



## Perspektiven auf globale Politik

### INSTITUTIONALIZATION AS SOCIAL MOVEMENT

7. September 2016 · von Gast · in *Blog Series: Movements and Institutions* ·

*Hinterlasse einen Kommentar*

**The relationship of social movements and institutions should not just be seen as one where political demands can influence policy change in a targeted organization or political system. With a focus on instituting practices, instead of resulting institutions, we can understand all social institutions as institutionalizations, as constantly moving processes with the potential for radical change.**

*by Jannik Pfister (Goethe University Frankfurt)\**



Foto: Archive.org



Folgt uns per E-Mail:

Schließe dich 1.157 Followern an

SUCHE

#### LETZTE KOMMENTARE

- Kommentar zu Ein „westafrikanisches Afghanistan“? Staatskrise in Mali und Herausforderungen an eine ECOWAS-Intervention von Ein “westafrikanisches Afghanistan”? Zur Staatskrise in Mali und der bevorstehenden

*“I wanna be part of a youth movement/ I want to be able to rely on you/ And every movement of our hands/ Has a special meaning/ Because we are a movement” (Tocotronic).[1]*

## Social Movements and Institutions beyond Demands and Outcome

The relationship between movements and institutions is still most of the time (in accordance with **Political Process Theory**) conceived as follows: social movements are networks of actors mobilizing around certain issues to influence political decision-making in official organizations through protest. Institutionalization of social movements thus traditionally means their **routinization** and professionalization, away from radical roots and towards increasingly formal organization (**Della Porta/ Diani 2006**: 150-151). The relationship of movements and institutions is mostly thought of as a process in which movement demands are translated into policy change or institutional change within target organizations – it is conceived as **political outcome**.

This established perspective (which has been expanded for some time now **by scholars investigating personal or cultural outcomes**) is helpful when it comes to explaining how protest movements influence politics in the short run, and what factors influence movements’ political outcomes; or to understanding how movements can transform into political parties and organizations: take the **Green parties’ rising from the environmental movements of the 1980s** or, more recently, the **emergence of PODEMOS in Spain** as examples (see also the forthcoming contribution by Rosa del Mar Moro in this blog series).

But this conception of social movements and institutions is less helpful in understanding long-term processes of social change and how social movements relate to them, and does not speak easily to a theory of society. In order to assess the importance of social movements within their historical macro-settings, and the movements’ potential to change them, we need to connect movement research to theory of society.

## From Movements and Institutions to Institutionalization as Movement

In order to do so, and better grasp how social movements can influence all areas of society over a longer time and reconfigure historical relations of power and rule (think of Feminism as a social movement that, at several points in time, aimed at concrete policy changes, but has impacted all areas of society now: we could not understand contemporary society without it), this post builds on insights from Marxist social movement research, the sociology of living institutions, and post-foundationalist political theory.

Taken together, they point to a productive reversal: *instead of social movements’ influence on institutions, we should focus on institutionalization*

Intervention - Genocide

Alert 3. September 2016

- Kommentar zu Über uns / About von Roberta Ioana 4. Mai 2016

## TWITTER

- RT @theorieblog: Die Daten aus der umfangreichen #DVPW-Mitgliederstudie 2015 sind jetzt verfügbar: Wer wird was, wann, wie in deutscher #Po... | 5 days ago
- Why the Interventionist Left didn't de-radicalize in the process of formalization | by A. Gross & P. Grosmann >> bit.ly/2cnTz92 | 6 days ago

## BLOGROLL

- A View From the Cave
- Aidnography
- ArmsControlWonk
- Chris Blattman
- Göttinger Institut für Demokratieforschung
- Inner City Press
- International Law Observer
- IR Blog (Berlin)
- ISN Blog ETH Zürich
- Jihadica
- Junge UN Forschung
- Junge Wissenschaft im öffentlichen Recht
- Justice in Conflict
- Kings of War

as a social movement.

Instead of thinking institutions only as finite entities, we also always ought to think them as processes: institutions are constantly evolving (or “becoming”) phenomena. To grasp this process, the constant (re)arranging of institutions, it is thus helpful to understand institutions not just as sedimentations of dynamic processes, stabilizations of social phenomena on the one hand, or on the other hand as intersubjective grounds for individual freedom. If we combine such negative (constraining) and positive (enabling) descriptions of institutions, we can see them as fixed form and fluid phenomenon at the same time, since “institutions always comprise both tendencies: revolutions and founding acts, permanence and fixation”, they are “de/stabilized tensions” (Seyfert 2011: 13, my translation). Therefore, they might be better described as constantly changing institutionalizations rather than as institutions.[2]

Now institutionalization, or the constant becoming of social institutions, and the subsequent constant (potential for radical) social change, can also be called a social ‘movement’. What is usually understood as social movements are communicative projects politicizing institutions, bringing them into motion, aiming to de- and re-institutionalize according to a specific political focus. In doing so, social movements are antagonists in struggles for hegemony in society, and we can trace their institutionalizations.

