Abstract: The case studies tell stories of powerlessness and incapacity, of how movements and collective action run up against stronger forces, internal fragmentation and failures of coordination. The ability to network (i.e., horizontal relations with other social actors) across social sectors is a major success factor for social movements but we do not know enough about who are participating in social movement networks, or whether there are significant groups who are not involved and thus the overall representativeness of the truly poor and marginalized. Those formed between social movements and highly influential organizations, like political parties in office, have both positive and negative effects on social movement goals. The benefits of rescaling (the ability to bring claims to “higher” arenas and institutions where power is wielded) for social movements include accessing the legitimacy, capacities and resources that like-minded organizations elsewhere might possess. Yet rescaling as a basis for collective action can perpetuate the democratic deficit, generate organizational overreach, create coordination problems with grassroots bases, and supplant and replace locally-based alliances. The authors note that there is little research on social movement networking and rescaling that uses the concept of “the Americas” as a basis for the repoliticization of poverty. Despite commonly shared forces that produce poverty in both the north and the south, deeply entrenched dualism is one force working against both more research and a more substantial development of such cross-continental linkages and imaginaries.

Keywords: social movements, poverty, the Americas, networks, scale

Conclusion: Social Movements, the Poor and New Politics of the Americas

In the Introduction we put forward that if this truly is to become “the Latin American decade”, as some commentators suggest, then there is a need to politicize the engrained structures of inequality and poverty in the region. We argued that this politicization has to go beyond the narrow confines of income distribution, and question deep structures of cultural, social and political dispossession. As the main political protagonists in the region now seem to recognize, economic development does not automatically bring about the types of changes that uproot structures of poverty and marginalization. Economic development has to take a form that attempts to level imbalances of power and resources, and provides new opportunities for marginalized actors while not jeopardizing natural resources and environmental sustainability. Social movements have a critical role to play in this politicization. The rising importance of
social movements in the region, coupled with the stabilizing of democratic institutions and the
election of politicians on “New Left” platforms, have been understood by many as a sign that the
claims of the marginalized are increasingly a force in the shaping of future development agendas,
that we are seeing the emergence of new power geometries in the region. This has accounted for
a great deal of optimism in academic circles, where many have seen social movements as the
primary agents of change in contemporary Latin America. Yet the actual achievements of this
“new politics” for the poor are less clear, and the balance of respect for the environment while
using natural resources is not a win-win issue, and some pessimistic assessments are beginning
to emerge. Debates on the achievements of these political projects tend to follow ideological left-
versus-right lines that obscure more than they enlighten. To us it has remained an open question
whether the new politics of the region is having substantive effects and whether social
movements are actually having the type of positive, democratizing influence that they might
have. We see this as an empirical issue, one that requires research and analysis.

As also noted in the Introduction, this special issue is part of an effort to step back and
look at the achievements of social movements and the factors that condition these achievements.
The contributors were asked to reflect critically on emerging forms of politics and the role of
social movements in order to promote an understanding of their characteristics, achievements
and conditioning factors. They have looked through various case studies at different types of
movements or forms of collective action, thereby allowing us to take some steps towards
 theorizing around the mechanisms that are at play. One striking resemblance between them is
that they often tell stories of powerlessness and incapacity, of how movements and practices of
collective action run up against stronger forces, internal fragmentation and failures of
coordination. Despite the existence of active movements and resources in networks, there tend to
be stronger social forces (resistant bureaucracies, capital interests) that prevail. For theorizing,
these stories are highly relevant, since they tell us something about the actual conditions under
which most social movements and marginal actors negotiate their claims and position. The
“Argentinazo” of 2001 or the Bolivian Gas War of 2003, highly successful episodes of collective
action that have captured many analysts’ attention, are certainly important. But they may reveal
less about the daily struggles of social movements than the cases collected here. The articles in
this Special Issue also describe victories, or examples where social movement actors have
gained access to powerful spaces. We try to use such examples to understand both success
factors and the ways in which these achievements have changed the movements in question for
better or worse. In the conclusions that follow we will pick up on the two themes identified in the
Introduction, those of networks and scale.

