

Agents for Change or Conflict?

Social Movements, Democratic Dynamics, and Development in Latin America

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Abstract In today's Latin America, governments implementing public policies for development and against poverty and inequality meet with social movements that engage in practices for social change, poverty reduction, and empowering. In this context, we analyze the interplay between both processes, describing its conflicts in three specific dimensions: the material, the democratic, and the environmental. Social movements are permanently contesting and challenging public policy when they autonomously appropriate public policy resources; yet, governments respond with criminalization and cooptation strategies. In a setting where social conflict takes place in response to existing poverty and inequality levels, movements challenge development and poverty reduction projects of an 'assistentialist' and extractivist nature, and propose an integral understanding of development and the emergence of new relationships among individuals, society, and the environment.

Résumé Actuellement, en Amérique latine, les gouvernements mettant en œuvre les politiques publiques en faveur du développement et de lutte contre la pauvreté et les inégalités rencontrent les mouvements sociaux qui s'engagent dans des pratiques pour le changement social, la réduction de la pauvreté et l'autonomisation. Dans ce contexte, nous analysons l'interaction entre ces deux actions en décrivant leurs conflits sous trois aspects spécifiques : matériel, démocratique et environnemental. Les mouvements sociaux contestent et remettent en question en permanence les politiques publiques quand ils s'emparent de manière autonome des moyens affectés aux politiques publiques, à quoi les gouvernements réagissent, cependant, avec des stratégies de criminalisation et de cooptation. Dans un contexte où les conflits sociaux se produisent en réponse à la pauvreté existante et aux niveaux d'inégalité,

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ces mouvements contestent les projets de développement et de réduction de la pauvreté et de développement de nature « assistentialiste » et « extractiviste » et proposent une interprétation complète du développement et de l'émergence des nouvelles relations entre les individus, la société et l'environnement.

Zusammenfassung Im heutigen Lateinamerika kommen Regierungen, die eine öffentliche Politik zur Entwicklungsförderung und gegen Armut und Ungleichheit durchsetzen, mit sozialen Bewegungen, die Praktiken zum gesellschaftlichen Wandel, zur Verringerung der Armut und der Übertragung von Verantwortung verfolgen, zusammen. Vor diesem Hintergrund analysieren wir das Zusammenspiel dieser beiden Prozesse und beschreiben dessen Konflikte in drei spezifischen Bereichen: dem materiellen, dem demokratischen und dem ökologischen Bereich. Soziale Bewegungen beanstanden und hinterfragen stets die öffentliche Politik, wenn sie selbständig die Ressourcen der öffentlichen Politik zuweisen; und doch reagieren die Regierungen mit Kriminalisierungs- und Kooptationsstrategien. In einem Rahmen, wo infolge bestehender Armut und Ungleichheit ein sozialer Konflikt besteht, hinterfragen Bewegungen Projekte „assistenzialistischer“ und „extraktivistischer“ Natur zur Entwicklungsförderung und Armutsbekämpfung und schlagen ein integrales Verständnis der Entwicklung sowie den Aufbau neuer Beziehungen zwischen individuellen Personen, Gesellschaft und Umwelt vor.

Resumen Actualmente, en América Latina convergen gobiernos que implementan políticas públicas de desarrollo, contra la pobreza y la desigualdad, con movimientos sociales que despliegan prácticas de cambio social, desempobrecimiento y empoderamiento. En este contexto, se analizan las interrelaciones entre uno y otro proceso, mostrando su conflictividad, específicamente en tres dimensiones: material, democrática y medioambiental. Por un lado, los movimientos sociales ejercen una interpelación permanente a las políticas públicas planteando una apropiación autónoma de los recursos de las mismas, mientras por el otro, los gobiernos responden con estrategias de criminalización y cooptación de aquellos. En un escenario donde la conflictividad social responde a los niveles de pobreza y desigualdad existentes, los movimientos cuestionan unos proyectos de desarrollo y contra la pobreza de carácter asistencialista y extractivista, proponiendo una comprensión alternativa del desarrollo desde una perspectiva de cambio social integral y la emergencia de unas nuevas relaciones entre individuo, sociedad y medio ambiente.

Keywords Social movements · Conflict · Social change · Democracy · Development

Introduction

Social movements, increasingly important actors in contemporary societies since the second half of the twentieth century, have also become increasingly relevant in Latin America, particularly in the last two decades. The greater weight of these social agents in the societies of the region is particularly related to a crisis in

traditional political representation formats, throughout the Left and the Right, which results from an outburst of identities that redefine traditional class categories and the subsequent transformation of the social substrates involved—political parties and unions (Borón 2004). The falling legitimacy of traditional political actors in the region can be linked, for instance, to certain phenomena such as the high levels of political corruption, clientelism, cooptation, and personalism that characterize the traditional Latin American political culture (Hellinger 2012).

In general, the emergence of social movements as sociopolitical agents is linked to a complex array of dimensions such as the transformation of social demands (Servan-Schreiber 1968) and the transition from societies based on materialist values that seek satisfaction of material needs to others centered on postmaterialist values that seek to satisfy self-realization and participation (Inglehart 1991); the disappointment with the “two-step” revolutionary path for social change (seize power and then transform the world); the emergence—or novel visibility—of a set of dimensions of domination that had been previously disregarded by dogmatic Marxism, with its focus on the capital–labor relationship, while it underestimated or neglected conflicts like gender, sexual diversity, and other issues of generational or technical nature; and the emergence of an agenda with issues such as denuclearization and the environment.