### The Problems of Anti-Foundationalism

Ok – we should pay more attention to the life of institutions. But the anti-foundationalist underpinnings of this social theory make a political analysis of social movements difficult: without being able to refer to universals, or political foundations, we cannot assess the normative and societal relevance of a movement. As Oliver Marchart argues, deconstruction will not suffice to understand society. Who claims that society has no foundation, mistakes contingency for arbitrariness. Rather, we have to ask how social order is founded politically. But in anti-foundationalist thought, like that of Deleuze and Guattari, “the idea of differences ordered in a systemic totality does not make sense any longer” (Marchart 2013: 136, my translation). This is the main problem that emerges when we conceptualize society and its institutions as *being alive*: if we want to understand long-term processes of social change and the role of social movements, and if we want to grasp these processes in a theory of society (the impossible object of political projects), we cannot follow the anti-foundationalist assumption of absolute contingency, even if we want to treat institutions as constantly evolving and thus unpredictable.

Rather, the focus shifts to struggles around political and founding moments. Following Marchart, social movements are an expression of, and make visible, the social conflicts that mark the continuous becoming

- menschenhandel heute
- Mobilizing Ideas
- Opinio Juris
- Political Violence @ a Glance
- Pundicity – Aymen Jawad Al-Tamimi
- Radikale Ansichten
- Sicherheitspolitik-Blog
- Stephen M. Walt
- Syria Comment
- The Disorder of Things
- The Duck of Minerva
- The Monkey Cage
- Theorieblog
- Theorieleben
- Theory Talks
- Thought Economics
- Völkerrechtsblog
- World Peace Foundation – Reinventing Peace
- zoon politikon

### META

- Registrieren
- Anmelden
- Beitrags-Feed (RSS)
- Kommentare als RSS
- WordPress.com

of society. This antagonistic nature of society means that social institutions are never completely instituted and are always open to fundamental conflicts whose outcomes they are contingent upon. However, they convey a “deceptive appearance of stability” where “a multitude of social movements have found an ‘unstable equilibrium of compromise’ (Gramsci)” (Marchart 2013: 449, my translation). The construction of these compromises, or hegemony, thus becomes the central problem if we want to theorize social movements as the becoming of institutions, as projects, in a way that informs theory of society.

### **Social Movements as Practices that Institutionalize Political Differences**

In an adaptation of Gramsci’s hegemony theory, Alf Nilsen and Laurence Cox propose to understand social movements not as “a particular form of extra-parliamentary political activity, characterized by certain specific institutional and organizational features”, but as “a process in which a specific social group develops a collective project of skilled activities centered on a rationality – a particular way of making sense of and relating to the social world – that tries to change or maintain a dominant structure of entrenched needs or capacities, in part or in whole”. This is a wide understanding of social movements: it encompasses all practices geared towards changing institutions of society through a common political project, towards institutionalizing differences in conflict with other political projects. This wide understanding enables us to see “social structures and social formations as the sediment of movement struggles” (Nilsen and Cox 2013: 66).

Nilsen and Cox go on to describe “social movements from above” (the construction and reproduction of forms of domination) and “social movements from below” (challenging such forms of domination). The Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) is an example of how social movements from below might problematize our established conceptions of the relationship between social movements and political institutions. According to Rebecca Tarlau, referring to the example of the MST, public schools, that we would think of as ‘state’ institutions, became “a part of the movement’s contestation against that very state”. From this example, she concludes that while the “distinction between institutionalized and non-institutionalized tactics is useful for analyzing how movements often make demands on the state, it is less useful for understanding the ways activists work both inside and outside of the state to promote social movement goals.”

Similar examples of this kind of (attempted) social movement institutionalization, not just ‘against’ established institutions, but also including new social (and not just ‘political’) institutions, abound wherever some sort of radical social transformation is pursued. Even what in everyday political language is often described as anti-institutional protest (for example, the anti-representative horizontalism of Occupy) aims at creating new social institutions, as often seen in the



emphasis on prefiguration in Occupy (see also the forthcoming article by Nathalie Rauscher in this series).

A focus only on political outcomes of social movements vis-à-vis established institutions could not describe this appropriation of institutions and governmental apparatuses for broad movement goals of establishing new social relations (in comparison to more short-term, narrower outcome-seeking). The still evolving **cultural perspective in social movement research** provides important insights on how to better appreciate these dynamics. But in their eclecticism many authors in this line of research do not seem to care too much about large-scale social dynamics and theory of society, and often adhere to a rather rigid conception of social and political institutions.