Networks

To say that networks are important to social movements is actually a truism. Social movements
are networks. Still, these networks can be more or less horizontally and vertically integrated,
they can be broad or narrow, and they can have distant or close nodes within formal institutions.
They can mobilize more or less resources and capacities. They can gain legitimacy from
powerful discourses, or be broadly seen to make illegitimate claims. As the articles make clear,
these factors affect the ability of social movements to influence political processes. It is also
clear that the concepts of network and scale overlap to a significant degree (networks are
necessary for rescaling), and the authors here sometimes use them in an overlapping fashion.
Here we will primarily use networks in the sense of horizontal relations with other social actors,
and rescaling as the ability to bring claims to “higher” arenas and institutions where power is
decisively wielded.

One conclusion that can be drawn from several of the articles is that the ability to
network across social sectors is a major success factor for social movements. Forging campaigns,
alliances and united claims with different types of actors greatly strengthen movement influence,
but this involves overcoming differences of interests, perspectives and ideology. Labor unions
are inclined to want to secure employment, which may run counter to environmental campaigns
to limit industrial activity. Indigenous organizations may have very different perspectives from
urban-based environmental organizations, and might accept deals with industry and the state if
they see the deals to preserve their territorial control and bring spillover benefits. “Marginal”
groups are indeed different from one another, but in specific places and in relation to specific
state or industry projects, their interests are often overlapping. Horizontal engagement across
social sectors appears to be highly important to successful collective action. Such horizontal
engagement requires long-term commitments and a willingness to transform the goals of the
individual groups. Outside forces may also conspire to block such alliances. Rodriguez’s article
offers the example of the Collective Labor Agreement, providing a framework for relationships
between a mining company, a community and a labor union, as an illustration of the achievements that may result in alliances between sectorial groups. When they failed to overcome their differences and to foster cross-sectorial alliances, these groups achieved little. Barton and Roman’s article argues this forcefully as well, showing how lack of coordination between various organizations opposing industry practices leads to disempowerment. Social organizations are divided by identity, strategy and separate cross-scalar networks, and thereby fail to articulate grounded claims against industry practices in local places. To put it bluntly, the organizations they discuss seem better at forging networks with like-minded actors in distant places than with those close by with whom they share an enemy or when goals and ends are diverse. But it is clear that vertical linkages (rescaling) can not replace horizontal engagement.

The articles confirm our suspicion that we do not know enough about who are participating in social movement networks, or whether there are significant groups who are not involved and thus the overall representativeness of the truly poor and marginalized. The article by Brodrecht indicates that there are indeed processes that continue to bar marginalized groups from social movements and collective action. She stresses that lack of basic resources precludes collective action on the part of people who are especially deprived of resources, in this case urban squatters. She shows how deep deprivation creates a downward spiral of internal competition and mutual distrust, the opposite process of the interest aggregation, solidarity-building and trust-building needed for collective action. While the importance of “resource mobilization” (Jenkins, 1983) is a central theme of social movements themselves (focusing on internal resources) there is a need to bring attention to the gap between social movements and those lacking the basic resources to participate in them. Girvan’s article makes a related point. The campaign he analyzes dealt with a transnational, highly technical issue (an international trade agreement), and the campaign failed to translate the issue in ways that could mobilize broader social sectors. Rather than assuming that social movements speak for marginalized actors and broad social sectors, we have to recognize that the challenges of social inclusion and representativeness remain issues for social movements themselves. Social movements networks can be exclusionary.

