Perspektiven auf globale Politik

INSTITUTIONS IN A CRITICAL AGENDA FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENT STUDIES

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Social movements challenge systems of rule and thus institutions. They are expressions of the non-identical, the gaps and fissures in today's world. That's what makes social movements interesting and relevant for a critical research agenda. Thus, more than applying ready-made concepts to cases, scholars should inquire into the interactions between social movements and institutions as relationships between rule and resistance. This article proposes one way to go about such a critical research agenda.

by Felix Anderl* and Philip Wallmeier**

Social movements – a critical approach

> The idea of a just society "is not to be contrasted with existing society in an abstract manner … [R]ather it arises from criticism, from society's awareness of its contradictions and its necessity" (Adorno, 1976 [1962]: 118).

Social movement studies in their current form are often too dissociated from social theory and critical theorizing. Their concern with framing, bridging, repertoires, claims and identities is irrelevant when their findings cannot be related in a meaningful way to the daily lives of (subordinated) people or to the relations between rule and resistance – the issues because of which most scholars became interested in social movements in the first place. However, maybe out of an inferiority complex, "social movement studies" often maintain an obsession with

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"facts". Rather than showing how these facts (factum = made) can be unmade, turned into instruments of subversion, arguments for change, or indications of social contradictions, "social movement studies" often scientifically reproduce them, giving them the air of inevitability. This is especially obvious for those theorists, whose concepts are so firmly wedded to the status quo that they cannot even picture, what some movements are or could be fighting for. As a consequence, many scholars we have met don't consider themselves social movement scholars but rather "students of resistance", "theorists of social conflicts" or the like.

It seems to us that this lamentable lack of critical theorizing around social movement studies has a lot to do with a decay of academic Marxism in the last 20-30 years, a more general delegitimization of macro-sociological theorizing, and a global constellation, in which normative orientations have to be readjusted. Critical social theories, e.g. those focusing on "new social movements", have somewhat lost their appeal in an era in which social movements are increasingly transnationally or globally organized and in which the idea of countries and societies as homogeneous containers is difficult to defend. Today's global political landscape looks more like a hierarchical network of institutions than like an international society of states. While this new constellation has led to criticism of many older social theories, a new theoretical and normative basis for critically studying social movements has yet to be developed.

Building on the intuition that the increasingly global constellation has led to a lack of critical social theorizing around social movements, we are convinced that instead of waiting for new empirical clarity, it is the job of movement scholars to put forward a critical analysis of global society that reconstructs social contradictions from the articulated dissatisfaction from within social movements. We believe that there is much to be gained from an approach to social movements, which brings together critical theories of society and rule with more recent studies on the organization of transnational or global social movements. But what would such an approach look like? Our suggestion is that a critical social theory around transnational social movements should focus on their interaction with institutions, a suggestion that we try to explicate and defend in the following.

Institutions: defining what matters

People's daily life today is governed by different and often overlapping institutions. So much so, that even protest against this "bureaucratization" of the world is normed and deeply shaped by institutions: Whoever wants to take actively part in the construction or critique of the political world, cannot escape those institutions which often turn radical criticism into conventional activity or even just rituals. At the same time, however, institutions do not only steer or coopt criticism, but enable it; criticism can be directed towards institutions,

and institutions can be the (more or less) solid normative grounds that any critical activity can refer to and cling on to.

With Boltanski (2011: 75), we define institutions as beings without a body, to which people delegate the task of saying and confirming what is the case and what matters. This refers especially to their drawing of borders. In a competition, for example, institutions draw the line between the last one who qualifies for the next round, and the first one who drops out, despite of their performances being almost the same. The importance of this task is obvious when institutions assign possibilities for education, property or goods to persons or organizations. Institutions are a necessary part of human life because they coordinate behavior and thus reduce uncertainty. In order to do this, they make certain actions and ways of thinking possible and exclude others. In this sense, they fulfill a task which has been described as symbolic violence by Bourdieu. By defining what is the case and who and what matters, institutions have an impact on the formation of groups, identities and ways of thinking and acting. Hence, it is not (only) by orders and commands that rule manifests but also by measurements, definitions, classifications and guidelines, which, by saying and confirming what is the case and what's possible, prefigure and steer human conduct.

