



Perspektiven auf globale Politik

CONCLUSION: OUTLOOK FOR STUDYING THE INTERACTION BETWEEN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

23. November 2016 · von Gast · in *Blog Series: Movements and Institutions* ·
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This **blog series** reflected on the interactions between social movements and institutions. These interactions have proven to be among the most complicated areas of social movement research, especially because causality is very hard to establish: (how) do movements influence formal political institutions – and vice versa? How to study, understand and explain the consequences of the institutionalization of social movements? The difficulties of addressing these questions are also related to definitional problems as social movements and institutions can be understood and defined in various ways. All authors contributing to this blog series highlight the importance of studying interactions between social movements from one perspective or another.

by *Katrin Uba (Uppsala University)**

Considering that Anderl, Grimm and Vatthauer (2016) have already summarized the main issues of the articles in this series in their **introduction**, I will not repeat them here. Rather, these articles are used as a reference point for the following outlook for studying social movements and institutions from the perspective of the effects of social movement mobilization. An increasing number of studies have begun focusing on the political, biographical or cultural consequences of social movement mobilization, yet there still are more empirical analyses devoted to policy changes and political processes than to the impact of social movements on cultural change (see e.g., **Bosi et al. 2016**). Still, it is



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very likely that scholars who are interested in the interactions between social movements and institutions are also interested in the manifold consequences of social movement mobilization.

Many authors involved in the blog series refer to the importance of pursuing a modified or innovative approach to conceptualizing social movements and institutions (Anderl, Grimm & Vatthauer 2016; Betge 2016; Anderl & Wallmeier 2016). Such an exercise is obviously important and valuable. Still, defining the concepts of interest also depends of the scholars' specific research question. For instance, those who are interested in transnational movements and their role in societal processes beyond nation-states will probably opt for definitions which help grasp the multi-level interactions between movements and institutions (Anderl & Wallmeier 2016, Armstrong & Bernstein 2008; O'Brien et al. 2000). Others, who are more interested in political change and citizens' mobilization in favor or against some particular policy, might instead opt for a traditional definition of institutions as formal rules of the game (see also Schneiberg and Lounsbury 2008). Finally, scholars who define institutions in terms of unwritten norms or social practices might, for instance, be most interested in the cultural consequences of social movements (see Earl 2004 for review). While scholars have noted that the direct impact of social movements on institutional change has rarely been studied (Schneiberg and Lounsbury 2008), there are several ways to examine the interactions between social movements and institutions and the eventual consequences thereof. One possible approach is to focus on the particular kind of change occurring. That is, one may only pay attention to the institutional change unfolding or only focus on the changing character of social movements (Rao, Morrill & Zald, 2000; Kriesi and Wisler 1999, Mahoney and Thelen 2009), and investigate whether these changes occur gradually or swiftly.

First, let us consider the slow, i.e. predominantly incremental or sequential change. In the context of social movement research, this might refer to processes where movements become political parties and thereby change the respective party system and political process (Kitschelt 1986; Cowell-Meyers 2014). Such processes have had significant consequences, for example for environmental mobilization, policies and institutions, and have helped understand the consequences of social movement mobilization in Sweden (Peterson 2016). Slow incremental change might also mean that state or international institutions coopt a movement, causing it to gradually disband (Weipert-Fenner and Wolff 2016; Coy & Hedeon 2005). In addition to the threat of cooptation, the issue of legitimization remains. Sometimes, social movements avoid targeting international organizations (Uhlin & Kalm 2015) or economic institutions (del Mar Moro 2016, Rauscher 2016) because this might legitimize the institution's power. Similarly, state institutions may try to avoid any actions which might legitimize radical (right or left-wing) movements.

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Slow transformations have also been one of the major foci in this blog series. They were referred to in the context of social movements becoming institutionalized (Briguglio 2016, Gross and Grossmann 2016; Suh 2011), and with regards to democratization processes that might foster or hinder social movements from developing (Betge 2016). Pfister (2016) in this series suggests that we should look at the process of institutionalization as a social “movement” and thereby emphasize the dynamic character of institutions. However, this does not prevent us from examining how social movements interact with changing institutions. Rather, this perspective is similar to the analysis of interrelated outcomes of social movements (Bosi 2016), which shifts the focus from single outcomes, such as a movement’s influence on institutions, to broader processes of social change. These processes of social change may result from the interactions of movements with formal or informal institutions, as well as social practices or norms. Grimm (2016), in this series, has a special take on this, referring to affective power arising from the interaction between movements and institutions which may materialize in collective action.