What about the networks formed between social movements and highly influential organizations, like political parties in office? Many commentators have noted the close links between social movements and the “New Left” parties who have won elections, thereby
increasing the chances that social movement demands become official policy. As Levy’s article illustrates, these relations can be empowering as well as debilitating for movements. They force the movements to adapt to political parameters established by the party. Parties and movements may have similar goals, but tactics, discourses and means are widely different. When movements (or at least their leaders) become dependent on the party or the state for funding and influence, they have incentives to abandon opposition and critique. Leaders may lose their oppositional edge and become mainstreamed or co-opted into the party’s tactics. This can create internal tensions in the movements, as their bases may feel abandoned and left out of “inner-circle” decision-making processes. This is a tightrope exercise, since influence and funding can further the movement’s original goals but strain the movement’s internal organization. The co-optation problematic is of course familiar, but it is one that remains pertinent. Similar points, on the limitations of collective action within state sanctioned spaces, is brought home in the article by Mahmood and his co-authors on popular participation in health reform in Venezuela. These spaces obviously present opportunities, but they are also contingent on the state’s institutional capacity and willingness to follow up the communities’ decisions. And regardless of the ideological orientation of the executive and his party, lower level institutions and the bureaucracy have their own agenda that may place obstacles in the way of decisions made by community groups. For social movements, interactions with formal institutions and the political parties with which they associate are fraught with difficulties and pitfalls. Those interactions require strong organizational capacities to maintain a degree of independence, an integration of grassroots bases in decision-making, and a focus on the substantive long-term goals. Social movements can certainly be empowered by maintaining close links to parties and governments, but they must balance this by, at the same time, preserving a critical distance.

**Scale**

This discussion of relations to the state brings us over to the theme of *scale* in social movement action and organization. Cross-scale mobilization is typically seen as an empowering way for social movements to pressure the state, through forging linkages with organizations and actors nationally and internationally that may bring resources and legitimacy to their claims (what Keck and Sikkink (1998) called the “boomerang effect”). Several of the articles here stress the
importance of the national and international linkages that movements engage in, but they also make us more aware of the limitations of rescaling as a basis for collective action. Rodriguez, for example, argues that transnational linkages can represent a source from which to change discourses and “rules” of particular political arenas, but only to the extent that local substantive causes of development and human rights can take precedence over sectoral interests. We noted above how Barton and Roman warn that transnational linkages can supplant locally grounded alliances in particular places, and therefore be a source of local division and fragmentation.

The problematics of local grounding also emerge in the articles that deal specifically with movements that are transnational in character. Girvan’s assessment of the campaign against the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between the European Union and fifteen Caribbean countries, Bennett’s analysis of fair trade organizations as an instance of a global social movement, and Muhr’s discussion of social movement involvement in the ALBA-TCP all bring out aspects of the democratic deficit that haunt transnational movements. Girvan exemplifies how campaigns conducted mainly through the media and in the blogosphere often lack the genuinely popular dimension they would need to properly be called “social movements” and that is necessary to gain political influence. Bennett’s case is instructive because the global movement she assesses maintains an impressive level of institutionalization, with a core organization, multi-stakeholder negotiations and an inclusion of actors across North-South boundaries. At the same time she shows how this organizational stretch requires significant resources and capacities to maintain, which few movements actually possess. Subtle cultural and informal processes continue to uphold certain structures of power and positions within such movements. In turn, the movement faces internal shortcomings, such as lack of local representation of particular areas in the South, which in turn constrain the movement’s ability to bring broadly supported perspectives to global governance. In a passage that is likely to resonate widely, she argues that “while including global social movements is necessary for bolstering democracy in global governance, it is not always sufficient – who is included, and their relationship to the broader movement, affects the degree to which inclusion begets representation.”

The involvement of social movements in the ALBA-TCP initiative is a promising approach to including social movements in transnational governance. The fact that it identifies social movements specifically (rather than the broader term “civil society”, which is more
common in these participatory schemes) and recognizes extra-regional linkages with movements elsewhere, is a testament to the legitimacy and position that social movements have gained in the “new politics” in the region. However, as a substantive project of social movement integration in transnational governance it appears incomplete. As elaborated in Muhr’s article, the Social Movement Council was formed to facilitate the integration of social movements from both member and non-member countries into the development of the ALBA-TCP process. Yet it is unclear how the deliberations of the Social Movement Council will actually be incorporated into decision-making processes, and in turn, how it can move beyond being an interstate (or inter-presidential) initiative (see Serbin (2012) for an elaboration of these points on the Social Movement Council and ALBA-TCP). The initiative does not appear to address the inevitable tensions and differences of interests and goals between states/governments on the one hand, and social movements on the other. As we noted above, operating within state sanctioned spaces for participation can create problems of dependence and co-optation for social movements, while the benefits are uncertain. Developments in this initiative will have to be monitored closely to see if these reservations are unjustified.