In trying to understand this phenomenon, different social movement theories have focused, respectively, in different dimensions within the movements themselves. Thus, while classical approaches and the American tradition—resource mobilization theory (RMT) and the political opportunity structure approach (POS)—have focused in the how and when of social movements—centered on analyzing the strategies, organization, and resources that enable social mobilization—the European perspective—new social movement theory (NSM)—pay attention to the whys, dwelling into structural- and identity-related factors that move individuals to take part in collective action (Melucci 1985). In other words, while the former emphasize strategy, the latter underscore identity (Cohen 1995).

Latin American approaches, for its part, have underlined the cultural dimension of these collective actors, highlighting the fluid, political, and conflictive nature of culture, and the articulation of collective mobilization and certain sets of meanings and stakes. In that regard, when social movements assume certain alternative conceptions on different social dimensions—such as gender, race, economy, or democracy—“they enact a cultural politics,” so culture become political since these conflicts of meanings “are constitutive of processes that, implicitly or explicitly, seek to redefine social power” (Alvarez et al. 1998, pp. 6–7). According to these authors, this particular cultural dimension of social movements, understood in terms of their cultural politics, is associated with their challenge to the dominant political cultures, in a process that breaks the borders of what has been traditionally understood as “political” in the society.

Identities are, this way, inherently on the basis of this political expansion resulting from collective action. This is particularly relevant for the understanding of the complex interrelationships between individual and collective within social movements. Even when scholars acknowledge that some of the so-called new social movements focus on individual change (Javaloy et al. 2001), these actors are

generally presented as social agents that seek to carry out and even nullify or prevent social—and, consequently, collective—change (Raschke 1994). Collective identities become a relevant mediation in this individual/social tension when considering collective action more than a collective behavior—this is just an aggregation of individual wills—but a common project in such a way that “the action developed on some collective interests and expectations (a process of identification) reverts on the individual level (the confirmation of the own identity,” so “the collective identity becomes itself an incentive for the individual action” (Revilla Blanco 1994, 2005).

In general, the interrelationships among collective action and social change “can seem too obvious to need explanation. Rather than questioning whether there is a connection between protest and change, it is far more likely that it will be presumed that social change and social movements are simultaneously occurring” (Jordan 2005). Scholars consider that the link between social movements and social change is mostly far removed from the State as it takes place within the movements rather than in general terms; change takes place in everyday practice and the internal experiences of collective actors (Zibechi 2004). In words of Holloway (2002)—precisely based on the analysis of a Latin American social movement, the Zapatism—these collective agents try to change the world without taking power, i.e., the State.

This approach originates in a view, deeply rooted in social movement theory and practice, according to which the anti-State or no-State standpoint (Muro and Canto 1991) has represented a central characteristic for those collective agents since the mid-twentieth century. Their position with respect to social change processes, in addition to the anti-system condition that some authors attribute to social movements—traditional or new (Wallerstein 2004)—renders them a significant analytical sphere. Of particular research interest is their relationship with public policy and the institutional action undertaken by governments to achieve specific social development goals in addition to the mediation role that these agents play in the dynamics of representative democracy.

Latin America turns out to be a pertinent scenario for this analysis given the confluence of two particular circumstances. On the one hand, the emergence of significant social movements, with periods exhibiting particular protest and mobilization activity (Cochabamba Water War, Bolivia, in 2000; indigenous people’s mobilization and the occupation of Quito, in 2000; protest and mobilization in Argentina between December 2001 and March 2002; social conflict in Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2006; the so-called “Penguin Revolution” in Chile, also in 2006, or the more recent university students movement in Chile in 2011 and the Mexican #YoSoy132 in 2012). All these social mobilizations and movements have been analyzed by several previous studies, underlining aspects such as their impact in the traditional political system and the public policies by influencing governmental decision-making and shaping the interrelationships between governments, politicians, citizens, and other stakeholders (Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia 2013): their cultural, identity, and communicative nature (Evers 1985; Escobar 1992a, b; Huesca 2001) and their potential for opening the public agendas (Gómez García and Treré 2014).

On the other hand, there is the existence, in many countries, of a spectrum of governments that span openly anti-neoliberal or even radical anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist governments (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, that have joined Cuba, the region's historic enclave holding this position), to others with socially progressive stances (Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay). These countries have implemented public policy that focuses on specific services (health, education, etc.) in addition to social development, poverty reduction, and social inclusion programs. Some examples would be the Programa Bolsa Familia in Brasil, the Programa Argentina Trabaja, or Misiones Bolivarianas in Venezuela. The coming to power of these political groups in different Latin America countries has been defined in terms of a "pink tide," and there is the perception that leftist ideology in general and left-wing politics in particular are increasingly influential in Latin America. However, as Fernandes (2007, p. 9) has noted, "the presence of these left-leaning leaders means little without mobilization and support from the grass roots to ensure that they carry out their campaign promises," that have taken the form of "targeted social compensation" or "conditional cash transfer" programs focused on those groups affected by the income-concentrating effects of decades of neoliberal policies in the region.

