Perspektiven auf globale Politik

REPERTOIRES OF COUNTER-CONTENTION: CONCEPTUALIZING INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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The ways in which political authorities respond to societal challenges is a key element in the interaction between social movements and state institutions. Two conceptual distinctions are important when studying such repertoires of counter-contention: authorities' responses may (1) aim at either including or excluding challengers, and they may (2) either respect their autonomy or try to control them.

by Irene Weipert-Fenner & Jonas Wolff (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt)*

Social movement research has produced rich empirical accounts and useful conceptual proposals which help understand the ways in which movements challenge authorities, including political ones (see, most prominently, the concept and analysis of repertoires of contention). But the interaction between social movements and state institutions – be they at the national or at the international level – obviously involves two types of actors. Still, we know much less about the strategies through which political authorities respond to the contentious challenges posed by social movements. In this contribution, we propose a conceptual framework that grasps the overall repertoire of counter-contention that is available to state institutions in this regard. Specifically, we suggest differentiating between two dimensions: In the dimension of inclusion/exclusion, authorities' responses can range from incorporation of social movement organizations, representatives and claims to their outright exclusion. In the dimension of autonomy/control, state

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institutions may respect social movements as independent collective actors or they may try to gain direct influence on their agenda and behavior. As we have argued elsewhere, this distinction results in four ideal-type responses to social movements that combine "inclusion and autonomy (liberal-democratic inclusion), inclusion and control (cooptation), exclusion and control (repression) or exclusion and autonomy (marginalization)".

This conceptual framework, as we argue in the following, has two key advantages. First, it allows us to theoretically acknowledge and empirically study the ambivalence of inclusion. Inclusionary strategies are generally seen as the more benign type of response to societal challenges. However, as is well-known from social movement studies, inclusion per se does not enable challengers to gain political voice and/or see their demands implemented. Rather, it frequently takes the form of cooptation which, in our conceptual framework, is defined as controlled political inclusion (the term "controlled inclusion" is taken from Philip Oxhorn). The second advantage is that our conceptual framework helps us avoid the dichotomous distinction between democracies (that are supposed to be characterized by liberal-democratic inclusion) and autocracies (that are usually thought to rely on repression). Democracies do also coopt, repress and marginalize, just as non-democratic regimes also make use of inclusionary strategies. In principle, we should expect any political regime to use the whole range of responses – even if democracy imposes specific constraints on the use of repression and implies particular political incentives to include challengers (in one way or another).

To be sure, social movements are far from passive objects in this process – which is, after all, a process of *interaction*. The consequences of the different institutional strategies, therefore, depend on the strategies and decisions taken by significant elements within a given social movement (usually key social movement organizations and/or important spokespersons or leaders). Furthermore, given that social movements are not unitary actors, mixed institutional strategies and interaction dynamics are also possible (i.e., when parts of a social movement are included or coopted, while others face repression or marginalization). Conceptually speaking, however, the framework implies one crucial simplification: State institutions are treated as collective actors that take strategic decisions – not (also) as arenas that constrain and enable the interaction between a range of sociopolitical actors that act within these very institutions. In the following, we will illustrate the relevance – and the key advantages – of our conceptual proposal by briefly discussing the labor movement in Egypt and the Argentine unemployed movement.

The case of the Egyptian labor movement

Historically, Egypt is a good example of how an authoritarian regime combines cooptation with repression in order to control a potentially

challenging labor movement. Ever since then-President Abdel Nasser formed the Egyptian Federation of Trade Unions (ETUF) in 1957, this labor confederation has served as the main strategy through which the Egyptian regime *included* and *controlled* the labor movement in a classical, state-corporatist manner. Complementing state repression of contentious labor activities, cooptation, thereby, constituted a crucial pillar of the authoritarian bargain which allowed organized labor to reap socioeconomic benefits (including job security, health services and education) and to have an institutionalized, if limited say in the country's political affairs. But this controlled inclusion through ETUF came at the cost of any meaningful autonomy vis-à-vis the state (consequently, organized labor in Egypt could hardly be called a social movement at all).

This started to change in the 1990s when neoliberal reforms combined with Egypt's crony capitalism undermined the socioeconomic foundation of the authoritarian bargain. From the mid-2000s onwards, labor protests spread and an independent trade union movement emerged outside of the ETUF. This movement deliberately challenged the state-corporatist structures that tied the coopted labor federation to the regime. In this context, the attempt by the Egyptian government to respond with a mix of neglect, repression and very limited concessions backfired. In the end, the protests waged by the incipient movement of independent trade unions prepared the ground for the uprising in early 2011. The ouster of Egypt's long-standing President Hosni Mubarak opened up new spaces for the labor movement as independent trade unions mushroomed all over the country. Concurrently, new umbrella organizations emerged, such as the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) and the Egyptian Democratic Labor Congress (EDLC). Unsurprisingly, one important claim of this movement of independent trade unions concerned a new trade union law that would allow for the legalization of their organizations, thus ending the state-corporatist regime of controlled inclusion of organized labor.

The different post-uprising governments, in turn, continued to rely on ETUF as the key strategy to *coopt* organized labor. Whether led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (2011-2012), the Muslim Brotherhood (2012-2013) or President Sisi (since 2013), the Egyptian government refused to legally recognize the independent labor movement. This, primarily, served to weaken the movement vis-à-vis ETUF: It was the official trade federation only that benefited from obligatory membership fees, offered social benefits to its members (such as access to pension funds) and had institutionalized access to corporatist institutions (such as the National Wages Council). With the closure of political spaces after the military coup in mid-2013, this strategy of *marginalization* was increasingly complemented by *repression*: Harsh legal sanctions against protesters and strikers were introduced and many activists imprisoned.

