



Perspektiven auf globale Politik

SOME VANTAGE POINTS FOR RETHINKING MOVEMENTS AND INSTITUTIONS: INTRODUCTION TO A BLOG SERIES

23. August 2016 · von Gast · in *Blog Series: Movements and Institutions* · [Hinterlasse einen Kommentar](#)

Social movements and institutions are central actors in national and transnational politics as well as core categories of social inquiry. Despite their importance, both terms are still haunted by a lack of thorough definitions. We introduce a blog series with ten weekly contributions on their interrelation, outlining several innovative approaches and suggesting some vantage points for rethinking 'Movements' and 'Institutions' in a productive manner.



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by Felix Anderl (Goethe University Frankfurt)*, Jannis Julien Grimm (Freie Universität Berlin)**, Jan-Philipp Vathauer (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt)***

‘Movements’ and ‘institutions’ take center stage in political science and sociology and, above all, in the more specialized sub-discipline of social movement studies. Despite an abundance of publications on their interrelation and interdependence, both terms are still haunted by a lack of thorough definitions. More often than not, they work as containers into which scholars project vastly varying concepts. Frequently, they have been conceptualized as opposing ends in a continuum of different expressions of social organization; sometimes they are even thought to be antagonists. The workgroup ‘**Movements and Institutions**’ within the ‘**Institut für Protest- und Bewegungsforschung**’ (ipb, Institute for Social Movement Studies) was set up precisely for this end: to explore these varying perspectives through which scholars of differing disciplinary backgrounds have conceptualized the interaction between movements and institutions in their research. Even so, discussions among members of the working group frequently revolved around basic questions of definition, ultimately revealing that, both in the pertinent literature and within the working group itself, a consensus is lacking on how to understand and put both terms to practical use.

Depending on the theoretical or empirical interests of a researcher, we find narrow or broad categorizations of movements and institutions that differ with a view to scope and level of analysis, and thus imply varying notions of meaning and significance of the concepts. Scholars with a background in the study of **contentious politics** (e.g., **Tilly, Tarrow & McAdams 2001; Tilly & Tarrow 2007**) have a distinct understanding of movements and institutions as antagonistic entities, and hence differ strongly from researchers of political participation who tend to see institutions as open fora into which a movements’ members and their ideas can enter and diffuse. From a more radical **deconstructivist perspective**, institutions may even be conceived of as desiderata of movement action or as discursive patterns within movements themselves. Yet another approach comes from scholars uniting under the paradigm of ‘politics from below’ (e.g., **Bayart, Mbembe & Toulabor 1992; Bouziane, Harders, Hoffmann 2013; Bayat 2010**) who have argued for an understanding of institutions as strongly rooted in and locally reconstructed by society, and hence as an inherent component of every act of social mobilization. Anthropologists of the state have argued in a similar vein, focusing on the artificiality and temporal as well as spatial and cultural constructedness of official institutions, which in turn affects their interaction with agents of social contestation (e.g., **Migdal 2001**).

Discussions on the nature and boundaries of the ‘movement’ as the central category for analyzing processes of political contestation and collective action phenomena are equally fragmented. The disparities

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among the attempts to delimit the object of analysis are mirrored by the wide range of definitions that have been suggested by scholars since the inception of movement studies as a discipline. first set out from theories of class conflict, before moving to theories of collective behavior, taking on a more organization and network-centric perspective, extending with a focus on mobilization processes into the field of event history, and finally advancing into the newfound fields of space (e.g., [Daphi 2014](#); [Miller 2000](#); [McCarthy & McPhail 2006](#); [Soudias 2015](#)), visibility (e.g., [Bogerts 2015](#); [Doerr, Teune, Mattoni 2013](#)), emotion and affect (e.g., [Goodwin, Jasper & Poletta 2001](#); [Jasper 2011](#)). Given the conceptual ambiguities, it is no wonder that the past two decades have witnessed the rise of ‘movements with adjectives.’ In addition, the increasing extension of movement terminology through qualifying adjectival complements has brought forth innovative descriptors and analytical categories from ‘new social movements’ ([Buechler 1995](#)) to the notion of ‘non-movements’ ([Bayat 2010](#)) as specific forms of mobilization and social activism.