In this scenario, some authors underline a positive approach to the political change associated to these governments—such as the configuration of what is defined as a post-liberal democracy in these countries, proposing it as a better notion for understanding the contemporary transformations of democracy in the region, instead of concepts such as radical populism or defective democracy (Wolf 2013). Contrary to similar accounts that celebrate the victory of social movements in terms of bringing progressive governments to power, Zibechi (2012) suggested a critically nuanced stance toward the growing presence of progressive/Leftist governments in the region—particularly in countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador—proposing that the configuration of new territorialities of "constant struggle"—where they develop their particular political projects and learning practices—is the most important contribution of social movements in the region. From this perspective, as it has been noted, one of the most important challenges faced by current Latin American social movements is their relation with allegedly progressive parties and governments (Stahler-Sholk et al. 2007). Consequently, the analysis of the articulation of social movements' practices within the context of these governments—taking into account two specific analytical dimensions: democracy and development—would be a relevant topic for understanding the role of these collective actors in current Latin American societies.

Latin America: Development, Inequality, and Social Conflict

With recent growth rates that exceed those of the United States (US) and the most important economies of Europe (CEPAL 2012), Latin America is currently considered one of the strongest and most economically integrated regions. In 2011, the region's economy achieved a 4.3 % gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate, with 3.1 % in 2012; years in which Europe grew at rates of 1.7 and 0.4 %,

respectively (IDESCAT 2014). In a similar fashion, between 2003 and 2009, almost 50 million Latin Americans joined a middle class now sporting 152 million people (Ferreira et al. 2013). Similarly, inflation has been exhibiting a negative trend in most countries in the region, while unemployment has steadily decreased since 2002—except for 2009—in what has been dubbed the Rise of the South (CEPAL 2012; PNUD 2013a).

We are talking about a sustained process, as evidenced by the fact that eight economies of the region are among the top 25 developing economies with greater per capita growth and among the top fifteen countries with more advances in the Human Development Index (HDI) between 1990 and 2012. Between 2005 and 2012, all Latin American countries exhibited HDI improvements, with a global regional rate of 5.29 for this period (PNUD 2013b). Simultaneously, the region presents significant advances in issues like health, education, poverty reduction, political stability, and democratic strengthening with a greater commitment to more fair, plural, and inclusive societies and States with more responsibility in welfare issues (PNUD 2013b). Yet, Latin America remains the most unequal region in the planet, as the slender reduction in the Gini coefficient from 0.533 in 1997 to 0.496 in 2012 confirms (CEPAL 2014).

Therefore, this HDI improvement has not reached important segments of the population that remain excluded from a set of economic and social rights. In addition to inequality, issues like low social mobility and intergenerational transfer of poverty (PNUD 2010); still prevailing deficiencies in education, health, and gender equality (PNUD 2013a); and insufficient reach, efficacy, and legitimacy of the State are identified as significant barriers to development processes that preclude an integral and active exercise of citizenship (PNUD 2013b).

Protest levels in the region would be allegedly linked to the prevalence of inequality. A study that analyzed 2300 social conflict instances in the region between 2009 and 2010 (Calderón 2012) identified a link among social protest, political systems, and the population's economic situation. Even if some of the recent conflicts and mobilizations in the region have resulted in severe institutional fractures (e.g., Honduras in 2009), for the most part, these include statements, protest, strikes, and an assortment of collective action tactics that do not involve violent confrontation. Their demands include issues such as health, jobs, education, human rights, and others related to the environment and the control over natural resources. Considered an expression of a process of democratic recovery and strengthening, social protest has been enabled by increased access to ICT, a novel public space and integration resource for excluded and marginalized groups.

The articulation or continuity among inequality and social protest must be, in this case, contextualized in the specific regional scenario and history. From a historical-structural perspective, social protest in Latin America must be understood in connection with global political and economic dynamics but also contextualized in local structures, social arrangements, and cultural traditions, assuming that traditionally dominante groups rebel as a response to their “limited alternative means to voice their views and press for change” (Eckstein 2001, p. 3). This author underlines that changing economic relationships has been historically the main cause of protest and pressure for change in the region, while the means of protest are

associated to contextual factors, such as “cross-class, institutional, and cultural ties; state structures; and real, or at least perceived, options to exit rather than rebel.”

According to Eckstein and Wickham-Crowley (2003, pp. 2–3), the four most important contested arenas of social rights in Latin America include the “rights to subsistence protection and social consumption, rights to work-linked benefits, rights based on gender, and rights based on race/ethnicity.” The historical process of social re-configuration of social rights and contestations about it is particularly mediated by the most unequal distribution of wealth and income, reinforced by the neoliberal restructuring since the 1980s and 1990s, and the little done by representative democracies to reduce this inequalities. As these authors note, contestation of social rights by disprivileged groups has begun even under the less politically repressive regimes, in a process characterized by continuities and ruptures, its embodiment in group life, and the influence of cultural dimensions.

