequalities in the short and medium term, and become the discursive foundations of future struggles for equality and social justice. However, no gain towards social justice is guaranteed, even when it has been enshrined in a constitution, and no single actor, such as the state, can take total responsibility for this agenda. As regimes continue to violate fundamental rights, social movements are easily subjected to repression, co-optation of their leaders or exhaustion of their membership. They need to be relatively autonomous in their sources of funding, their ideology and their constituency. Only this allows them to challenge powerful interests, governing parties and the state, and play a leading role in the battle against inequality and for social justice.

Note

1. This section takes examples from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) report *Strengthening Social Justice to Address Intersecting Inequalities Post-2015* (Arauco et al., 2014), in which I participated as one of the co-authors.

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