Although less frequently analyzed in the context of social movement studies, social movements or institutions may also change due to an abrupt transformation such as a revolution (Goldstone 2001; Tilly 1978). It is surprising that none of the articles in this series deal with revolutions. It suggests that scholars studying movements and institutions are situated in stable institutional environments in which they do not expect drastic and sudden institutional changes anytime soon. However, the study of such changes may similarly focus on the fast dissolution of a movement as a result of harsh repression or the severe effects of environmental, political or economic crises (e.g., the Great Recession of 2008). Revolutionary change does not have to be a one-way process, as revolutionary movements might be successful at some point in time, but fail later on. Also, increased instability may lead to a counter-revolution. For example, Meirowitz and Tucker (2013) systematically examined outcomes of the Arab Spring and Colored Revolutions, and showed that the actions of governments which emerged after the revolution and democratization process can easily bring about new mobilizations and a radical change of institutions.

Empirical analysis of such repeated cycles of interactions between movements and institutions is difficult and requires opportunity to engage in long-term observations which get further complicated if one moves from the national to the international level. As already noted by Anderl, Grimm and Vathauer in the [introduction](#), such studies would be highly important for developing and testing a theoretical framework to better understand the consequences of interactions between social movements and institutions. Some noteworthy forays in this direction have already been made, of course. To name only a few: Meyer and Minkoff (2004) have examined the dynamic interaction of protests and political opportunities in the U.S., Bosi (2016) has analyzed how the

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mobilization of the Irish Republican Army and its interaction with British institutions has generated broader social change, and Kapstein & Busby (2016) comparatively analyzed market transformations as a result of mobilization by AIDS and climate-change activists.

This blog series has demonstrated that one can understand and conceptualize the relationship between social movements and institutions in a variety of ways. Although the articles by Briguglio (2016), Gross and Grosmann (2016), and Betge (2016) all study processes of institutionalization, each has a distinct focus. One examines the results of institutionalization of an environmental NGO (Briguglio 2016), another the ongoing institutionalization of a radical left-wing group (Gross and Grosmann 2016), while a third focuses on the failed institutionalization of the landless people's movement (Betge 2016). Similarly, there is an analysis of Occupy as a post-modern movement (Rauscher 2016), as well as a study which relates the same movement (and the Indignados) to a critique of an electoral system (del Mar Moro 2016). As such, the results of the interactions between these entities play out differently depending on the respective case. Furthermore, the authors are driven by very different theoretical and intellectual interests. While some theoretical approaches are explicitly concerned with long-term social change (Pfister), others are more concerned with concrete effects and specific modes of interaction (Betge 2016; Briguglio 2016; Grimm 2016; Weipert-Fenner and Wolff 2016). Interestingly, there seems to be a certain disagreement among authors regarding the perception of the purpose of movements: while studies about the Occupy movement (Rauscher 2016; del Mar Moro 2016) suggest that it exemplifies an "anti-institutional approach" which is not actually interested in, nor directed at institutions, Anderl and Wallmeier (2016) seem to argue that this is not so. According to them, social change will always be driven by institutions which is why social movements always directly or indirectly target some institutions. To them, this is what makes the relationship between movements and institutions particularly interesting to study.

The articles in this series have shown various ways to examine the interaction between social movements and institutions, and this variety is an important contribution to the field. However, further theoretical and systematic (comparative) empirical research is needed. It should account for the transnationalisation of social movements, as well as take into account the formal and informal, but also the multi-level, character of institutions.

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This is the last 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.

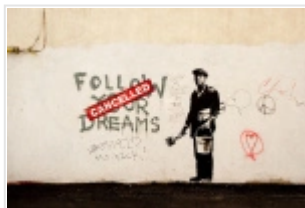


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