In a context characterized by highly concentrated power structures and chronic inequality, there is a constant articulation and strengthening of citizen demands, while public institutions exhibit a persistent frailty that renders them incapable to process conflict through democratic channels. Social movements are inherently related to social conflict because of the intrinsic opposition—the identification and proclamation of an opponent, a *sine qua non* condition for the movement’s organization that is directly linked to conflict—and identity—the act of self-determination that these actors exercise as part of their engagement in conflict—principles (Touraine 1973, 1987). At the same time, considering inequality as a source of conflict is a key feature of relative deprivation theory (RDT), one of the classical theoretical approaches according to which social movements result from the expression of certain feelings of deprivation that individuals experience when their expectations for material goods and issues such as political participation or personal development are not met (Gurr 1970). Nevertheless, according to this approach, this feeling is not objectively real but is rather based on each individual’s perception of their particular reality, whereas, in the Latin American context, inequality is a statistically proven phenomenon. Even when this approach would lose relevance as an explanatory model, some of its core components such as formulation of expectation and the sense of grievance are still considered to be to applicable for the analysis of some instances of collective action and social conflict (Della Porta and Diani 1999; Pérez Ledesma 1994).

However, according to relative deprivation, there is a prevailing negative appraisal of mobilization according to which it actually results from feelings of frustration and discontent that could lead to a direct link between social movements and violence. This would in turn result in the criminalization of the movements when, in fact, research shows that these agents are also emerging in the region in response to heightened violence, crime, and insecurity that constitute some of the most pressing challenges facing Latin America (PNUD 2013b).

In this setting, studying the relationship among social movements, public policy for social transformation and democratic dynamics becomes particularly relevant to understand civil society in the region and, particularly, the role these collective actors play in development processes. On the one hand, the range of collective action undertaken by social movements as part of their insertion in democratic

dynamics may become a source of social conflict, while, simultaneously, autonomous experiences of social transformation may become excluded from such processes. On the other hand, instead of implementing constructivist policies (Calderón 2012), this may lead to the cooptation of social movements by institutional politics in order to reduce social conflict in public policy programs geared toward development.

We set out to study the interaction between social conflict cycles and the implementation of governmental programs for development—e.g., policies and programs that fight poverty or enable access to basic services—to be able to describe the nature of the mediation that social movements carry out in those dynamics. The analysis is relevant to understand these civil society actors, their mediation role in democratic dynamics, development processes, and the possible reciprocal impact between both. In our analysis, we will consider Argentina and Brazil as case studies.

Since 2003, with the arrival of presidents Néstor Kirchner and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, respectively, these countries have joined the block of Latin American courtiers considered to be progressive, with a social-democratic stance. In addition to this common feature, two things make this comparison particularly relevant. Argentina, for one thing, is among the countries with higher protest levels in the region, with about 200 cases recorded between 2009 and 2010 (Calderón 2012). Brazil, on its part, is still the most unequal country in Latin America, with the highest Gini coefficient (CEPAL 2014) and the second lowest HDI improvement rate between 2005 and 2012 (PNUD 2013a). At the same time, relevant social movements like the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Rural Workers Without Land Movement, MST) in Brazil and the *piqueteros* (picketers), peasant, unemployed workers, and territorial movements in Argentina assume a social transformation approach that pursues the configuration of a new interaction paradigm between the individual and the collective. These actors engage in varied forms of protest and collective action that are determined by a mix of tradition and historical memory (Tilly 2002) and new action formats that result from learning processes, improvisation, and innovation (Zald 1999). At the same time, these movements engage in practices (productive, organizational, educational, communicative, etc.) that aim at generating social change processes—empowerment, reduction of poverty, education, social justice, etc.—that, as Zibechi (2004) explains, take place away from the State.

Social movements are also relevant analytical agents for examining the articulation between development and democracy, as previous Latin American-based analysis of them have underlined. On the one hand, the possibility for redefining development—understood “as a particular set of discourse power relations that construct a representation” of what it developed and underdeveloped—“rests largely with the action of social movements” as agents that configure an alternative vision of what development contributing to the liberation of Third World societies from the hegemonic imaginary of development (Escobar 1992a, p. 47). On the other hand, a characteristic shared by the diversity of Latin American social movements is the configuration of a new sense of territoriality, understood as a space for the emergence of new practices and social relationships, where the new individuals

build, in a collective way, a new social organization where they “instituted themselves, instituting their space, through a material and symbolical appropriation” (Zibechi 2003, p. 187). As a part of it, they put in practice a new form of organization that promotes equalitarian and horizontal relationships, without hierarchies and vertical divisions, characterized by horizontalism, self-management, and autonomy, avoiding any reification of a social order or the configuration of a unified movement or hegemony (Sitrin 2006), in a trend that points out to a radical sense of democracy.

Social Movements, Development, and Democracy

In face of positions that link social movements to certain postmaterialist values (Inglehart 1991) and the view that considers relative deprivation a matter of perception, demands of a materialistic nature—in a setting characterized by stark inequality—are one of the most important banners of a great number of social movements.