Interlocking institutions form an international system of rule

This may already give you an idea of how we understand rule. Traditionally, the concept of rule was only applied within nation-states and understood as the possibility that others will comply with the ruler's decisions.   However, if the semantic function of institutions and their effect on peoples' conduct is taken seriously, different, transnational and overlapping fields of possibility, impossibility and hierarchy come into sight. Whenever they form "structures of institutionalized superordination and subordination" (Daase and Deitelhoff: 2014), we talk about rule in the global sphere. Obviously, this may not be classical top-down rule (as was often imagined for the nation-state) but rather what we call "heterarchical rule". The concept of "heterarchical rule", in contrast to orthodox understandings of top-down decision making and compliance, takes into account a variety of practices and expectations. Although there is no single authority, a set of actors and organizations has the capacity of setting rules for others, shaping discourses and material distributions in a way that are sedimented in institutions which again effect and steer the conduct of others. When these interlocking institutions lead to a super- and subordination of actors, to a discursive and material inclusion of certain actors and possibilities, and an exclusion of others, we will speak of rule.

Social movements: Criticizing things that matter, or challenging the authority to define what matters

How do social movements fit into this and how should we thus understand them? Usually, definitions of social movements evolve around the form (network), character (collective identity) and purpose (conflict) of the particular group in question (see Diani 1992). As David Snow has pointed out already, we want to add and highlight that social movements are also always challenges to systems of authority – or, as we want to suggest, to systems of rule and thus institutions. Social movements are therefore interesting to critical inquiry, because they aim at changing the character of rule or the quality of how rule plays out, because their practices are directed at or against institutions. Based on the above, one could even make the argument that it is not a matter of choice for social movements, whether to work against institutions or not (see for such an argument the article by Natalie Rauscher in this blog series); in our conceptualization, social movements challenge institutions because they challenge the systems of rule in place. Two analytical distinction may come in handy to describe this relationship between social movements and institutions.

First, social movements either criticize things that matter, or they challenge the authority of others to decide what matters. In both these cases, institutions are their adversaries. In the first case, social movements engage in *blaming*. They blame others for an existing (or non-existing) thing that matters (to them). The one being blamed is always an institution (or a person representing an institution, or fulfilling an institutional role). In the second case, social movements engage in *unmasking*. They challenge an authority's right to define what matters.

Second, we distinguish between radical and reformist critique. Sometimes social movements create situations in which they question the overall legitimacy of an institution and thus want to abolish or replace it – for example in revolutions. This, for Boltanski, is a situation of "radical critique". We call these 'counter-situations' and the movements who create them *dissident*. Or, movements question whether institutions are functioning properly, whether they work "the way they should". In this case, social movements intend to change institutions within the current system by pointing out that they do not satisfy norms and principles which are already in place. Boltanski calls these situations "reformist" and we call the social movements who engage in them *oppositional* (see also Daase/Deitelhoff 2014).

How does that help a critical agenda?

The study of transnational social movements can be an access point for critical projects because social movements challenge established expectations and practices – and thus point to different expectations, norms, and ways of describing the world which are not (yet consistently) institutionalized. Put simply: they point to the non-identitcal, the gaps and fissures in today's global society. Scholars can make use of this "epistemological function" of social movements and engage critically

with institutions through the arguments that social movements make[1] (obviously that does not mean simply taking over the movements' perspective). It is further a critical agenda because it neither approaches social movements as phenomena sui generis nor pathologizes them, but tries to understand them in relation to a global system of rule – as problematic as the movement's critique might seem to us in some cases. Thus, overall, this agenda looks for the cracks and fissures within the global system of rule instead of reproducing "facts", thereby reproducing the status quo as inevitable Cracks and fissures are interesting, because through them, we may get a glimpse of the conditions of possibility of a better global society.

The interaction of movements with institutions

What does that mean for the interaction of social movements with institutions? As we have argued, movements cannot change the quality or locus of rule without engaging with institutions. The aim of social movements, criticizing things that matter, or challenging the authority of others to decide what matters, centrally revolves around the replacement or critique of specific institutions or classes of institutions. This creates a myriad of dilemmas, such as the danger of cooptation, and generally, the question as to how far a movement should strategically engage (or not engage) with certain institutions. Which institutions can they count on to substantiate or amplify their critique and which ones are to be rejected completely? Empirically, this is a question that social movements answer on a case-to-case basis rather than categorically. La Via Campesina, for instance, regularly works with organizations such as the FAO, UNCTAD and a few other Special Bodies of the United Nations, while they decline cooperation with the WTO and the World Bank. For the former, they apply oppositional or cooperative, for the latter dissident practices. This stems from their judgement of what are (at least potentially) *good* – and what are *bad* institutions.

Thus following Boltanski's sociology of critique, we would suggest that the question with which institutions to engage remains an important practical question for critics and thus social movements, rather than being an a priori theoretical question. Following this understanding of the Sociology of Critique will hopefully bring us closer again to a critical sociology of movements.

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[1] We are aware that there is never "the" argument of "the" movement. However, even if there are several or conflicting arguments in a social movement, we think that it is one of the tasks of scholars to reconstruct the political claims and the overall critique of movements.

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*This is the seventh 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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