The aim of the series

For the sake of conceptual clarity and analytical precision, this blog series aims at gathering a variety of views on the two terms and their (non-)interconnectedness. Our goal is not to unify around one specific usage of either term, but to achieve a better understanding of the specific reasoning behind diverging conceptions. We are confident that the collected contributions will provide readers with a good basis to make up their own minds on how movements and institutions interrelate in different schools of thought – and what the concepts (can) mean in the first place. The series includes theoretical works on definition, genealogy and function, as well as considerations from research practice and political arguments.

Although the bulk of the content presented in this series derives from the individual contributions presented below, we would like to take this opportunity to suggest some vantage points for future studies on movements and institutions that could strongly profit from a better understanding of terminology:

1. Rethinking the notion of ‘opportunity structures’ and grasping their dynamic, interactive and thus often volatile character
2. Substantiating the relevance of movement studies and situating its subjects
3. Addressing conflict and thinking in procedural terms

Combined, we believe these conceptual nodes make a strong case for studying movements and institutions in an interactionist logic. After all, it is precisely these conceptual considerations that inspired this blog series.

1. Grasping the dynamic nature of opportunity structures

In social movement research, the notion of an *opportunity structure* remains central in explaining movement practice. In many studies, this opportunity structure functions as an explanatory or at least an intervening (context) variable which, by now, has come to encompass about every structural factor thinkable. This quite stable and uniform notion of ‘opportunity structure’, however, implicates (at least) two problems. First, a potentially endless adding of constellations of variables and context factors to collective action as part of the opportunity structure (Meyer 2004: 135); and second, a tendency to fixate the sum of these context variables within a variable that is implicitly assumed to be relatively stable and uniform over space and time, causing it to assume a “structure-like” character. In contrast, we argue for a more dynamic approach that takes into account the spatial and temporal divisions of opportunity structures; distinguishes spheres of influence (“levels”); and categorizes institutional and normative spaces. More importantly, our conceptual perspective is defined by the realization that the relationship between structural opportunities and social agency, just like the relationship between contenders in a political struggle, is a dynamic and multi-layered one and therefore produces identifiable effects on both ‘sides’. From such a perspective, institutions cannot simply be bracketed as ‘context’ but need to be taken into account, at least, as one among many drivers of movement practice, as ever-changing bodies that interact with and shape movement practices, such as they are shaped themselves by the latter. Finally, we would like to emphasize our understanding of the structural context in which movements and institutions operate as one, which is, above all, discursively constructed. This implies, first, that structures are historically embedded and co-derived from movement practices as well as other forms of contestation. In addition, we also acknowledge that both institutions and mobilizing agents may create new windows of opportunity by engaging in ‘meaning work’ (Benford and Snow 2000: 613; Desrosiers 2011:2) and resignifying the conditions of possibility for institutional and collective action (Harders & König 2016 forthc.; Grimm 2016 forthc. ; Koopmans 2005). In sum, we believe that these vantage points for rethinking opportunity along the lines of ‘structured contingency’ (Grimm 2016, forthcoming) add both the necessary dynamic to further research on movements and institutions, as they presuppose relational thinking beyond binary categories.

2. Substantiating the relevance of studying movements and institutions

Since ‘the movement’ is often already the given subject of research (e.g., due to the author’s expert knowledge, personal experience, or ties to his/her interlocutors and target audience), many empirical accounts say little about the relevance of the matter in question. Readers’ shared enthusiasm and understanding is often implicitly assumed. Empirical

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studies, and more generally the entire discipline of social movement research could, however, strongly benefit from a better explanation of their own relevance. We hold that this can be achieved first and foremost by an increasingly reflexive **research ethos**. In addition, studies would also benefit from an explicit location of their subject vis à vis their subjects' opponents: 'the institution' should not only be treated as something awkwardly external to the universe of cases. In contrast, elaborating on the movements' effects on, situatedness within, and interconnection with societal institutions (broadly conceived) would help readers comprehend what all the fuss about understanding mobilization and politics from below is actually about.