Since its inception, the MST focused on three primary demands; first, getting land; then, Agrarian Reform; and a third, a much broader and farther reaching objective: to achieve general social transformation as part of a process of radical change in social structures and relationships (Mañano 2001). On the other hand, the origins of Argentina’s Movimiento Territorial Liberación (Liberation Territorial Movement, MTL) seem to be linked to land occupation to build homes and the resistance to eviction of homeless and unemployed people in the most impoverished areas of Greater Buenos Aires. Also in Argentina, the founding charter of the Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero-Vía Campesina (Santiago del Estero’s Peasant movement-Via Campesina, MOCASE-VC) states that it sets out “to seek solutions to common issues, (...) promote training for cooperatives and trade unions and improve the quality of life of small producers” among its objectives (in Durand 2007, p. 35) and is self-defined as a movement “for solidarity, the production of healthy produce, agro-ecology, development, justice and social change” (MOCASE 2010).

Nevertheless, social movements assume a perspective that strives to overcome—and is even opposed to—the traditional development paradigm and that opposes assistentialist¹ approaches to inequality. The bottom-up and internal social change that these social actors propose implies transformation processes that, despite their important material dimension, are not limited to gaining access to specific resources or services by marginalized collectives but rather implies the configuration of new social power relationships. In this way, even when the emergence of movements like the MTL was initially related to solving specific collective needs like hunger and unemployment, its members emphasize that they have always known that they “did not want to reproduce assistentialism. We had social change, revolution, in

¹ Translator’s note: the corresponding Spanish *asistencialismo* (and its related forms) is an term used to refer to assistance and social welfare models based on what are considered to be merely palliative intervention models that often result in dependency and clientelism. It usually has a negative connotation.

mind since the beginning.”² According to João Pedro Stedile, a member of MST’s national coordination body (in Mançano 2001, p. 121), what differentiates the movement from traditional assistentialist action, is its mission to “build dignity for everyone”.

In consequence, social movements try to use their practices to generate social transformation processes that transcend a reductionist understanding of development and individual-focused assistentialism. Special attention is given to “avoid paternalism and achieve its gradual dismantlement³” in a context that is marked by these issues in everyday political practice. Thus, even when social movements generate experiences that rely on government resources that are distributed through public policy (social programs, land distribution), their strategy centers on “how to appropriate what the system provides to achieve more without partaking in assistentialism.”⁴ In this way, previous studies have emphasized the evolution of some of these movements “from mere demands for subsidies to advocacy for development initiatives that entail ‘genuine work’ of a cooperative and solidary nature in order to neutralize the traditional clientelist and assistentialist components” (Rajland 2008, p. 340).

In their conception of development, these actors strive to formulate solutions to specific and pressing material needs with a long-term social change project. With their activities, they suggest that “it is possible to combine and make visible the link between the struggle for very specific an immediate demands with the political sphere and concerns about the system, capitalism and socialism”.⁵ This is one of the most difficult and complex dimensions in action, as individuals demand swift solutions to their needs, which is why “we insist in that the struggle is not over with the specific problem that we must approach many matters thoroughly and in depth. It is very complex and very hard to grasp.”⁶

Eliminating inequality, overcoming poverty, and gaining access to resources and services cannot be understood in social movements without simultaneous processes that empower subjects and configure participative dynamics that enrich democratic structures and procedures. In this way, for example, the MST is not only concerned with “conquering some piece of land (...). We want to become emancipated and build beautiful communities, where other social relations are the norm, based on friendship, solidarity; communities that are developed to the fullest extent of this term” (João Pedro Stedile, in Mançano 2001, pp. 105–106). Democracy and the eradication of inequality are closely linked in the social movement’s view on development, a perspective where new relationships among individualities and collectivity are core constituents.

As a part of this effort of attempting to implement an alternative vision of social relations and values in the spaces they are occupying and their experiences, these

² MTL member. Interview, Abril 7, 2011. Cañuelas, Buenos Aires. Interviews to social movement members will be hereafter identified using this formula.

³ Miembro del MOCASE-VC. Entrevista, 12 de abril de 2012. Quimilí, Santiago del Estero.

⁴ Miembro del MTL. Entrevista, 7 de abril de 2012. Buenos Aires.

⁵ Darío Santillán Popular Front member. Interview, April 8, 2012. Buenos Aires.

⁶ MTL member. Interview, April 7, 2012. Cañuelas, Buenos Aires.

social movements prioritize the collective forms of decision-making within their organizational structures—for instance, through commissions and assemblies—as well as try to develop collective forms of production, such as cooperatives. However, their members recognize that “our most important challenge is to overcome the traditional individualistic farmers’ perspective of wanting their individual piece of land—seeing the individual property of land as the main objective—, and moving towards a more collective sense.”⁷ In that regard, for building this alternative social relations and values, their main purpose is “based on the exam of life as well as the power relationships,” to find “how to build an inside-democratizing movement,” without having as a goal to be present in the institutional structures of political participation” but “advancing in the reconstruction of the social networks without having as our main perspective to dispute the power in electoral processes.”⁸