### **Hegemony and its Institutionalization**

So in order to understand social change and social movements, we should focus on hegemony as the institutionalization of political differences. But how to conceive of one important, and in social movement theory hitherto often taken-to-be-central, part in the institutionalization of hegemony, of the relationship with governmental apparatuses? Marchart (2013: 375) applauds that Marxist state theory after Poulantzas is essentially hegemony theory. Although this is an apt characterization of those theorists he names (Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe), he does not mention work by people like Bop Jessop, Joachim Hirsch, Sonja Buckel and the former research group **“State Project Europe”**, who have made productive advances in materialist research on theorizing institutionalization (though mostly concerning state apparatuses):

**Buckel et al.** (2014: 15-84) look not just at the more ‘discursive’ phenomena in struggles over hegemony, but also at their materialization and complex inscription into different often contradictory, governmental (state) apparatuses – and how these, in turn, gain relative autonomy from constitutive interests. Going beyond crude materialism, social structure is conceived of as constantly undergoing reproduction in social struggles, where shifts in institutions also emerge. Buckel et al. introduce the useful concept ‘*hegemony projects*’ to describe complexes of practices aimed at gaining hegemony. In their example of the European “re-bordering” of migration control since the mid-1990s, *political* projects institutionalized out of the struggles of different hegemony projects, like the utilitarian **migration management** centred on selectively enabling/disabling mobility.

### **Returning to the Life of Institutions**

Hegemony and institutionalization through material condensation – hegemony projects translating into political projects – are a productive way to look at the relationship of social movements and institutions. But

existing historical-materialist approaches do not allow for enough contingency and constant becoming in institutionalization. They do conceive of social movements as institutionalization. But this conception is often limited: “Social structures and social formations” are treated as “the sediment of movement struggles” from ‘above’ and ‘below’ (as [Nilsen and Cox](#) do). Or the unity of a “state project” is presupposed that binds together different state apparatuses, all of them inscribed by different social forces, but still under the primacy of the economy (as [Buckel et al.](#) do). But conceiving of institutions as sediments and apparatuses is a conception limited to the negative, restricting side of institutions. Such an approach runs the danger of seeing only the institutionalization of social movements, not institutionalization as social movement. Where has the life of institutions gone? Can we develop a post-foundationalist application of it to the study of social movements and hegemony?

In studying the institutionalization of hegemony struggles, more distance is necessary from conventional conceptions of institutionalization as either becoming established, being incorporated, or entering institutions. Instead of starting our analyses with state-like apparatuses in order to understand their emergence, and with forms of domination ultimately relative to economic questions, we should focus even more on materialization as instituting practices, i.e., social movements. This would open up new aspects of contingency, temporality and historicity in describing how social conflicts and institutionalization are connected, in describing social movements as material *institutionalizations*, constantly stabilized and destabilizing, constraining and enabling at the same time – and radically so, precisely because of their nature as ‘becoming’, thus containing the potential for radical departures in a struggle for hegemony.

In the 1995 Tocotronic song, the ironical lyrical ego is caught between the equally impossible wishes of either being part of a youth movement, or just escaping into doing nothing. The former is described as part of a mythical rock n roll gesture – music, gestures, dancing. The lyrics thus point to social movements as ambivalent cultural phenomena that are part of constantly changing institutions. The emphasis on the reproduction of hegemony as constant re- and deinstitutionalization that follows is necessary to think social movements and social change beyond (not without!) demands, political opportunities and political outcome.

[1] Lines from „Ich möchte Teil einer Jugendbewegung sein“, Song from the 1995 Tocotronic Album „Digital ist besser“ (L’Age D’Or), translation by the author.

[2] While of course the noun institution can have a very active meaning as ‘that which is instituted’, best captured by Cornelius Castoriadis (1987: 112) describing “the social as instituted” that “always presupposes the social as instituting”.

\***Jannik Pfister** is a research associate at the chair for International Relations and Theories of Global Orders at Goethe University Frankfurt/ the Cluster of Excellence “Normative Orders” and member of the research group on “**International Dissidence**”. In his PhD project, he studies the transnationalizing interaction of protest policing and social movements in liberal democracies, c. 1980-today.

---

*This is the third post in the **blog series** „**Movements and Institutions**“. Check out the **introductory post** for more information on the series and click **here** for all contributions.*



Photo by Tom Thai  
([eviltomthai](#), CC BY 2.0)

[Über diese Anzeigen](#)



---

**Bewerten:**

2 Votes

**Teilen mit:**



Sei der Erste dem dies gefällt.

---

**Ähnlich**

**Kurz & Knapp:**  
"Corruption and  
Torture Practical  
Twins?"  
In "kurz & knapp"

**IB Online (1/1): Eine  
kleine Netzschau  
In "Links"**

**IB Online (1/10):  
Eine kleine  
Netzschau  
In "Links"**

# Schreibe einen Kommentar

Gib hier Deinen Kommentar ein ...

← The dualism of movements and institutions. A structurational approach towards the two concepts

Indignados and Occupy: Channeling Political Dissatisfaction through an Anti-Institutional Approach →