Empirical reality shows how many social movements interact with, and are result of, institutional practice on many levels, local national and transnational (see **Daphi and Anderl 2016**). Interaction processes are multilayered and should thus be studied in their concurrent effects both on movements and institutions as a whole, as well as on their smallest constitutive units. Regrettably, many current social movement studies remain confined to one specific level of both analyses (micro, macro, or meso) and inquiries into mobilization and interaction processes (local, national, transnational). An explicit perspective on movements and institutions, we argue, adequately situates movements on various levels, ultimately opening up the field of movement studies to multilayered inquiries. Such analyses would not only conform better to the rather complex empirical realities of movement practice, they would also provide useful points of contact for bridge-building to other disciplines.

3. Addressing conflict and thinking in procedural terms

International Relations, governance and democratization research, as well as norm research, often suffer from a functional bias in that it is assumed therein that 'better outcomes' are a result of deliberation or contestation. In contrast, when movements and institutions are thought of as interactive pairs, at least the potential for conflictive norms moves into focus, as the focus shifts to the emergent character of subjects of research, their fragile substance and procedural generation. This would also help to overcome the problem of ahistorical research in fixed categories and entities. Following Rucht (**2011: 12**), we believe that research on movements and institutions necessitates striving "for dynamic, process-oriented analyses with a focus on interaction in context" (see also **Tilly 1998**). This is new ground for political science, which, so far, has often equalized mechanisms to sequenced variables (for a more differentiated approach see **Guzzini 2011: 332**). This simplifying perspective has frequently resulted in studies that overemphasize stability over change, and coexistence over conflict. Taking the interaction between movements and institutions (which in our field often manifests in contestation) as the source of inquiry promises a more adequate reconstruction of outcomes, since a more diverse set of voices is heard instead of merely focusing on 'policy

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outcomes' on the institutional side, and 'protest practices' on the side of the movement (as well as bracketing political outcomes entirely). By doing so, dissent is deliberately taken into account, which has the effect of an explicitly cautious stance on the 'history of the winners'.

Nevertheless, focusing on processes has its limitations too: first, it is very difficult to isolate the impact of a single factor; and second, studies on interaction processes easily miss the macro-level, and the *significance* of the specific scenario (see [Checkel 2015: 92-93](#)). We still hold that, at the end of the day, it is more promising 'to address interactions' effects and other forms of complexity' (ibid.), rather than assuming linear processes or static constellations, only to make parsimonious theoretical statements. It is on all accounts a challenge for the study of movements *and* institutions to be neither overdetermined nor too micro to claim relevance. But it is worthwhile to confront this challenge, because the results promise to widen our understanding of how it is exactly that these two categories of social phenomena interrelate and mutually affect each other. In the end, this endeavor might also bring largely isolated research traditions closer together which have, so far, mostly bracketed either phenomenon as "external context".

Contributions to the series

The contributors to our blog series set out from the above-outlined vantage points, each addressing some of the described problems. The articles will appear in sequential order and are structured into four clusters. The first cluster *Conceptualizing Interaction between Movements and Institutions* will touch on, above all, definitional questions around movements and institutions and novel understandings of their interrelation: **David Betge**, a doctoral researcher at Freie Universität Berlin will kick off the first cluster of the blog series with his article *The Dualism of Movements and Institutions*. Betge takes a 'structuralist' approach towards the two concepts arguing that analyses should focus on the evolution of movements along their interplay with institutional norms and rules. Based on the example of South Africa's Landless People's Movement, he shows how movements institutionalize particular modes of cooperation by drawing on already existing institutions in order to craft effective internal structures. Further into the series, **Jannis Grimm** (Freie Universität Berlin, BGSMCS) will add his thoughts on the conception of contentious politics as dynamic processes of production and interpretation in his article *Contested Discourses on Contentious Dynamics*. In the multilayered interaction between movements and institutions, he argues, discursive representations work as a structuring 'translation mechanism' between material events and the action choices of contenders.