In the organizational dimension, for example, they put in practice strategies for “segmenting the power without dividing the movement, through the distribution of responsibilities among different individuals, avoiding this way the concentration of the decision-making processes.”⁹ But the one of the most important dimension, as part of the configuration of these novel social and communitarian relationships, is the consciousness of the individuals both with respect to their participation in the movement and the collective goals. In that regard, the members of the movements refer to the “necessary process of transition, in the individuals, from a viewpoint of the movement as the solution of their individual problems -such as their lack of resources or household, or their access to some public program-, towards a vision of the movement as a collective project, where the most important thing is to achieve certain social change.”¹⁰

In this conception of social change—and, consequently, of development—overcoming poverty and inequality is not related to consumerism. The individuality–poverty–society complex is tackled through practices that set out to achieve “a project about community, collective effort, where liberation does not mean becoming rich but rather where wealth and happiness supersede other values” to configure a narrative different from the one that “thinks in terms of millions of dollars, in the mansion instead of decent, comfortable housing.”¹¹ Social movement participants consider that one of the challenges they face is precisely the return of individualism and the consumerist ideals associated with it. These ideas distort the meaning of social change and when people’s income improves as a result of their engagement in productive projects, some “start consuming for the sake of consumption, (...) their whole life revolves around shopping, with very high incomes, (...) because of this consumerist pattern.”¹²

⁷ MST member. Interview, April 20, 2012. Sao Paulo.

⁸ MOCASE-VC member. Interview, April 14, 2012. Quimilí, Argentina.

⁹ FPDS member. Interview, April 8, 2012. Buenos Aires.

¹⁰ MTL member. Interview, April 7, 2012. Cañuelas, Buenos Aires.

¹¹ FPDS member. Interview, April 8, 2012. Buenos Aires.

¹² MST member. Interview, April 20, 2012. Sao Paulo.

At the same time, development processes carry out an inherent environmental dimension for social movements, particularly in movements pertaining to indigenous peoples and that take place in rural settings. Advocacy for ecological agriculture, the challenge to agribusiness, and the use of toxic agrochemicals are examples of the environmental commitment of the productive experiences of rural and indigenous social movements. In fact, the environmental dimension is one of the most conflictive among social movements when it comes to public policy, including those that situate themselves in the left or that share progressive ideologies. Ecuadorian indigenous movements protesting against issues like oil block allocation, mobilizations in Bolivia against the construction of highways inside the Territorio Indígena Parque Nacional Isidoro Sécore (Isiboro Sécore National Park and Indigenous Territory, TIPNIS), and opposition to the resurgence of the extractivist development model in the region—including those countries considered leftist or progressive like Ecuador and Bolivia—are examples of the centrality of this dimension in the interpretation of development that collective actors put forward.

According to the positions of some of these governments (Ecuador, Bolivia), natural resource exploitation is a source of financing for the development of public policy geared toward improving the quality of life of marginalized and impoverished sectors. In this way, an economicist relationship is established between natural resources and funding for public policies against poverty and inequality. From this point of view, the rejection of extractivism is considered “an environmentalist extreme to starve our people to death” (Rafael Correa, in *La Patria en Línea* 2013).

In opposition to the divide between inequality and environmental public policy that characterizes the neo-developmentalism of many governments in the region, social movements advocate for a comprehensive approach to development where equality and social justice go hand-in-hand with environmental protection. The very diverse areas around which these entities organize attest to their integral nature. For example, MOCASE-VC has work commissions (later renamed to secretariats) dedicated to land, production and commercialization, education, water and roads, communication, organization and promotion, and health. MST is organized into the sectors of gender, communication, formation, culture, production, environment and cooperation, education, health, youth, human rights, and the mass movement front.

In this way, the interpretation of development that social movements put forward in their practices is integral, and inherently includes not only the redistribution of goods and services following the principles of equity and social justice, but also a transformation of social power relationship that is to lead to democratization processes and the emergence of a novel interplay among individuality, collectivity, and the environment. As a consequence, instead of traditional development processes, these actors propose social change experiences that transcend the satisfaction of specific needs to propose a radical transformation of the social order.

Social Movements and Institutional Politics: Between Conflict and Cooptation

When they assume the aforementioned position, social movements become a source of social conflict for governments that implement equality and development public policy, even for those considered leftist or progressive. The range of collective action and protest in which these movements engage to forward their demands for social change becomes an arena to contest institutionalized politics, including development social policy. As a consequence, these collective actors exercise a direct mediation role in these policies and programs. The theory of political opportunity structures (POS) has been the fundamental approach to analyze the institutional and political environment where collective action takes place, as it pays special attention to the influence that the political context has in the formation, survival, and incidence processes of social movements.

In this respect, research has identified two types of factors that affect social movements: those related to the structural characteristics of the State and others pertaining to short-term dimensions of political systems. The former include issues such as territorial centralization, the functional concentration of state power, the coherence of public administration, and the degree of institutionalization of direct democratic procedures (Kriesi 1992); among the latter, we find an increased access to participation in political life, changes in the alliances within political elites, the willingness of influential allies, political elite conflict, and the repression and weakening of collective action that stem from the development of the modern State (Tarrow 1998).

Yet, EOP would assume that there are difficulties to establish a consensus around the variables or indicators that are better suited to account for complex political phenomena (Della Porta and Diani 1999). Explanations for the existence, extent, or absence of mobilization in terms of the “cost of collective action”—that increases with repression or decreases with enablement (Tilly 1978)—oversimplify the motivational dimension of social movements and reduce the complexities involved in those mediations that are present in the emergence of these collective actors, as well as their own mediation of general social structures and relations.