The lesson for social movements seems to be that rescaling offers clear opportunities but movements must proceed with caution. The benefits consist in accessing the legitimacy, capacities and resources that like-minded organizations elsewhere and northern NGOs or northern social movements might possess. Yet forging linkages and alliances at the national and international scales can generate organizational overreach, with problems of maintaining coordination with grassroots bases. It is also critical that transnational alliances do not supplant and replace locally-based, cross-sectorial alliances. An effect of globalization is perhaps that it is easier to engage in vertical organization (which can simply be achieved by accessing the internet) than horizontal networking (which necessitates more substantive relationship building and co-articulation of claims with different social groups). It appears that social movements are most effective in reaching substantive goals when they are strongly grounded in grassroots bases and emphasize horizontal engagements. The question remains about what is an ideal “size” and whether horizontal engagements can be expanded beyond national boundaries, for example in a stronger interrelation between social movements in South and Central America with those of North America.
A concept that motivated the initiative of this special issue initially was that of “the Americas”, as part of a framework for making visible actual and potential relations between various struggles taking place across the continent. We were interested in seeing whether there are grounds for connecting conceptually the struggles of social movements taking place in distinct localities in North, Central and South America – grounds that would allow us to contribute to the construction of a relational theory of the repolitization of poverty (Lawson 2012) across the continent. As noted in the Introduction, our discussions on this topic at the Tampa conference were inconclusive. As a descriptive term, “the Americas” is used in everything from biology to political science to describe either natural phenomena with no consideration for socially constructed borders (like mosquitos), or as a geographical demarcation in studies comparing social phenomena in different countries (typically in a non-relational manner). It is also used by historians of the era prior to the “discovery” of the continent. However, there appears to be less research upon which a relational concept of “the Americas” can be the basis for the repoliticization of poverty. A conceptual connection between distinct struggles requires a shared “revolutionary imaginary”, something resembling what Sardaña-Portillo (2003) finds traces of in popular narratives of the legacies of figures like Che Guevara and Malcolm X. Such traces can also be seen in the World Social Forum movement, the Occupy movement, the activism against the continent wide Free Trade Area of the Americas, or support by US activists for indigenous movements in Central and South America. As Reitan (2012) states, the myriad social movement organizations and networks that form the anti/alternative globalization movement, the movement of movements, are clearly of the “left”, meaning that they broadly share new-leftist ideas of democracy and justice.

However, there are also forces working against a more substantial development of such cross-continental linkages and imaginaries. The dualism between developed north and underdeveloped south is deeply entrenched, including the ways in which transnational movements and NGOs operate. As suggested in articles of this special issue, transnational movement organization struggle to maintain grounded alliances, and cooperation with NGOs with a Northern base often serves to accentuate divisions between the resourceful and the resource deprived. These divisions tend to allow the Northern counterparts to define the agendas
and force activists from the South into predetermined identities and frames, as McNeish (2012) argues with reference to NGOs working with Latin American indigenous movements. The roots of poverty and the capacities of the poor tend to be understood differently in Northern and Southern contexts by multilateral development institutions and movements alike, creating problems for relational understandings of the processes that produce and sustain poverty (McNeill and St. Clair, 2011). Yet the forces producing poverty in these different contexts are significantly interrelated. There seems to be momentous potential for academic work and research to make visible the links between poverty, activism and movements in South, Central and North America, as well as critical self-reflection on the part of northern NGOs on how southern social movements can increasingly take part in political discourse formulation and strategy building. In such research, the conceptual frame of “the Americas” may foster a relational understanding of both the interrelated conditions under which social movements in different localities operate and the shared interests in transforming processes of dispossession and disempowerment.

References