The second cluster, *Re-Conceptualizing Institutionalization*, will then attempt to identify avenues for reconceiving of the notion of 'institutionalization' in the study of social movements. **Jannik Pfister**

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(Goethe University Frankfurt) contributes his article *Institutionalization as Social Movement* in which he outlines his approach towards understanding long-term processes of social change and how social movements relate to them. In contrast to conventional research, which often thinks of ‘movement outcomes’ in terms of demands that are translated into policy, he argues that movements influence all areas of society over a longer time by reconfiguring historical relations of power and rule. **Philipp Wallmeier and Felix Anderl** (Goethe University Frankfurt) follow up these thoughts in their article *Social Movements always Interact with Institutions*. They make use of Boltanski’s theoretical work on institutions to show that, by definition, all practices of social movements are always directed at or against institutions.

Against this backdrop, the next two articles question the presumed common knowledge that institutionalization is what usually happens (and should happen) to social movements. After all, the success of social mobilization is often implicitly defined as the relative ground gained towards institutionalization. Engaging critically with this notion, our third batch of articles in the section *Challenging Institutionalization as Ultima Ratio* draws links to the normative level. **Rosa del Mar Moro González** (Universidad de Oviedo) illustrates this with her article *The Clash between the Logic of Elections and the Representation of the Indignados and Occupy*. **Natalie Rauscher** (Heidelberg University) seconds this program with her contribution on *The Occupy Wall Street Movement: the United States’ First Post-modern Social Movement*. She argues that Occupy Wall Street embodied different characteristics when compared to other social movements, since it was purposefully not directed at a specific institution. **Antonia Gross and Patrick Grosmann** (Graduate Students at Goethe University Frankfurt) report from their study on the effects of institutionalization on a social movement with a case study on the ‘Interventionistische Linke’ [Interventionist Left] in Germany. They show how the movement’s repertoire of contention partly de-radicalized as a result of increased institutionalization, even though its goals remained largely consistent over time.

Finally, the fourth part of the series *Institutional Responses to Movements* is devoted to the question of how institutions react to contenders. In their eponymous article, **Irene Weipert-Fenner and Jonas Wolf** (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt) offer a comprehensive conceptual framework, arguing that responses should be analyzed along two key dimensions: inclusion vs. exclusion and autonomy vs. control. **Michael Briguglio** completes the series with a challenge to the traditional conception of what it means to institutionalize in his article *Institutionalization: A One Way Process?*. Finally, **Katrin Uba**, Associate Professor at Uppsala University, will provide a conclusion and an outlook based on the diverse articles of our series.

Join the debate

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Since this blog series revolves around interaction, we would like to encourage you to interact with us and participate in the conversation: write comments (here, in the comment section of the blog), send reply arguments or reply articles (to one of us, find the emails below), or simply spread the news (everywhere). We would be happy to receive your feedback, so please join the debate!

* **Felix Anderl** is a doctoral researcher at Goethe-University Frankfurt. He obtained degrees in Political Science and History (B.A.) from Freiburg University and „International Relations: Global Governance and Social Theory“ (M.A.) from Jacobs University and the University of Bremen. Felix works in a research project on opposition and dissidence in the anti-globalization movement. His research focuses on the transnational contestation and critique of governance norms and the interaction of formal institutions with protest movements. Felix currently works on a PhD project, in which he analyzes how the World Bank reacts to transnational resistance.

** **Jannis Julien Grimm** is a Doctoral Fellow at the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies (BGSMS), where he works on the dynamics of social protests and state repression in post-revolutionary Egypt. He has studied Islamic Studies and Political Science in Münster, Berlin, and in Cairo where he has spent several years studying and working. Jannis has worked on Egypt’s civil society mobilization since the 2011 uprising for several academic institutions such as Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt University’s Mediterranean Institute Berlin (MIB), as well as the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP Berlin). He [tweets](#) on politics from below in the Arab World and on Islam in Europe.

*** **Jan-Philipp Vathauer** is Doctoral Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt works in the project “Socioeconomic Protests and Political Transformation: Dynamics of Contentious Politics in Egypt and Tunisia Against the Background of South American Experiences”. He is especially interested in the role of social movements in democratization processes.

*This is the introductory post to the **blog series Movements and Institutions**. Click [here](#) for all contributions.*

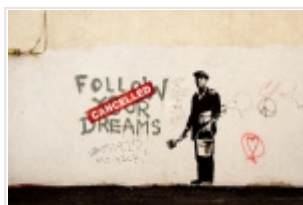


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