Notwithstanding this perspective, the analysis of the trends that the movements we have studied exhibit reveals the complexities implicit in the articulation of movements within the dynamics of institutional politics. Understanding the relationship between social movements and institutional politics solely from the perspective of the latter neglects the specificities of the former’s understanding of public issues. Social movements understand the political not as a stand-alone and autonomous dimension but as part of “a force accumulation process that originates in the social sphere.”¹³ The objective is to discover “how to build a movement that democratizes inwardly¹⁴” by way of “studying its life, relationships, and power linkages” without participation in institutionalized political dynamics as a goal. It is about “opening-up paths for the reconstruction of social fabric without aspiring to

¹³ MST member. Interview, April 23, 2012. Sao Paulo.

¹⁴ MOCASE-VC member. Interview, April 14, 2012. Quimilí, Argentina.

taking part in the struggle for power¹⁵” as a foundation for the permanent construction of a political alternative.

Despite the fact that these movements do not deny their social and simultaneously political nature, they do distinguish themselves from traditional political organization formats, especially unions and parties. The existence of certain principles that guide the social movements toward the emergence of a novel interplay between individuality and sociality—especially against the backdrop of a broadening democracy (collective management, division of labor, discipline, grassroots development and relationship, learning and mass struggle)—should not be conflated to “a political party logic” but rather “denote a social organization nature.” The differences between what constitute a “social movement,” a “political and social organization,” and a “political party” are particularly interesting. A social and political organization “goes beyond the scope of a movement” and “supports the achievement of our objective and its future” but “if that gets interpreted as a political party one is being reductionist” (João Pedro Stedile, in Mañano 2001, p. 36).

Given this, public policy that tackles development, poverty, and inequality becomes a special dimension in the dynamics of conflict and cooptation between social movements and institutional politics. This is somewhat logical since, for one thing, certain development and social change perspectives are at stake and, on the other hand, we are dealing with instances of institutional policy geared toward the most deprived and marginalized sectors of society, the very constituents of social movements.

Public economic development programs—stemming from extractivist positions, linked to agribusiness or favoring capital—become a central source of conflict for social movements. Yet, public plans and policy for poverty and inequality reduction become sources of conflict too, as they are considered political cooptation and demobilization instruments by social movements. Often, mobilization and protest that are precisely undertaken in response to these programs advocate for the autonomous management of public resources in an attempt to avoid their clientelist usage on behalf of politicians. For instance, in the past months, Argentina has experienced roadblocks in reaction to “claims that the right to land and decent housing should be egalitarian, not the privilege of a few,”¹⁶ in addition to demands for raises in the minimum wage, social welfare, and retirement subsidies in the present inflationary context. The social movements involved challenge the way public resources are being managed. Some government buildings have been “occupied,” and protests have been held against delays in the delivery of subsidies and to demand their improvement, particularly their increase to three thousand pesos, especially in the case of those unemployed who are associated to cooperatives and social programs.

In the same way, collective action undertaken by Argentinian social movements like MTL, FPDS, and unemployed worker movements has demanded new openings in Plan Argentina Trabaja and denounced that this plan and others implemented

¹⁵ MOCASE-VC member. Interview, December 5, 2009. Buenos Aires

¹⁶ MTD member. Interview, February 12, 2014. Buenos Aires.

against inequality and poverty are mainly managed by Kirchnerist organizations that use them as an instrument for political cooptation. In the particular case of Argentina Trabaja, social movements have constantly denounced the latter. In December 2009, piquetero groups camped for several days in Avenida de Mayo (Mayo Avenue), in Buenos Aires, to demand their inclusion in this employment program. They considered that the program was being “whimsically handled” by local chieftains in Greater Buenos Aires that made a clientelist assignment of the resources.¹⁷

Rural movements usually mobilize against the agribusiness model, which they consider to be destroying local markets, indigenous–peasant production systems, and natural ecosystems. In direct opposition to a development philosophy that assumes an industrial agricultural model, based in the use of toxic agricultural chemicals, these agents advocate for the strengthening and development of peasant, indigenous, and family agriculture with “an agro-ecologic production model where peasants and family farmers constitute the fundamental path towards popular and food sovereignty. A model where technology and the local agricultural industry are at the service of the development of life and the economy of our people, protecting nature and everyone’s health.”¹⁸

In Brazil, the relationship between the MST and the Partido dos Trabalhadores’ (Workers Party) government has been marked by ambivalence and tension. In the first months of Lula da Silva’s government, the movement halted all direct coercive action and protest, choosing instead to establish a cooperative relationship that began as a critically solidary position that turned into open contestation and opposition when the government failed to honor its promises with respect to Agrarian Reform (De la Fontaine 2009). The MST has asserted its autonomy from institutional policy and has resumed land occupation as the main tactic in its collective action strategy. While the government deploys public programs like Bolsa Familia to reduce poverty and tackle inequality within the poorest sectors of the population, Brazilian social movements believe that social exclusion and violence have increased, that misery is migrating from rural zones into urban centers, and that there is a deficit in popular housing projects and agrarian reform implementation (Glass 2004). In face of this positioning on behalf of the social movements and given their position as permanent resources to challenge political institution, the State assumes two fundamental strategies against them: cooptation and criminalization.