The main response to labor protests in Egypt since 2011 thus combined a continued reliance on cooptation (through ETUF) with strategies of marginalization and repression (of the independent trade union movement). This, plausibly, mirrors the fact that the (semi-)authoritarian regime in this country has, by and large, survived the 2011 uprising. Yet, on closer look, the picture is even more complex. There have been, at least, some official attempts to tame labor protests by making some inclusionary moves towards the independent labor movement. For instance, the governments of both the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and of President Sisi raised the national minimum wage, directly responding to one of the major claims of the pre-2011 labor protests. In 2011, minister of labor Ahmed El-Borei also included representatives of the independent trade union movement in the process of drafting a new trade union law that would have guaranteed trade union freedom. The draft law, however, was never enacted. Finally, during the first post-coup government (2013-2014), a leading representative of the independent trade union movement, Kamal Abu Eita, was appointed minister of labor. This decision was neither accompanied by the legal recognition of independent trade unions nor by any meaningful political concessions. Including the head of one of the main independent trade union federations (EFITU) into the government was thus clearly an attempt to coopt this important movement entrepreneur, weaken and divide the overall movement of independent trade unions and, thereby, reduce its capacity of autonomous, collective action.

The case of Argentina's unemployed movement

The Egyptian case confirms that cooptation (understood as controlled inclusion) constitutes a key strategy through which authoritarian regimes respond to, and often successfully tame, contentious political challenges. Yet, as a brief look at the unemployed movement in Argentina shows, cooptation – as well as repression and marginalization – are also part of the repertoire of counter-contention in democracies.

Between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, Argentina experienced what is probably the biggest wave of unemployed protests in history. Responding to the social consequences, and then open breakdown, of a fairly radical program of monetary stabilization and neoliberal reforms, unemployed people around the country took to the street, blocking roads and forcing state representatives into negotiations. Given that massive roadblocks (*piquetes*) constituted their preferred mode of contention, the Argentine unemployed movement came to be known as the *piqueteros*. With the worsening economic situation in the early 2000s, unemployed protests expanded massively and contributed to the "social explosion" of December 2001 that led to the toppling of President Fernando de la Rúa and a serious political crisis. In 2003, according to competing estimations, between 200,000 and 360,000 of roughly 2.3 million unemployed in the country were organized in a broad and heterogeneous set of unemployed organizations.

How did political authorities in Argentina – that is, in a generally democratic regime – respond to the serious challenge posed by a massive, contentious and quite radical movement of unemployed workers? Cutting a long and complex story short, the main strategy was informal *cooptation*. In particular after December 2001 and, most comprehensively, under President Néstor Kirchner who was elected in 2003, the Argentine government made important moves towards including the unemployed movement: Key demands of the *piqueteros* were met, the most important social movement organizations were recognized as official interlocutors, and unemployed organizations and their representatives were included in government programs and even provided with posts in the government. These steps toward inclusion, however, mainly aimed at taming the political threat posed by the unemployed movement by controlling the most important unemployed organizations. Informal governmental control, in particular, operated through the distribution of state funds, on which the organizations increasingly depended, and through the inclusion of key movement entrepreneurs into the government. In the end, an important segment of the movement effectively transformed into sociopolitical organizations that hardly challenged political authorities anymore, but broadened the social basis of the incumbent government, while providing significant benefits to their members. Still, given that governmental control remained informal and largely non-coercive, the different unemployed movement organizations retained some relative autonomy vis-à-vis the state.

Cooptation was not the only strategy, however. Especially those segments of the unemployed movement that resisted cooperation with the state and continued to rely on contentious action were met with a combination of targeted *repression* and, above all, *marginalization*. Mirroring the constraints on the use of state force in democratic Argentina, violent repression of unemployed protests was limited (some individual cases notwithstanding), and such repression rather stimulated than tamed protests. Unemployed movement organizations and human rights groups have, however, complained about a "criminalization" of protests, that is, the use of judicial proceedings against protesters. Yet, the most important strategy vis-à-vis the confrontational group of unemployed organizations was marginalization. Through the distribution of state funds in support of unemployed households and organizations as well as through a public discourse that delegitimized those groups that continued to block roads, the latter were effectively weakened.

Comparing repertoires of counter-contention: Beyond the democracy-autocracy dichotomy

Whether democratic, autocratic or something in-between, we should expect political regimes to respond to political challenges "from below" by drawing on the whole repertoire of counter-contention that is available to them. In our simplifying scheme, this means political

authorities will usually combine inclusionary and exclusionary, autonomy-respecting and controlling strategies. The ways in which a given government applies and combines these strategies are certainly shaped – constrained and enabled – by the political regime in place. But the idea that autocracies generally respond with repression (combined, perhaps, with cooptation), while democracies use liberal-democratic inclusion (combined, perhaps, with marginalization) is certainly wrong. Our analytical framework, in this sense, can contribute to a comparative research agenda that analyzes repertoires of counter-contention across different political regimes. What is more, we may also compare the repertoires of political authorities at different geographical scales: from the local to the national up to the international level.

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