With respect to his study, Zibechi (2010) believes that even Latin American governments that are considered progressive deploy social policies—following World bank directives aimed at the eradication of poverty—that seek to decelerate, isolate, and even eliminate social movements. Failing to propose genuinely structural change, these policies—in the author’s view—seek to act as governability lubricants, generate social movement institutionalization, and suppress their anti-systemic character. As examples of social policies seek to hinder the birth, growth, and expansion of non-capitalist life forms, this author cites precisely programs like

¹⁷ MST-Teresa Vive member. Interview, December 3, 2009. Buenos Aires.

¹⁸ MOCASE-VC statement, December 3, 2013. Available at <<http://mocase-vc.blogspot.mx/>>.

Argentina Trabaja and Brazil's Bolsa Familia. In his opinion, these policies constitute the following obstacles for social movements: they (1) position poverty as a problem and hide public wealth; (2) elude structural change, reproducing inequality and consolidating elite power; (3) block conflict; and (4) dissolve popular sector self-organization.

With respect to criminalization, there are many examples among the countries considered in the study. In 2012, Argentinian social movements denounced several criminalization instances (Giarracca 2010) and the government has actually stated the possibility of approving a "citizen coexistence" law that would limit mass mobilization and protest. In a similar fashion, the MST has also denounced judicial action in the past years; in 2008, eight of its members were imprisoned and processed in Carazinho, charged with threats to national security. They were accused of being supported by "foreign terrorist organizations" like the Colombian guerrilla and, even more relevant, the creation of a "Parallel State," complete with its own laws and organization (Scalabrin 2008). In 2010, a MST statement denounced that ten of its members had been imprisoned, in what the movement considered an escalation of their criminalization in an attempt confuse public opinion precisely during the presidential campaign and amidst an already conflictive environment.

In the movement members' own words, this is all about the antagonism arising from the diametrically opposed nature of two projects, especially about their approaches to agrarian reform: agribusiness versus a "life project,"¹⁹ precisely synthesizing two perspectives on rural development.

Conclusion

In the Latin American context, development processes and poverty and inequality reduction policies converge with the social change and empowerment experiences that social movements deploy. In this setting, the tension between traditional development projects and human development processes related to participative democracy become evident. While the effects of public policy can be evaluated using indicators like the HDP, the impact of the social aspects of the communities that the social movements create is harder to estimate.

Nonetheless, the interplay between these processes is complex and often contradictory, just like the relationship between social movements and political institutions itself. Public policy and programs for development and against poverty and inequality become a particularly conflictive scenario for the interaction of social movements and institutional policy in basically three fundamental dimensions: the material, the democratic, and the environmental. The demands that social movements put forward are related to the allocation and availability of material resources, the democratization of access to these resources, and the eradication of the clientelist and corrupt practices associated with them. Other demands are related to the environmental commitment that is ostensible in the projects and campaigns

¹⁹ Marcelo Durao, MST member. Speech, Buenos Aires, December 6, 2009.

that these agents carry out against the use of toxic agricultural chemicals or extractivism.

Social movements become agents that engage in a permanent contestation and challenging of these policies and programs, while institutional politics exhibits a pendulum-like behavior where—depending on the prevailing levels of social conflict—social movements are at times partners in development and democratization, at times obstacles that curtail these processes. In this sense, the main strategies of the governments are the criminalization and cooptation of social movements. Faced with the demobilization strategies that characterize traditional political dynamics, social movements carry out a counter-hegemonic appropriation of the resources contemplated in development and poverty reduction programs to use them autonomously, hence encouraging greater democratization.

The autonomy from which social movements spring constitutes a fundamental mediation mechanism between the contestation and appropriation of movements and the cooptation and criminalization strategies of institutional politics. In fact, we are dealing with two opposing approaches to development and the reduction of poverty and inequality. While governments propose neo-developmental projects of an extractivist nature, social movements position themselves in a social change model that emphasizes a strong environmental commitment. Where public policies that fight poverty and inequality focus in enabling access to resources from an assistentialist perspective, social movements understand that empowerment itself entails poverty reduction; in this sense, development—or, rather, social change—and the emergence of a new interplay between individuality and collectivity become two necessarily convergent processes in the experience of these social agents.

In the present Latin American context, the way in which this conflict is managed is crucial in the generation of conditions that enable the integration of these two perspectives so that they complement each other. If this is achieved, democratic development processes and poverty and inequality reduction programs where institutional policy and participative and contestatory politics become effectively amalgamated can take place, achieving what Davis and Brachet-Marquez (1997) call “accommodation”: the extension of governmental responsiveness to social, political, and economic demands generated through political participation and contestation. This would enable the overcoming of social conflicts generated by the persistence of poverty and inequality in the region, blending democracy, and development without the need to resort to criminalization or cooptation, strategies that erode the quality of democracy for the sake of development processes, and poverty and inequality reduction programs.

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